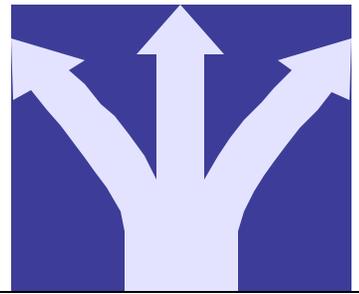


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ROAD RAGE

A recent incident here in Massachusetts in which a driver was killed when he drove off a major highway after he and another driver engaged in some cat and mouse driving has brought additional attention to the issue of road rage. However, other incidents across the country have made the news. For instance in Salt Lake City, Utah, a 75-year-old man became annoyed at a person who honked his horn because he was blocking traffic. This man followed the other person who pulled off to the side of the road. The man threw his prescription bottle at him and then smashed his knees with his car.

Road Rage vs Aggressive Driving

As a way of addressing the problem, it is important to clarify terms and distinguish between road rage which happens infrequently and the more common problem of aggressive driving that leads to road rage.

According to the American Automobile Association Foundation for Traffic Safety, road rage was defined as:

“An incident in which an angry, impatient motorist or passenger injures or kills another motorist, passenger or pedestrian, or attempts or threatens to injure or kill another motorist, passenger, or pedestrian.”

Aggressive driving which occurs more frequently can include the following:

- ◆ Approaching intersections and pedestrians at speeds requiring the driver to break hard when he/she gets close;
- ◆ Weaving in and out of traffic-making improper (no use of signals) and unsafe lane changes;
- ◆ Passing on the right or on the shoulder of unpaved portions of the roadway;
- ◆ Neglecting to stop completely at traffic signals or stop signs

- ◆ Using unfriendly gestures when perceiving an other driver to be irritating;
- ◆ Tailgating another car if there is a belief the other person is going to slowly.

The “Mad Max” Motorist?

While there appears to be a profile of persons who engage in lethal road rage-relatively young, poorly educated males who have criminal records, histories of violence and alcohol or other drug problems-for other individuals who engage in less violent forms of aggressive driving, there is a coming together of emotional and systemic factors that alters the “average” person from mere motorist to raging driver.

Dr. Jerry Deffenbacher at Colorado State University has conducted research about individuals who become angry behind the wheel. In a study conducted by Deffenbacher and his colleagues, they divided a group of 153 male and female psychology students into three categories; very angry drivers who knew they had a problem, equally angry drivers who believed they did not have a problem, and low anger drivers.

The participants recorded the number of times they became angry behind the wheel, what triggered the anger, the number of times they engaged in some kind of aggression towards another driver-like swearing, flashing lights, giving the finger-and the number of times they engaged in risky behavior, such as speeding and driving drunk.

The results of the study showed that both high anger groups reported more than twice the number of angry episodes, about three times as many aggressive actions and about two thirds as many risky behaviors as the low anger group. There was no difference between the amount of anger felt by men and women, but men were more likely to take aggressive and risky actions. In addition, those in

(Continued)

high anger group that did not think that they had a problem were more likely to take aggressive and risky actions.

Another psychological aspect that may contribute to aggressive driving is the “anonymity of the road.” Dr. June Tangney at George Mason University has noted, “You’re not really confronted with the person. You’re less likely to empathize because you are not dealing with a person with two eyes and a heart.”

Clogged Roads

Finally, there are the factors that are demographic in nature that increase the chances for people to drive aggressively. There is legitimate evidence to point to traffic becoming worse. Since 1987, the number of miles of roads has increased just 1% while the miles *driven* have shot up by **35%**. Further, between 1970 and 1987, the number of cars on the road more than doubled and from the late 1980s to the late 1990s the number of cars grew faster (17%) than the number of people. According to a Federal Highway Administration study of 50 metropolitan areas done in the late 1990s almost 70% of urban freeways- as opposed to 53% in 1983 were clogged during rush hour. Another study by the Texas Transportation Institute during that same period found that commuters in 1/3rd of the largest cities sent well over 40 hours a year in traffic jams. There has also been less reliance on mass transit and more on cars. In 1969, 82.7% of people drove to work and in 1990 91.4% did.

The increased congestion of the roads comes at a time when Americans are feeling more pressed for time. The peak period of time for aggressive driving does not come during gridlock when no car can move but just before, when traffic density is high but cars are still moving briskly. The idea of cutting someone off or forcing someone out of a lane can appear to make the difference between being on time or being late.

Reducing Aggressive Driving

A number of suggestions have been made to try to reduce the level of aggressive driving on the road. One idea that has started to be researched is public service programs such as billboards and radio announcements, focused on calming drivers or at least getting them to behave better.

Another approach is more law enforcement efforts

to more closely monitor and ticket drivers who are engaged in aggressive driving. Some states have a cellular phone number that motorists can call to report dangerous driving to the appropriate law enforcement agency.

Obviously, aggressive driving could be reduced if persons who drive look at being able to change their thinking and behavior once they are behind the wheel. Being able to reduce stress when one drives by allowing plenty of time to arrive at one’s destination, listening to soothing music and understanding one cannot control the traffic only one’s response to it are ways to reduce the possibility of aggressive driving. The motorist can also work on avoiding the idea of “defensive driving” which implies that other drivers are the enemy and giving more attention to supportive driving that gives the other driver the benefit of the doubt and does not personalize the other person’s driving mistakes.

FROM OUR FILES:

Violent –TV Viewing Leads to Adult Aggression

Researchers at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research interviewed 329 children when they were in the 6-9 range, and then again in their early 20s, to measure long-term effects of televised violence.

The researchers found that boys and girls who watched violence on television were more likely to exhibit aggressive adult behavior, such as spouse abuse and criminal offenses, no matter how they acted in childhood.

Dr. L. Rowell Huesmann who led the study, said televised violence suggests to young children that aggression is appropriate in certain situations and also erases a natural aversion to violence. It was recommended that parents restrict the viewing of violent television shows and movies by young children and preteens.

The study was published in the March 2003 issue of Developmental Psychology.

(From *Join Together Online*, 3/12/03)

NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Outlook Associates of New England is pleased to announce that Lisa Majewski, LICSW has joined our group practice. Lisa will be bringing her significant experience in the area of families and children to our anger management treatment approach. She will be leading the anger management groups for women. Lisa can be reached at 781-643-5251, Ext. 1 or lmajewski@outlookassociates.com.