

A LINE ON LIFE

2/21/99

Road Rage *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

"In Utah, a 75-year-old man struck a 41-year-old man with his car because the latter had honked at him for blocking traffic.

In Colorado, a 55-year-old man fatally shot a 17-year old who had been tailgating.

A driver's education teacher in North Carolina ordered his student to chase a car that had cut them off. At the end of the chase the teacher walked over to the offender's car and gave the driver a bloody nose."

These are examples of **"road rage."** Since 1990, it has killed hundreds of people and injured over 10,000. Its victims are from all ages, socioeconomic groups, and areas of the country. "Road rage" is growing at an alarming rate.



Essentially "road rage" is **aggressive driving** – attempting to injure or kill another driver because of a traffic dispute. It involves unusually aggressive responses to a variety of traffic incidents. "Road ragers" may be upset by rather minor driving errors, like not using a turn signal. They may become enraged by a bigger infraction, like tailgating. They may retaliate with their car by forcing someone off the road, or they may follow the driver until he stops. Then they get out of

their car and attack the driver in person. Such attacks may include the use of a gun or any handy weapon, like a tire iron or a purse.

"Road rage" is thought to be a factor in two thirds of all automobile accident fatalities. According to the US Department of Transportation, approximately 250,000 people have been killed and 20 million injured in traffic crashes between 1990-96. They estimate that two thirds of deaths are at least partially caused by aggressive driving.

A separate study by the Foundation for Traffic Safety of the American Automobile Association studied 10,037 incidents of aggressive driving between 1990 and 1996. These incidents caused 218 deaths and more than 12,610 injuries.

The increase of aggressive driving in recent years has been attributed to more congested roadways and fewer classes in driver's education. In addition, there is a general lack of emotional control among drivers. Some are provoked by the actions of another driver; others are set off by roadway congestion. Most are caused by a change in moods and reactions when these drivers get behind the wheel. This is a serious issue for traffic safety — your safety and mine.

Aggressive drivers come from either gender and all ages, races and socioeconomic levels. Even persons who are usually "mild-mannered" can blow their top behind the wheel. These persons may only become mad when they're on the road. However, persons who are typically cynical, rude, angry or aggressive get angry more often. They "rage" at home, at work and on the road.

Aggressive drivers tend to become "enraged" at other drivers for the following activities.

- Tailgating.
- Flashing your lights in order to signal them to move to another lane.
- Obscene gesturing.
- Changing lanes without signaling.
- Blasting their horn.
- Frequently changing lanes by weaving back and forth.
- Racing to beat a yellow light that's about to turn red.
- Traveling in the left lane at a slow speed, making it impossible for others to pass.
- Driving right behind or toward other cars with your headlights on "*high beam*" at night.
- Cutting them off.
- Slowing down in front of their car right after passing.
- Making a turn from the wrong lane.
- Reacting too slowly after the red light turns green.

Defensive driving is a skill that needs to be learned. Then it needs to be practiced.

In order to avoid becoming a victim of "*road rage*," it helps to avoid any of the activities listed above. However, there are some positive steps you can take.

- Show courtesy to other drivers.
- Give yourself extra time for travel, so you won't feel rushed.
- Use your turn signals correctly.
- Drive defensively, not offensively. If driving is viewed as a contest, too often everybody loses. "*Winning drivers*" arrive at their destinations "*safe and sound*."
- Be alert to the traffic around you.
- Keep plenty of space between your car and the car in front of you. This becomes hard when others cut into that gap. However, if you aren't in a rush, it's relatively easy to give the new driver the same space.
- Be tolerant of those who exhibit non-conforming traffic behaviors.

These suggestions will help you to be safe from "*road rage*." In fact, one suggestion will keep you from developing "*road rage*." Whatever time you calculate to reach your destination, add 10% to that. In that way, congested traffic or unexpected delays won't fray your temper. You can actually enjoy your trip. As the saying goes, "*Half the fun is getting there*."

* Adapted from "Aggression Hits the Road" and "Common Motorist Irritants." These articles are on the web page of Wadsworth Publishers (March, 1998).