

TILL DEATH DO US PART



BY RAY MAGLIOZZI

Dear Car Talk:

What can a passenger do to bring a car safely to a stop if the driver should die while driving the car on a highway?

My wife sits in the passenger seat. She cannot drive or safely move from her seat without help. But she can reach the ignition key, steering wheel and console gearshift with her left hand.

We are blessed with a carefully maintained 2010 Toyota Venza,

and my mechanic (may he live forever, or at least until I'm gone) looked at me in profound wonderment and said – without expletives – “Where did THAT question come from?” It worries me. What do you suggest Barbara do if I have a “medical event” while driving? – John

Well, first she should call her boyfriend and tell him the coast is clear. Actually, John, it is an unpleasant thing to think about, but there are things Barbara can do in such an emergency. Let's say you're driving, and you suddenly choke on a beef jerky at 65 mph. We don't know the details. Is your foot still on the gas? Are you using cruise control? Are you slumped onto the steering wheel?

Let's say all of those are true.

What Barbara wants to do is avoid driving off the road, or into a bridge abutment. So, the first step is to grab the wheel and keep the car going straight. Next, she has to get the car to stop accelerating. She'll do that by putting the car in neutral. Whether your foot is on the gas or the cruise control is set, shifting into neutral will cause the car to coast to a stop.

You can have her practice putting the car in neutral a few times while you're driving. Just don't practice slumping over. She won't find that funny. Once she has the car in neutral, she'll want to steer the car out of harm's way. With her left hand on the wheel, she should be able to slowly edge the car over to the shoulder of the road.

If she really has her wits about her,

show her where the emergency flashers are, and she can turn those on to alert other cars that you're not just a lousy driver, John, but there's an emergency.

Once the car is safely on the shoulder of the road and stopped, or almost stopped, she can put the car in park and call for help. Hopefully, a Heimlich maneuver will bring you back so she can look forward to doing it all over again someday.

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Got a question about cars? Write to Ray in care of King Features, 628 Virginia Drive, Orlando, FL 32803, or email by visiting the Car Talk website at www.cartalk.com.

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