

## Driving and Dementia

### Common Questions

- Who decides when an individual with Alzheimer's disease or other dementia should no longer drive?
- What is the role of the person with Alzheimer's disease in making the driving decision?
- What are the implications of mandatory reporting by physicians of an Alzheimer's diagnosis to a state's department of motor vehicles?

### Background Information

The declining cognitive abilities of an individual with Alzheimer's disease will ultimately lead to the necessity of driving restrictions. It is difficult to determine when restrictions are needed; however, because little solid evidence exists linking various stages of dementia with driving behavior. Nonetheless, at some point in the progression of the disease, driving performance errors will present a safety risk to both the individual and the public.

### Association Positions

Although the Alzheimer's Association does not have an official policy statement regarding driving and dementia, the Ethics Advisory Panel has made the following recommendations regarding restrictions on driving:

- A diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease is never a sufficient reason for loss of driving privileges;
- If an Alzheimer patient's driving is impaired, driving privileges must be limited;
- Driving privileges must be withheld when the individual poses a serious risk to self or others;
- The person with dementia, if competent, should participate in decision-making regarding driving restrictions.

Ideally, a privilege is never limited without offering the affected person ways to fill in the gaps and diminish any sense of loss. The affected person should retain a sense of freedom if possible, and an "all-or-nothing" approach can and should be avoided. For example, if some driving privileges can continue, they may be limited to day-time driving in certain areas. If a person needs to stop driving altogether, then he or she can express a preference on transportation options. Informed and caring family members can successfully implement compromise, especially when the person with Alzheimer's has insight into diminishing mental abilities and loss of competence.



Appropriate limits to driving can often be mutually agreed upon through open communication among the Alzheimer-affected person, family members, and health care professionals. Individual responses to proposed limits will vary from immediate acceptance to strong resistance. To encourage acceptance, the individual who agrees to limits should be assured that others, such as family members, will provide transportation. Indeed, family members can often avoid conflict with the affected individual by identifying and implementing safe alternatives. When the family simply cannot negotiate limits on driving with a loved one who is a danger to self or others, it

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## Returning from the War Zone: Family Expectations about Homecoming

The days and weeks after a homecoming from war can be filled with excitement, relief and many other feelings. Following return from overseas duty, the entire family will go through a transition. Reintegration following homecoming involves taking time to

become reacquainted. Talk and listen to one another to restore trust, support and closeness.

There may be times when you and your returning family member feel stress, uncertainty, concern and distance from one another. All of these emotions are a normal part of readjustment following deployment to a war zone. At first, these reactions may be difficult to deal with. Some individuals have real difficulties and struggle during their transitions back home. Understanding what you might expect will help with the transition.

### Expectations about homecoming

Families often want to hold barbecues and big welcome home parties for their loved one when they return. The service member or war zone employee often has mixed feelings about returning home because they now face a completely different day-to-day life than they have grown used to. Relaxing may be what they want, not a big party. Reworking "who does what," who handles the money now, who takes the kids to school, who mows the lawn; these issues will need to be dealt with. Make sure that all family members talk to each other about what they want and expect, even before returning home.

### Effects on family life

One challenge everyone faces is adjusting to changes in the family; both the person returning from war and the family left behind have changed. War experiences have changed the person who was deployed. Children have grown and developed new skills in school. Spouses or other family members may have taken on more

responsibilities and control in the family. Everyone needs to work and get used to a new family pattern that works for all involved. Be aware that problems in relationships that were already there before deployment may return.

The person returning from the war zone needs to relearn how to feel safe, comfortable and trusting again with family members. This involves getting reacquainted and communicating with spouses, children, parents, friends, coworkers and others.

The returning family member should not feel forced to talk about his or her combat or war zone experiences. They should be given opportunities to talk about the war and their reactions and feelings with people who will not be judgmental or negative. You should join in these discussions if you are invited to do so. Some individuals may be more comfortable talking with their peers about their time at war. It may be helpful to speak with a counselor about his or her experiences, or about any concerns about sharing the details of war experiences with family members. Family and friends need to

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is appropriate for the clinician to order that driving be limited or halted. This technique will usually succeed, although it may be necessary in some cases to disable vehicles.

*Related issue:* California and other states have, or are currently developing, legislation that requires the reporting of a probable diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease to a state's department of motor vehicles. The National Ethics Advisory Panel discussed this issue and recommended that the association develop a position that does not support mandatory reporting of a probable diagnosis of Alzheimer's. The panel agreed that reporting requirements might jeopardize patient confidentiality and discourage some persons from coming into the clinic for early diagnosis and treatment of symptoms. To receive additional association materials on this topic, log onto the association's website [alz.org](http://alz.org) or call 1.800.272.3900.

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remember not to take signs of withdrawal personally and to remember to be patient. Recovery takes time.

Sometimes the everyday stress of family life can feel overwhelming for the returning family member. He or she may become more irritated or react more strongly to common family issues. Anger and aggression are common combat stress reactions but these reactions may scare spouses and children, and even the returning family member. Continued angry outbursts or over-reacting to everyday situations might mean that you should get help.

### Kids

Parents may face challenges coming home to their children and kids can need time to reconnect. Children may feel resentment, abandonment, sorrow or anger when a parent leaves. During deployment, a child may have learned to rely more on the parent who remained

at home. Homecoming may bring back the child's normal fears of separation. It's important for the returning parent not to take these reactions personally, but instead to reassure the child. Communication within the family, or in counseling, is very important in helping the family as a whole.



### Effects on work functioning

For some, going back to work is hard because changes have happened at their job during deployment. He or she may have difficulty finding a job or a new career to get started in. Following the excitement of deployment, he or she may find their old job boring. Combat stress reactions, such as feeling irritable or "on edge," having trouble sleeping, or problems relating to people, make going back to work very difficult or even seem like an impossible undertaking. The trauma survivor may also worry that an employer (or future employer) might not want to work with somebody who is dealing with symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder or other combat stress reactions.

### Effects on other functioning

Some other areas where problems can occur: Money issues can add to stress at work or home, and finances are often complicated by deployment; sleep is often disrupted and getting a full night of sleep is important to maintaining a healthy and happy life; aggressive driving is common, and although adaptive in the war zone, causes problems at home. An individual experiencing combat stress may also have trouble concentrating, which can affect many regular activities.

Problems with family relationships, relationships with other people or day-to-day life should not be overlooked. These difficulties can turn into marital separation and divorce, family violence, and caregiver burden. Communication is key to working through these problems. You may want to consider talking to a counselor for support and assistance.

### Role of the family in problem solving

Adult family members can help by learning and understanding some of the stressors and emotions a veteran or returning employee may experience after being away from home for a period of time, especially when he or she has served in a war zone. Family members' most important role is to be genuine, loving and supportive. You should be forward about expressing your own needs and expectations, rather than hiding them in an effort to protect the returning family member.

At the same time, adult family members need to be supportive and respectful of the need for time to adjust. Spouses or partners need to be prepared for change, and be ready to get used to sharing control of the family and important tasks and goals. It is important that partners and spouses show their trust in the returning family member's role as parent and support joint decisions.

Family members should be ready to learn and accept new skills or tools for coping used by the returning family member. For example, talking about likely "triggers" will allow both partners to understand what might cause an upsetting reaction. A positive attitude towards treatment and readjustment can go a long way to making homecoming an easier transition.

It is also important to remember that all individuals in the family count. The spouse or partner at home should



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be prepared to seek counseling for themselves and children if needed. Often times, couples counseling can help make the needs of individual family members clearer. Parents and extended family also need to be taken into consideration.

#### Encouraging your loved one to seek help

Family members are often the first to notice problems in readjustment. You also need to watch for any negative impact on children and teens. While a returning family member needs some practical time to readjust, problems that continue over months may be on the way to becoming negative habits and family patterns. If harmful strategies are used to cope with stress, such as drinking, drugs, withdrawal and isolation, or showing strong emotions that seem wrong in front of the family, consider encouraging your loved one to seek assistance. Try to communicate your concerns with understanding and not blame.

Learning about what to expect when a loved one returns from a war zone is an important first step to being able to recognize when help is needed. Most combat-related reactions are not permanent. In many cases, they will go away on their own. With early proper treatment, problems that impact your family and relationships may be minimized. When problems do continue, effective treatments are available. In most cases, cognitive behavioral therapy (with or without medication) can either eliminate or at least improve stress reactions and functional problems, and help stop family disruption. Combat stress reactions are like any other physical injury from war. There is a range of how severe these invisible injuries are, just like there is a range of how severe physical injuries are. If problems do persist, treatment may help everyone lead a happier, more well-adjusted life.

Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.