

Embracing a New (Driving) Normal

An occupational hazard of being someone dispensing advice about aging is following my own advice, however difficult that might be. I've written about how aging requires adapting to a new normal. As my seventy-fourth birthday approached, my new normal for driving was becoming more frequent near misses when I started to turn into an adjoining lane and found another car there in my "blind spot".

For the past five years my daily commute home from Providence has involved merging onto a very busy Route 10 southbound, and then needing to cross two lanes of traffic going up to 50 miles an hour. I have to watch for two things at once—a slowdown by the car straight ahead as well as an opening in the lane to my left--very exciting. I had been checking my blind spot with two small wide-angle mirrors attached to my outside mirrors. But now my system wasn't working so well. What had changed?

I had to absolve Rhode Island drivers from blame. During my commute most drivers were very accommodating about letting me over if they had the time and space. There was no way around it, I was the problem and needed help. My new normal required a new car, and fortunately I could afford it.

Since I had bought my current car thirteen years ago, it had been highly reliable and I became very attached to it. But as a reader of car magazines, I knew a lot of new safety technology had been added to cars since 2006. I began my research, and was inundated with options for driver assistance: forward collision warning, automatic emergency braking, adaptive cruise control, and much, much more. It was all a bit much. What was the difference between lane departure warning and lane keeping warning? I turned to Consumer Reports' July 2017 edition article about "The Top 25 New Cars for Senior Drivers." It gave heavy weight to four safety features: backup camera, automatic emergency braking, forward collision warning and blind spot warning (aha!). Best of all, the latest version of my old car ranked #2 on that list. Using a helpful online search site www.truecar.com, I bought a new model with many safety features.

There was one more step---living up to another of my aging mantras--- you can teach an old dog new tricks. I began working my way through a 99-page owner's manual on driver assist technology. It required understanding different features, and in some cases making choices (did I want cruise control to automatically slow me down if I neared another car or turn that feature off?). It was worth it. While I am continuing to learn the finer points of my new driver assistance technology, the blind-spot warning has already proven tremendously helpful.

For many of us who aren't near a bus line, driving as long as we can is the best way to remain independent. Self-driving cars may be decades away. If we're willing to learn to use new technology, I think many of us should be able to extend our years behind the wheel.