

# ON ROADS



Volume XV Number 4

The Driver Safety Magazine

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## WHEN EMOTIONS Take Control



The best driving skills and the safest vehicle in the world can't combat the wrong emotional state on the road. If your mind isn't "in the game," you're not likely to focus your attention on the many tasks required to drive safely. Yet, many people drive when they're angry, frustrated, fatigued, or depressed. This issue of OnRoads reviews how your attitude affects your driving and provides strategies for maintaining the proper frame of mind whenever you're traveling.

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# IS AGGRESSION Getting the Best of You?



**Y**ou've seen it many times: A driver mistakenly cuts off another, sparking a heated exchange. A motorist deliberately tailgates, trying to coerce another driver to speed up. One vehicle blocks another from passing, triggering a series of retaliations. Aggressive driving has become a way of life — and a contributing factor in more and more vehicle crashes. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that aggressive driving behaviors cause about one-third of the crashes and two-thirds of the resulting deaths that occur annually on U.S. roads. Eighty-five percent of Canadians surveyed admitted to engaging in aggressive driving behavior during the past year.

Some drivers are aggressive because they're angry about something specific that's occurred (an isolated incident), while others are aggressive because they're generally impatient, rushed, and frustrated with the driving environment (a more chronic issue). In either case, emotions lie behind the behavior. Understanding how

and why our attitudes often dictate our driving is the first step in getting the situation under control. First, it's important to distinguish between aggression and road rage. Aggressive driving usually involves a traffic offense — like tailgating or speeding — that places the driver and others at risk. Road rage is a much more serious, criminal offense that involves violence — ranging from a minor assault to use of a deadly weapon. Though it doesn't make the headlines as often, aggression is far more common and is fueled by many factors.

## The Culture Trap

TV, movies, and other media outlets are filled with role models that depict aggressive driving as attractive and fun. In a paper presented during the Aggressive Driving Issues Conference (sponsored by the Ontario Ministry of Transportation), two University of Hawaii professors noted a direct link between these role models and our own attitudes and behaviors on the road. Dr. Leon James and Dr. Diane Nahl believe that by making it socially acceptable to drive in an unsafe manner, media role models raise our tolerance for such behavior. When these personalities demonstrate competition, dominance, and protection of their territory on the road, we

tend to do the same. When they retaliate against other drivers or coerce them into driving more aggressively, we become more tolerant of these behaviors. And as impulsive, risky behavior becomes the norm rather than the exception in the real world, it gradually becomes more acceptable.

Compounding the effect of the media is the fact that anger and aggression on the road are learned habits that we acquire as children, when exposed to the driving habits and reactions of parents and other drivers. Drs. James and Nahl believe these real-life role models can unknowingly distort children's attitudes about what is dangerous, leading them to become aggressive drivers later in life.

Another cultural factor fueling aggressive driving is our 24/7 society. Most people feel pressured to take on far too much in a day, forcing them to rush from one activity to the next. The more rushed we are, the less patient we are with anything that interferes with our schedules. People who drive as part of their jobs can be even more prone to this problem than the general driving public (as discussed on page 8).

## The Driving Environment

Many studies have documented the impact of the driving environment on the

likelihood that you'll exhibit aggression. One of the most obvious environmental factors is the amount of time most people must spend in their vehicles today. For many of us, even the simplest of activities requires driving, thanks in part to the phenomenon known as suburban sprawl. Each trip means getting in and out of the car, finding

ly. For instance, when a curved road is straightened, motorists with a higher risk threshold will increase their speed. Naturally, the propensity for risk varies tremendously from person to person.

Other psychological factors that affect driving include the motorist's ability to assess a situation objectively, to recognize his or her role in a situation, and to

a parking space, navigating parking lots, and waiting at traffic lights. Under these conditions, driving becomes a chore that we want to finish as quickly as possible. When we can't, we become frustrated; and that frustration often leads to anger and aggression.

Studies conducted at the University of Delaware and Texas A & M University found that when drivers are exposed to roadside environments that are characteristic of sprawl — those cluttered by strip malls, billboards, and parking lots — they experience increased stress and fatigue. Another study of 600 nurses found that those commuting by car had much higher stress levels than those using mass transit, even with equal commute times.

## The Psychology Game

A number of psychological factors can impact your level of aggression on the road. One is your risk tolerance. It's been demonstrated that people naturally seek an optimal level of risk in any situation. When they perceive the risks to be too low, they find ways to increase their risk. To apply this principle to driving: When confronted with a low-risk driving environment, some drivers will respond — whether consciously or not — by driving more aggressive-

ly. For instance, when a curved road is straightened, motorists with a higher risk threshold will increase their speed. Naturally, the propensity for risk varies tremendously from person to person. Other psychological factors that affect driving include the motorist's ability to assess a situation objectively, to recognize his or her role in a situation, and to tolerate differences in others' styles and skill levels. Like risk tolerance, all of these factors vary greatly from one individual to the next — and all have the ability to promote aggression. Drivers who don't accept responsibility for their actions will expect other motorists to compensate for them — by moving out of their way when they're rushed, for example. Those who don't tolerate differences in others will be more easily frustrated by non-aggressive drivers — and more likely to coerce them into speeding or other unsafe behaviors.

The extent to which you enable emotions to take control of your driving will directly influence how aggressive you become and the severity of your actions. As Drs. James and Nahl discuss in their paper, your resulting level of aggression will fall along a spectrum that is very broad — ranging from impatience and inattentiveness, to conscious power struggles, to outright recklessness and rage. By learning to temper your emotions and maintain the right frame of mind while driving — using the advice on the following pages — you'll take a major step toward improving your own safety and the safety of others on the road.



## SOUND FAMILIAR?

Few of us would label ourselves as aggressive drivers. Yet, many of us let our emotions get the best of us on the

road. This gap in awareness was even documented in a research study, in which respondents said they drive aggressively only 35% of the time — yet they believe 85% of drivers are emotionally charged on the road. If you engage in these fairly common behaviors, you're probably letting your attitude dictate your driving:

- **Speeding up to make it through yellow lights**
- **Rolling to a stop**
- **Cutting corners**
- **Inadvertently blocking intersections**
- **Failing to yield**
- **Speeding**
- **Failing to signal**
- **Following too closely**
- **Inadvertently blocking the passing lane**
- **Closing the gap to keep another driver out**
- **Gesturing or honking**
- **Frequently changing lanes**

For tips on keeping your emotions under control whenever you're behind the wheel, see page 4.



# KEEPING AGGRESSION

**T**he first step in addressing any problem is to recognize it. And when it comes to aggression on the road, recognizing the problem means understanding the specific behaviors that can lead to an emotional incident on the road. To become part of the aggressive driving solution instead of part of the problem, there are two basic tenets to keep in mind: **Avoid exhibiting aggression on the road and avoid any behavior that might encourage aggression in others.**

## Don't Start Trouble

Thankfully, it's only a small minority of motorists who set out to cause serious trouble on the road. But even "average drivers" can find their emotions escalating under certain conditions, causing them to engage in behaviors that are aggressive and capable of provoking others. Though they may be increasingly common, the following behaviors are known to cause trouble and should be avoided.

**Gestures.** Offensive gestures are used more and more every day on the road, but they can quickly intensify and even lead to violence. One motorist in Pennsylvania shot through another driver's window after she made an obscene gesture at him. Fortunately, the bullet missed the driver and her passenger — but not by much. "The safest choice is to avoid gestures of any kind, including those that aren't blatantly offensive but could be

misconstrued," says Kaz Zielinski, Programs Manager for Advanced Driver Training Services. Even a simple shake of your head could be enough to trigger a problem.

**Tailgating.** If the vehicle in front of you isn't moving fast enough for your liking, do you follow far too closely, hoping that he or she will move out of your way? That's a sure way to provoke anger.

**Boxing others out.** In your haste to get where you're going, you might be tempted to block other drivers from merging into your lane, especially if traffic is tied up due to an accident or construction. "But consider how much of a difference a car length or two will really make in your total trip time," Zielinski says. "Rather than cause a problem, use common courtesy and let the other driver in."

**Headlight and horn use.** Flashing your headlights is likely to cause a reaction from other drivers. So is honking your horn, as noise is known to cause stress.

**Speeding.** It's easy to get caught in the speeding trap, when so many people regularly drive 5, 10 or even 15 miles per hour above the speed limit. But even if it's not caused by emotions, speeding can be interpreted as aggressive — especially if it infringes on other drivers by making them feel unsafe. For your own safety and the safety of others, always drive within the posted limit.

**Weaving in and out of lanes.** Aggressive drivers will take every opportunity to get further, faster — even it means continually switching from lane to lane. But doing so unnecessarily increases your odds of a collision, and rarely makes a significant difference in your total travel time.

## Don't Invite Trouble

Sometimes, the incidents that prompt a fight aren't deliberate; instead, they result when one driver inadvertently angers another. While you may think that you can't control another person's emotions, you can minimize the odds of a problem just by avoiding the behaviors that are most likely to provoke an angry response.

**Eye contact.** The simple act of making eye contact can be enough to escalate a situation. If another driver is trying to start trouble, keep your eyes on the road. Try to get away from the motorist without actively acknowledging him or her.

**Distraction.** Many people are angered by drivers who are distracted — whether it's from talking on a cell phone, eating, reading, or doing anything else that takes their attention from the road. "The more focused you are, the less likely you'll be to upset another driver and the safer you will be," Zielinski says.

**Lane blocking.** When traveling below the speed limit on a multi-lane road, don't inadvertently block the passing lane.

# IN CHECK

Move to the center or right lane so that others can pass you.

**Signal use.** Always use your signal when changing lanes or turning — but be sure to turn it off when you're through.

**Parking problems.** Taking up more than one space, illegally using spaces reserved for people with handicaps, hitting the vehicle next to you with your door by accident, and parking too close to others are all sure-fire ways to upset other motorists.

**Blocking traffic.** Don't stop along the road to talk with another driver or a pedestrian. If you're traveling slowly because you're hauling cargo, use your emergency flashers and pull over as necessary to let traffic pass. And if you're having vehicle trouble, try to move to the roadside and away from the flow of traffic.

**Improperly merging.** Before you merge, make sure you have plenty of room and use your turn signal to indicate your intentions.

## Don't Overlook Passengers

Maintaining a positive attitude on the road also requires minimizing the potential stressors inside your vehicle. And one of the most often overlooked stress-inducers is the passenger. Those riding with you can unknowingly cause your stress levels to rise, unless you take steps to keep the situation under control. The next time passengers have you frazzled, try these tips:

**Reduce the noise.** Ask passengers to keep the volume down, especially on long trips and in stressful driving conditions (such as foul weather or construction). Keep the



stereo volume to a reasonable level; if the noise becomes too distracting, turn the music off for a while. Young children (and even some not-so-young passengers) may need regular reminders to keep their voices down.

**Control the climate.** If a passenger has the heat or air conditioning set at a temperature that makes you uncomfortable, speak up.

**Keep them busy.** Parents are all-too-familiar with the need to keep children occupied in the car — with books, snacks and other treats — to avoid problems. But the same principle applies to adult passengers, too. Find ways to keep them busy so they'll avoid distracting you or engaging you in a stressful conversation.

**Share the driving.** Switching drivers for part of the trip gives you a rest and puts the passenger in the driver's seat, literally. That means he or she will be more likely to understand the specific stresses you've been experiencing on the road and less likely to add to them when it's your turn to drive again.



## A Vehicle that SENSES YOUR MOOD?

Though it sounds like the plot of a sci-fi movie, a vehicle that can gauge your mood and help to calm you down is closer to reality than you may think.

Toyota's "Pod" — a concept car unveiled last fall in Japan — uses biometrics built into the steering wheel to monitor the driver's pulse and sweat levels for signs of stress. If stress levels are high — or if the driver speeds or tailgates — the car will flash an alert on the dashboard display or play soothing music. Engineers are even working on ways to allow the Pod to communicate to other drivers on the road.

**Y**ou're approaching the end of a long trip, with only 20 miles to go. Your eyes are feeling a little heavy and you're starting to have trouble concentrating. But you press on; after all, you're so close to your destination.

If you're like the majority of drivers, this is how you respond to fatigue on the road. In a National Sleep Foundation poll, only 22% of drivers said they had ever pulled off the road to rest when fatigued. And most people report that the closer they are to home, the less likely they are to stop — despite the fact that 3 out of 4 crashes happen within 25 miles of the driver's home.

"It's extremely dangerous to ignore fatigue when you're behind the wheel," says ADTS Programs Manager Kaz Zielinski. Fatigue is estimated to contribute to 56,000 crashes in the U.S. each year, and most are severe — in part because they tend to involve high speeds and delayed reactions. Once you recognize how sleep affects your state of mind, you'll want to make sufficient rest a part of your daily regimen.

#### **The Snowball Effect**

"People tend to be aware of the most common effects that fatigue has on their mental and physical performance," Zielinski says. "They recognize that sleepiness can make them less alert and less able to focus." Drowsiness also slows your reaction time, impairs your motor skills, encourages forgetfulness, and promotes poor decision-making.

But lack of sleep appears to have much broader consequences. The findings of the National Sleep Foundation's 2002 "Sleep in America" poll suggest that inadequate sleep contributes to many other problems, including anger and stress on the road. More than one-third of the respondents said sleepiness interferes with their daytime activities several days a month, and most believe it makes them impatient and prone to unsafe behavior.



If your reaction time is impaired, you'll have trouble stopping in time to avoid a crash. If you're not paying attention, you won't recognize the indicators of a potential crash — like another driver failing to stop at a traffic light or pulling out in front of you. And if you're not processing information well, you won't be able to manage the multitude of information that driving involves — or exercise the good judgment needed to respond safely.

#### **Fighting Fatigue**

The best defense against drowsy driving is to get sufficient rest, which means 8 – 9 hours a night

But what if you've taken preventive measures like these, yet suddenly feel fatigued while driving? Zielinski says that for the drowsy driver, there is no substitute for rest.

"Experts agree that even a 15 to 20 minute nap can help rejuvenate you and make you more fit to drive," he says — though napping for 40 minutes or more may work against you, by leaving you feeling groggy and disoriented. If you decide to stop and rest, be sure to find a safe place — such as a busy rest area, service station or strip mall. Never stop to rest on the

# Too Worn Out TO DRIVE

The survey also documented a direct correlation between less sleep and negative moods. Those who averaged fewer than six hours of sleep nightly more often described themselves as stressed and prone to anger. Most importantly for drivers: About two-thirds (65%) said insufficient sleep makes them more likely to become impatient or frustrated in traffic.

#### **Why Is Sleep Important?**

Most of us equate sleep with physical and mental rest — a time to recharge your body and mind for the next day. But through a growing body of research, scientists are discovering sleep's other vital functions. For instance, near the end of your sleep cycle your body secretes a stress hormone called cortisol, which stimulates alertness. So if your sleep is interrupted, your alertness could be directly affected by a lack of cortisol.

Not surprisingly, research also has linked sleep deprivation with impaired cognitive

and motor skills. In one study, people deprived of sleep for 19 hours scored much lower on tests of performance and alertness than those with a blood alcohol concentration level of .08 percent — enough to be considered a drunk driver in most countries. Yet, it doesn't take a significant sleep loss to affect your body and mind. The effects of sleep loss are cumulative — so losing just 1 or 2 hours each night over time can lead to a "sleep debt" that impairs your physical and mental capabilities. One research project discovered that people who slept seven hours a night for one week — what many of us would consider sufficient — were less mentally alert and demonstrated reduced motor skills.

For the driver, sleepiness is even more dangerous because it impacts elements of human performance that are vital to safe driving — including reaction time, vigilance, and information processing.



on a regular basis. It's also helpful to avoid heavy lunches when on the road. Your body's circadian rhythms will naturally make you tired by about 2 pm, so don't contribute to the problem by eating a meal that will make you more drowsy.

shoulder, since it places you at risk of a roadside crash. If you take a nap in your vehicle, lock the doors, close the windows, and move out of the driver's seat.

If you feel you're unable to stop for a nap, steps like these can help you fend off fatigue for a short period:

**Stretch your legs.** Even a brief walk can help improve your concentration. On long trips, a good rule of thumb is to stop every two hours.

**Have a snack or beverage.** A NHTSA study found that consuming caffeine equivalent to two cups of coffee can improve your short-term alertness. But remember that it takes up to 30 minutes for caffeine's effects to kick in — and the energy burst will be short-lived.

## DEPRESSION and DRIVING: A Dangerous Mix

Do you ever take off in your car because you're upset and you feel a drive will do you good? Unfortunately, many people take this approach. But getting behind the wheel is one of the last things you should do when you're depressed.



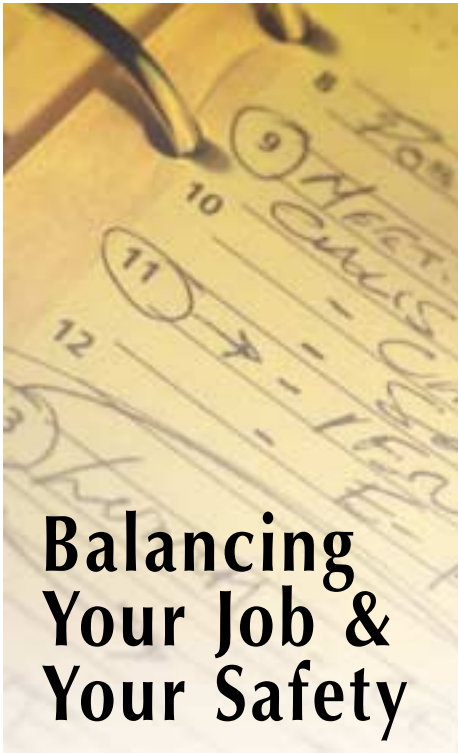
"Depressed drivers tend to focus on their problems, instead of on driving," says Kaz Zielinski, ADTS Programs Manager. "They're usually distracted and often drive for long distances without remembering the trip."

Depression also clouds your judgment — a vital component of safe driving. In extreme cases, you may lose interest in your own safety or the safety of those around you — increasing the odds that you'll take risks on the road.

Faced with depression, many people turn to alcohol or drugs as an escape. While this is never a wise decision, it's especially dangerous if you plan to drive. Impaired drivers face a whole gamut of risks — from severely reduced reaction times, to compromised motor skills, impaired vision, and poor judgment, among many others. And it only takes one drink or a single dose of certain drugs to begin the impairment process.

#### **What to Do?**

"Keep in mind that driving isn't a relaxing activity; it's something that tends to create stress," Zielinski says. "So you should never take a drive to calm you down or escape from a problem." Better options include taking a walk or engaging in some other form of physical activity, or talking to a family member, friend or colleague. In cases of serious depression, consult your doctor or a professional counselor.



## Balancing Your Job & Your Safety

**W**hen driving is an integral part of your job, you face even more potential stressors than the average motorist — someone who commutes to and from the job or drives mainly for personal reasons. The pressure to keep on schedule; to make a required number of sales appointments, service calls or other

stops; and to reach your target goals all have the potential to inadvertently shift your focus away from safety.

“Tight schedules, heavy workloads, and aggressive quotas can encourage business drivers to rush,” says Kaz Zielinski, ADTS Programs Manager. “And rushing often leads to stress and frustration with anything that might get in the way on the road.” As frustration rises, so does aggression — a dangerous state of mind for motorists.

As a business driver, one of your most important goals of the day should be to arrive at your destination safely. But how do you balance the need to maintain a safe driving state of mind with the need to satisfy your job requirements? Best practices like these provide a good start:

**Don't over-schedule.** Be realistic about how much you can accomplish within the space of a single workday. That means being realistic about how long each appointment or stop will take and the necessary transit time between each. If you know it takes 15 minutes to drive from point A to point B with no traffic, allow some extra time in traffic.

**Plan ahead.** Know what your trip is likely to hold in store — which includes knowing the weather forecast, traffic patterns, and any construction projects that could put a kink in your plans. (In addition to your news stations, sources for road construction updates include [www.fhwa.dot.gov/trafficinfo](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/trafficinfo) for the U.S. and [www.caa.ca](http://www.caa.ca) for Canada.)

**Build in “catch-up” time.** “Instead of scheduling back-to-back appointments throughout the day, leave one 15 – 20 minute gap in your schedule as a time to get back on track,” Zielinski advises. Some extra time in the early afternoon can help you catch up if your morning runs over.

**Phone ahead.** The next time you're running behind for an appointment or service call, resist the temptation to speed. Instead, find a safe place to stop and place a call to your contact. If it turns out that you can push back the appointment a bit, you'll know that you don't have to rush. And if you can't push it back, you can suggest rescheduling. In either case, you'll take some of the pressure off yourself and minimize the chance that you'll drive aggressively.

**Manage for safety.** Managers who supervise business drivers can also help their employees maintain safety as a priority. “Managers should emphasize that while keeping on schedule and making the numbers are important to the company, so is the driver's personal safety while traveling,” Zielinski says.

Balancing your personal safety with the requirements of your job is an achievable goal, but one that will take a serious commitment and continued focus. By keeping driver safety in mind each day, you'll begin to make safe driving behaviors a natural part of your daily routine.

OnRoads is published bimonthly by ADTS, Inc., circulation 35,000.

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