

When You Lose Your Driver's License

Driving Toolkit Insert for Person with Dementia / Caregiver

Losing your driver's license can be emotionally difficult. Especially if you have known the pleasure of sitting behind the wheel of a car. A driver's license means so much more than the privilege to drive. For many, it is a symbol of our independence, freedom and identity.

Losing the ability to drive means big changes in your life. You need to solve practical challenges. You have to find new ways to get to doctors' appointment, the grocery shop or to visit family and friends. Besides, we often face this problem at a time when we are dealing with many other big changes caused by aging. Preparing for this change requires planning, discussion and courage to move through this difficult period as smoothly as possible.

You should pay special attention to the emotions you feel. Find ways to deal with your feelings in a healthy way.

To do this, you need to build a strong support network of friends, family and health professionals to witness, guide and walk with you through this process.

Grief is...

- a natural response to any loss or change
- emotional, not intellectual
- a universal human experience
- a journey that cannot be measured in time

How you respond to grief will depend on how you see the loss. Grieving can be extremely hard work. It can take both physical and emotional energy to cope with changes and loss.

Losing the ability to drive may create all sorts of feelings and emotions. This is a natural response and there is support in our community to help sort through this experience. See the list of service providers who offer counseling in this area.¹

1. Services in Ottawa Community

First Link Program
Alzheimer Society of Ottawa and Renfrew County
613-284-1140, <http://www.alzheimer-ottawa-rc.org/>

Geriatric Psychiatry Community Services of Ottawa (Physician Referral Required)
129Y-75 Bruyère Street, Ottawa, ON K1N5C7. Tel: 613-562-9777

The examples below show how people might respond emotionally to any deep loss, including the loss of their driver's license.

- Shock: You freeze when you first hear the bad news.
- Denial: You refuse to accept the facts.

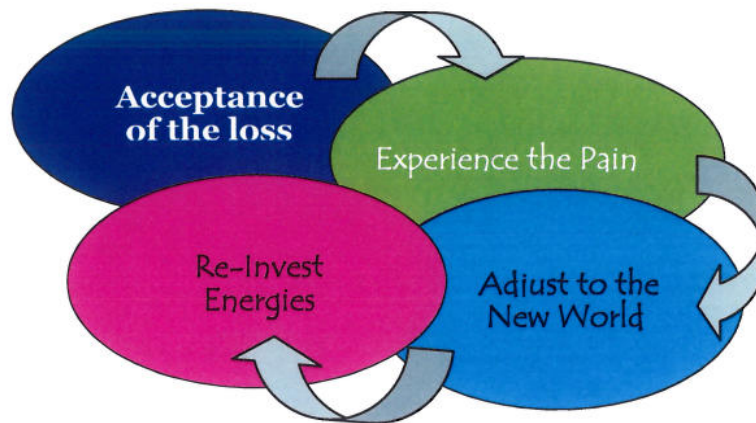
*"This isn't happening to me...I can drive just as well as I ever could."
"I am as smart as I always was."*

- Anger.
*"Why is this happening to me? This is not fair. How am I supposed to get our groceries?!"
"These tests they did [to test my driving skills] were silly and childish."
"What do these doctors know about me anyway?"*
- Bargaining: You try to find a way out.
*"I'll drive more carefully if you let me keep my license..."
"I won't drive on the highway, only to the church or the grocery store."*
- Depression: You realize the truth and you feel sad and helpless.
*"I don't care if I can't drive; I don't want to go anywhere anyway."
"My life is over!"*
- Acceptance: You finally find the way forward.
*"If you help me with the bus schedule, I'll give it a try."
"I don't want to hurt anyone on the road if I am unsafe to drive."*

Possible Signs of Grief

In addition to the emotional reactions we just talked about, there may be other signs telling you that you are going through grief. You may have physical symptoms such as shortness of breath, dry mouth, tightness in your chest, difficulty sleeping or lack of energy. You may have changes in behaviour (crying, restlessness, avoiding reminders or searching for the car keys). You may also notice certain mental reactions, such as disbelief, confusion, disorientation or worrying.

Worden's Tasks of Mourning



1. Understand and accept the reality of the loss

- Denial can at times be a typical defensive reaction to loss. It is meant to allow us to absorb the change a little at a time. It is common way to protect ourselves from pain of a loss.
- At some point, it becomes necessary to openly recognize the reality of the change and the new circumstances we are facing.
- This is an opportunity to digest our new reality and realize that things cannot go back to the way they were.

How to help yourself move through your loss:

- Turn to your support network of people with whom you feel truly safe to be yourself.
- Find a helper. Tell your story out loud to someone you trust (a counselor or friend).
- Review all the details: Who, what, where, when, why.
- Allow for 'grief bursts,' feelings of sadness that suddenly come over you. Sometimes they last just a few seconds. Feel each when it comes up. (?)
- Exercise.
- Pray or meditate.
- Express yourself creatively. Try some of these suggestions:
 - Journal: write daily, name your feelings, list your strengths and things you like about yourself. Try writing some poetry.
 - Draw or paint.
 - Listen to your favourite music.
- Make a list of what you need help with and who can help you with each task. Make a schedule with tasks for people.

2. Experience the pain of grief

- The universal reality of grief is that there are always FEELINGS and we must allow ourselves to experience them.
- There is no escape from this. A person can attempt to avoid, distract and deny feelings, but there is no way over, under or around grief—only through it. Grief is an emotion we need to feel and move through in order to heal and move to the other side.

- If a person does not work through the painful feelings related to loss, they may take other forms. They may even turn into problems such as depression.
- Recent losses can sometimes trigger past losses that we have buried or denied. This can make the current loss and related grief work more complicated.

How to support someone who is grieving:

- A simple kind and understanding presence and acceptance, with no words spoken, can provide a great deal of support.

3. Adjust to the new reality

- We must respect our emotions, be aware, learn from them and try to manage them. Awareness of our thoughts and emotions can help us feel more in control of the changing situation.
- Adjusting to new realities can take time. In addition, we need to plan for any practical changes made necessary by the loss.
- Adjusting may mean developing new skills and giving up old roles; for example, learning to use city buses or rely on others for a ride.
- Adjusting may also mean developing a new sense of self

- Support the person in accepting the loss of the ability to drive by reviewing the specific circumstances of the loss: : where did you lose your driving? When and how?

- Facilitate communication: Use open-ended questions, compassion and patience to witness the feelings experienced because of the loss.

- Help explore potential problems and find solutions.

- Recognize and name coping strengths and limitations and assist in gaining skills for living in the new circumstances.

4. Re-invest energies in new tasks and relationships

- Putting energy into new relationships and activities helps us get past the loss.
- When we create healthy new relationships in new ways, we reclaim feelings of self-worth.

- Normalize and validate the experience.