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**Driving Missed Crazy**

**By Curtis Seltzer**

**BLUE GRASS, Va.** Age happens.

Sometimes age is enabling. Certain fortunate people, for example, reach a certain number of years and no longer make the same mistake three times in a row.

But, at some point, age is disenabling.

We, Baby Boomers, are on the downside of this divide. We dont anymore; we cant anymore; and we shouldnt anymore . Adaptation is required.

Since Im tailgating 69, I decided it was time to evaluate my driving. So I enrolled in an eight-hour, AARP class on driver safety designed specifically for older drivers.

I dont like this categorization of myself, but I a m what I am, and it is what it is.

Driving has changed since I learned on a 55 Chevy with a threespeed shift on the column.

Today's cars are far more complicated to understand and operate. Glove-compartment manuals can run to 200 pages.

Modern cars are rolling distractions, what with onboard navigation systems, smartphones, CD players, laptops, televisions, voice commands, computer-assistance programs and dashboard trouble icons. Old-fashioned lights and buzzers are still part of the package.

Multiple streams of information are now funneled constantly into every driver like a force-fed goose being fattened for *foie gras*.

Driving is more complicated than it used to be—more traffic, more signage, more electronic signals, more road instructions and more rules. There are more older drivers, more teenage drivers, more distracted drivers, more drunk drivers, more drivers on drugs, more fast drivers and more road rage.

Unfortunately, older drivers carry many lesses—less hearing, less vision particularly at night, slowed perceptions, decreased reaction time, decreased cognitive functioning (ability to reason, remember and concentrate), less physical flexibility and less ability to drive safely arising from chronic health problems and the side effects of medications, such as those for high blood pressure, diabetes, depression and pain.

For these reasons, older people account for about 15 percent of all traffic fatalities and have a higher fatality rate per mile driven than any other age group except those younger than 25.

Fortunately, government regulation, lawsuits and manufacturer self-interest have combined to make vehicles more protective.

Modern vehicles are more mechanically reliable and safer owing to better materials, design, brakes, tires, shoulder harnesses, airbags, padding and computer-aided, accident-prevention measures.

Drivers and passengers are much more likely to survive a crash in a 2014 Chevy than in a 1964 model, because cars have been engineered to be more crashworthy.

For these reasons, 2012s 33,500 traffic fatalities were no higher than those who were killed in 1950 despite many more people driving many more miles. The fatality rate over those 62 years was cut in half to fewer than 11 deaths per 100,000 population. The most vehicle fatalities -- 54,052 -- were recorded in 1973.

Although seniors drive more slowly, are less frequently impaired, use seat belts more and drive less at night, in bad weather and on unfamiliar roads, we can become a disproportionate danger to ourselves and others because...well, theres no other way to put it...because driving is increasingly complicated and we are increasingly diminished.

The AARP course emphasized the steps an older person could take to drive as safely as possible. It's an adaptation strategy that uses my brain to make up for what I've lost, even though my brain is not how I remember it, either.

I fell asleep one night driving late on a remote country road several years ago and landed in a ditch. I changed the flat tire and drove home, punctuating each mile with IDIOT! It was a wake-up call. If I get that yawny now, I pull off for 15 minutes.

The age-related adaptations the AARP recommends are simple and obvious:

**Keep risks away** from you. Give yourself a chance. Stay out of tight spots.

**Eighty-five percent of safe driving is seeing.** Look far ahead into your driving future; scan and check your mirrors.

**Keep your head in the game.** Don't rubberneck at accidents. Don't solve problems and write love letters while driving. Resist slipping into automatic pilot.

**Keep a large buffer zone** of space around your vehicle.

**Don't speed or follow too closely.** Keep a minimum of a three-second stop time between you and the vehicle in front. (The faster you're driving, the more separation three seconds requires.)

**Don't distract yourself** from driving with road maps, phones of any kind, texting, TV, shaving, putting on makeup, etc. (The instructor told of a woman who was observed driving while smoking a cigarette, talking on a hand-held phone and painting

her toe nails.) **Dont drive if youre falling asleep, or under the influence of alcohol or drugs** or while engaging in heated discussions or even tepid sex.

**Plan** to travel in daylight on familiar and less-busy routes. The traffic death rate is three times higher at night.

**Maintain your vehicles** brakes, tires, wipers and lights in addition to its mechanical parts. At 50 mph, you can see only about four seconds ahead with good headlights. At 60, you need at least three times more light to see at night than at 20.

### **Heads-ups for drivers.**

Research estimates **that between 10 p.m. and 2 a.m. 30 percent of drivers are drunk.** You have a 50-50 chance that you'll be involved in an alcohol-related crash during your life.

The National Safety Council found that **cellphone use caused 26 percent** of U.S. car accidents in 2013. The majority of these accidents involved handheld or hands-free phones. Only five percent of cellphone-related crashes occurred as drivers were texting.

Cellphone-using drivers are **more than five times** more likely to get into an accident than a non-distracted driver.

Cellphone use puts a driver at about the same risk of accident as an 0.08 blood-alcohol concentration (BAC).

Drunk driving is defined as having a BAC between 0.08 and 0.11, varying by state. At 0.08 BAC, your crash risk is 6 to 10 times higher than at 0.00.

Aging means changes are happening to us. It means we

have to adapt. In the case of driving, change is unpleasant to contemplate since a time will come when no amount of adaptation will make up for the loss of capabilities.

The message I took from my little driver-ed experience is this: I should do what I can to prolong safe-driving independence for as long as possible. The changes required are simple, easy, cheap and commonsensical.

You will not catch me at the wheel while texting, smoking a cigar, changing a CD and painting my toenails.

