

Things We'll Do Differently When We're Old

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- By [Grace Birnstengel](#) Associate Editor December 15, 2017

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If we're lucky, our parents' actions can serve as inspiration for who we hope to become as we age. But for most people, there are at least one or two things — usually more — parents do that serve as cautionary tales.

Adult children of aging parents often find themselves hyperanalyzing the behaviors and choices of their mothers and fathers and using this information as motivation to do things a bit differently. That's exactly the case for journalist Steven Petrow, who wrote about a list of things he will and won't do as he ages in a recent New York Times article, "[Things I'll Do Differently When I'm Old.](#)"

Soon after Petrow's 50th birthday, he began keeping this list as he watched his parents become unwilling to acclimate to the realities of aging.

Petrow described his list as a "highly judgmental and super secret accounting of all the things [he] thought [his] parents were doing wrong." He wrote that the entries directly reflected the frustration that came with seeing the price his parents paid for their stubbornness.

The Self-Awareness to Hand Over the Keys

One of Petrow's aging to-dos is knowing when it's time to give up driving. This is an issue that affects every older person who drives. As of 2012, there were about 30 million licensed drivers 65 and older, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. In a [previous Next Avenue story](#), we recognized the difficulties people have in knowing how and when to have tough conversations about driving.

"Many family members or caregivers wonder what they should do if they think a loved one's driving skills have diminished," the story said. "And that's the dilemma. Family members don't know how to assess their loved one's driving abilities. They dread approaching an older loved one to discuss whether he or she needs to modify his or her driving habits or even stop driving."

After his mother ignored his qualms about her slew of fender benders, Petrow felt trapped and reported her to the D.M.V., which — after a driving test — revoked her license. To avoid this future shame, Petrow wrote on his list:

"If my driving capability is questioned, I will not reject the comment out of hand because I am afraid of losing my independence. I hope there will be self-driving cars by then. If nothing else works, I hope someone will turn me in."

Accepting Dependence and Asking for Help

An underlying theme on Petrow's list is having the bravery and humility to accept your aging self as you are and the will to adapt accordingly — a sentiment he wished his parents could embrace.

This includes using a walker when necessary ("I'll use a walker rather than fall and break bones"), accepting incontinence ("I will choose the humiliation of wearing adult diapers over the humiliation of wetting my bed and having someone else clean the sheets") and keeping up appearances if only to feel good — even if it requires asking for help ("If I can't take care of my personal grooming any more, I will find help").

He addressed emotional goals as well:

"If I'm hurt or angry by what's happening to me or my body, I will do my best not to take it out on those who are closest to me."

"I will be kind."

"I will apologize."

A Nod to Self-Care

Lately at Next Avenue, we've been writing a lot about self-care: We have a [self-care action plan](#) and know [the factors that tend to sabotage self-care practices](#).

Consider an exercise like Petrow's list a practice in self-care. Not only is it a method of reflecting on your wants and needs, it's also a step towards holding yourself accountable and working toward a better future for your aging self.

We can't change other people — and it's not our job to try — but we can observe what's happening around us, and from that, pledge to make different, more informed choices.

By [Grace Birnstengel](#)

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