

Why your mum's iPad ended up in a drawer

Who this is for: families of older Australians

Reading time: about 5 minutes

In one line: the device was never the problem, and there is a fix.

It usually starts at Christmas or a birthday. The family chips in, someone drives to the shops, and an iPad arrives with the best of intentions. Video calls with the grandkids. Photos. Maybe the crossword. Everyone is excited, including Mum.

Six weeks later it is in the drawer under the phone books, and nobody quite wants to bring it up.

We see this constantly, and the first thing worth saying is that it is nobody's fault. Not Mum's, not yours, and honestly not even Apple's. It happens because of a handful of very predictable problems, and almost all of them are fixable.

What actually goes wrong

The setup was done by the wrong person, at the wrong speed. Usually the most tech-confident person in the family sets it up. They do it the way they would do it for themselves, in about twenty minutes, narrating at a pace that makes sense to them. Then they hand it over and head home. To them, the iPad is now "done". To Mum, it is a glass rectangle full of decisions she never made and cannot retrace.

There were too many steps to the one thing that mattered. For most older people there is really one killer feature, and it is usually seeing the grandkids' faces. If getting to a video call takes finding an app, remembering which app, tapping the right contact, and not bumping anything along the way, that is four chances for the call not to happen. After a couple of failures, most people quietly stop trying. Not because they cannot learn it, but because failing at it feels awful.

Nobody wrote anything down. A verbal walkthrough evaporates within a day, and that is true for all of us at any age. Without simple written steps to fall back on, every small problem becomes a phone call to a busy adult child, and most parents would rather let the iPad sit in a drawer than be a burden. Read that sentence again, because it is the real reason the drawer wins.

The first problem killed it. A password expired. An update changed how something looked. The wifi dropped out and never reconnected. These are trivial fixes for someone confident, and complete roadblocks for someone who is not. One unresolved problem is usually all it takes, because the lesson learned is not "this needs a small fix". The lesson learned is "this thing does not work for me".

The shame factor. This one nobody talks about. Many older people feel embarrassed that they find technology hard, especially in front of their own children. Asking the same question twice feels like failing a test. So they stop asking, and the drawer is a dignified way to make the whole problem disappear.

What proper support looks like

The fix is not a better iPad, and it is usually not more enthusiasm from the family. It is a different approach to support.

Set up for the person, not the spec sheet. That means stripping the home screen back to the three or four things that will actually be used, making text bigger, turning on the accessibility features that help, and removing every app that is just noise. A simpler device is not a lesser device. It is a better one.

Make the most important thing one tap. If video calls matter most, the call should be as close to one touch as possible, and it should work the same way every single time. Consistency beats features. Every time.

Write it down. Plain-language notes, large print, kept next to the device. Step one, step two, step three. Not a manual. A recipe card.

Practise at their pace, more than once. Real learning is a person doing the steps themselves, slowly, several times, with someone patient nearby. If something needs explaining three times, that is fine. That is the job.

Have a plan for problems. Things will go wrong eventually. An update, a password, a frozen screen. Knowing in advance who to call, and that the question will be welcome rather than a nuisance, is the difference between a hiccup and the drawer.

A short checklist before you buy the next device

- What is the one thing they actually want it to do?
- Who will do the setup, and will they do it patiently and in person?
- Who writes the notes?

- Who answers the questions in week three, and week ten?
- Has anyone asked Mum what she wants, rather than what we think she should want?

If you have good answers to those five questions, the device has a real chance. If you do not, the drawer is waiting.

If the iPad is already in the drawer

It is not too late, and it is not a write-off. In most cases a single patient session is enough to reset the device around what the person actually wants, get the one important thing working reliably, and leave proper notes behind. The second life of a drawer iPad is often much better than its first.

This is exactly the work we do at Gray Matter Solutions. We come to the home, we set things up properly, we train at the person's pace, and we leave written notes that make sense. No products to sell, no rushing, no jargon.

The easiest way to start is a free 15-minute call. Email phil@graymatter.team or visit graymatter.team.

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