

A LINE ON LIFE

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"Those Crazy Drivers!" *

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Many of us view the highways as dangerous mainly because of the aggressive driving of other motorists. The most even-tempered of us admit to occasionally swearing at other motorists who aggravate us. They could be elderly people who drive 20 mph under the speed limit or brash teenagers who speed in and out of traffic. Are drivers getting worse?

Among psychologists who study driving behavior, there are mixed conclusions. Some indicate that drivers are no more aggressive on the highway than 20 years ago. However, they may be more smug about their driving abilities. Other psychologists conclude that increased crowding on highways and busier schedules make drivers more frantic and hostile.

As early as the 1960s, British researchers indicated that highly aggressive drivers were more accident prone. Some of their subjects indicated, *"At times, I felt I could gladly kill another driver."* In recent surveys, the *American Automobile Association (AAA)* found that people view aggressive driving as more dangerous than drunk driving.

However, most of us have a broader definition of aggressive driving than highway safety experts. Researchers view **aggressive driving** only as *hostile* behavior — forcing someone off the road, shouting obscenities, or shooting at other drivers. In contrast, most lay people include *risk-taking* behavior in their definition — speeding, tailgating, weaving in and out of traffic and ignoring stop signs or red lights.

*"Yet many of us, when driving our cars and vans,
assume risks that an airline pilot would be fired for taking."*

If our definition of aggressive driving includes risk-taking behaviors, then we are all guilty. Our risk-taking is more prevalent than aggressive driving, and risky driving causes many more injuries and deaths on the highway. (As Pogo, a comic strip character, said many years ago, *"We have met the enemy, and they is us."*) Since we all bend the rules a little bit, it is hard to point out the bad drivers. Even though highway deaths have declined in the last 20 years, over 40,000 people still die each year in crashes.

Even though cars and highways have become safer, congested highways lead to distress. In our fast-paced culture, people are expected to do more, but they have less time to do it. Especially for those who regularly commute long distances over crowded highways, driving leads to high levels of frustration and stress. In turn, this chronic driving stress can lead to job dissatisfaction, family strife or even physical illnesses. In studies of

Southern California drivers, those with longer commutes had higher blood pressure and called in sick more often.

Although driving frustrations don't automatically cause aggressive behavior, they do increase the risk. Partially, this is related to **territorial defenses**. Some drivers see their cars as an extension of their *personal space*. Their car is their "*private sanctum*" — their "*moving castle*." If someone invades their private territory by bumping into them or cutting across their path, they are more likely to become aggressive.

The relative **anonymity** of driving in a car leads to greater reduction of inhibitions — and this promotes more aggressive driving under conditions of stress. A 1995 study was done with drivers of jeeps and convertibles. A confederate would drive up to a stop light in front of them. When the light turned green, they would remain stopped to see how this would affect the honking behavior of drivers. Those drivers who had their tops up started honking sooner and honked longer than drivers who had their tops down. These results supported the view that the anonymity of an enclosed car contributes to aggressive behavior.

New safety devices lower risks of crashing or risk of injury during a crash. In turn, their use may tempt people to take more chances while driving. Increased risky driving has not been noted with the availability of *airbags* or the mandatory requirement to use *seatbelts*. Both of these devices have lowered traffic death rates. In contrast, studies in Europe and Canada have shown that people are more likely to take risks if they have the new *electronic antilock brakes*. The difference seems to be linked to the *feedback* that the driver gets from the safety devices. Airbags are rarely noticed, unless we have an accident. Drivers become used to the seatbelts. However, as they drive, motorists are repeatedly reminded of the electronic antilock brakes. This makes them less concerned about their risky driving. A 1993 study was done with 1000 drivers who drove late-model cars with electronic antilock brakes. About 40% did not even know how to correctly apply the brakes. They incorrectly thought that they needed to pump the brakes. (The brakes must be held down to start the antilock action.)

It doesn't seem as if safe driving campaigns are very helpful either. Even though the media may urge people to drive safely, most of us view the message as applying to *others*. We get so upset about unsafe driving, because we tend to blame others rather than assuming the responsibility ourselves. We rarely change our own driving habits. We don't see ourselves as one of the proverbial "*nuts behind the wheel*." This view was exemplified by a driver in a 35 mph traffic zone, complaining about another driver. "*Here I am going 50, and that crazy idiot is passing me!*"

* Adapted from Scott Sleek's "Car wars: taming drivers' aggression," "When human behaviors offset safety mechanisms," and "Experts have varied ideas on how to curb accidents," [*APA Monitor*](#), September, 1996, pages 1, 13-14.