

MOTORISTS BEWARE: **Identifying The Different Types Of Road Ragers Out There**

A highly publicized road rage incident a number of years ago in the Twin Cities featured a 41-year-old physician who hit a 69-year-old grandmother in the face after she cut in front of him at a freeway entrance ramp. Many people were surprised that someone like a physician could become involved in an episode like this. It did not surprise me, however, because there are a variety of different types of road ragers. And they often don't necessarily fit the stereotype of the chronically angry person who lashes out everywhere in his or her life. This section will look at the different types of road ragers I have worked with and gotten to know over my years as a psychologist and offer some descriptive information about each one. As you are reading this section, think about your own driving habits and those of people you know. You may be surprised at what you see.

Part of what's especially important in identifying different types of road ragers is to realize that even people who seem to handle anger and stress in other areas of their lives may become angry on the highway and contribute to a road rage incident that involves property destruction, injury, and, sometimes, even death. Once tempers start to flare and we begin to make some bad choices, there is always the possibility that we or someone else will become just another road rage statistic. The types of road ragers mentioned here are not necessarily "hard and fast" or distinct. There is significant overlap between the categories and many road ragers may have qualities that involve parts of several different categories.

The first type is what I call the **ROAD WARRIOR**. This name comes from the *Mad Max* movies of the 1970's, which were set in a post-apocalyptic society where anarchy and violence reign supreme and roaming gangs of marauders maim and kill others for the few remaining stores of food and gasoline and for the sheer excitement of that lifestyle. This type represents the psychopathic and anti-social element who use the roadways as just another place where they can act out their criminal behavior. They don't care about themselves or others and are constantly on the lookout for opportunities to create fear and intimidation and to perpetrate violence against other drivers. The majority of aggressive drivers who create road rage statistics (i.e. crashes, injuries, homicides) are young males between 18 and 26 who are poorly educated, have drug or alcohol problems, and have criminal histories.

You may think to yourself, "*Oh, I would never get involved with someone like that when I'm driving,*" but don't be quite so sure. How do you know that the motorist who just cut you off or who is tailgating you isn't this type? In the summer of 1997, a 22-year-old woman was shot and killed on Highway 94 in St. Paul by a 17-year-old and two friends in a stolen car who began the episode by harassing her and a companion returning from a date. Thinking about the potential consequences to you and those you love, especially with this type of road rager and the next, is a great reason to start to control how you react in the car. Once the reacting begins, you never know what the other driver will do and where and how your interaction with them will end.

The second type is also scary, especially since I have worked so closely with them as a psychologist since the early 1980's in domestic abuse treatment programs, in anger management

classes, and in individual and couples therapy. These were the people who really helped me tune into the high level of anger, hostility, and violence on our streets and highways. They are the **RAGEAHOLICS**, men and women who feel frustrated, angry, and rageful much, if not most, of the time. They feel powerless, victimized, and “stepped on” by their partners, their children, their bosses and coworkers, their neighbors, and everyone else in their lives. They often become verbally and even physically abusive at home and they may have angry outbursts at work and be fired from positions or quit abruptly and move from job to job. They feel impatient and irritated much of the time and the car becomes simply another vehicle to vent their life’s pain and frustration.

This type, similar to the first, are just looking for someone to “cross” them, which gives them an excuse to “dump” the anger that is continually churning within them on that other person. Clients in the domestic abuse program have shared disturbing and sometimes horrific examples of brutal beatings they have given to other motorists who had the audacity to turn in front of them or drive too slowly in the left hand lane of a highway. One client, a over-the-road truck driver who was going through his abuse history in the domestic abuse program, “boasted” about two incidents when, after becoming angry with other motorists, he slammed the rear end of his trailer into their cars, knocking them into the ditch by the side of the road.

The third type is known as **ROAD ROYALTY**, the “kings” and “queens” of the roadways. The doctor at the beginning of this article has a good chance of fitting into this particular category. These people see themselves as “different” and “better” than other drivers because of their higher status, their life circumstances, or their perceived driving ability. They might drive a Lexus, a BMW, or a Jeep Grand Cherokee. They might be a corporate executive or manager who makes all sorts of important decisions and expects people to bend to his or her wishes. They might be a professional like a attorney or a physician who is used to getting his or her way in the court room or in the operating room. They might be a highly successful entrepreneur who has risen to the top “all by myself” and who expects others to realize how special they are to be able to do that. They might have or make a lot of money and live in the most prestigious areas of their community which (to them) is an clear indication of their unique status. Or they might be married to someone in the above life situations and take on that person’s attitude toward the rest of the world (which includes other drivers).

These individuals have a grandiose and arrogant sense about themselves and feel personally entitled to “*have things my way*,” which includes what happens during the time they are in their car. They believe that driving unencumbered by other motorists is their “unalienable right” because of who they are and how they have lived their lives up to this point. They see themselves as too important and too successful to have to live by the rules and etiquette intended for everyone else. These people are likely to react when someone gets in their way and keeps them from doing whatever “vital” task happens to be at hand for them in the present (which could be simply getting to where they want to go without any sort of “interference” by others).

The fourth type of rager is the **ROAD RANGER**. Road rangers are drivers who seek out and attempt to punish other motorists who are breaking the “rules of the road” that the rangers define (for themselves) as important. Unfortunately, other people may not necessarily see the rules in quite the same

way as the rangers do, including the legal system. For example, if road rangers believe the left lane is for passing only, their rule is that others should get out of the way even if that other motorist is traveling at or above the posted speed limit. However, if their rule is that everyone should always abide by the speed limit, they will try to slow others down by camping in the left lane and driving at the posted speed. Nobody else knows their particular set of rules, which tend to be personal, arbitrary, capricious, and very rigid. But the rangers are constantly “on guard” and looking for anyone who has the “audacity” to violate the standards that they deem to be critically important.

They have the self-righteous and arrogant attitude that it is their job to monitor, “instruct,” “correct,” and punish the “rude” and “inconsiderate” behavior of other drivers and tend to become focused on and obsessed with finding fault in other drivers. They take deep offense when someone violates any of the “rules of the road” (as the ranger interprets them). They also believe that they “just know” the personalities of the offending drivers by how they look, what type of vehicle they own, and how they drive and they are quick to judge and label others with demeaning or disrespectful terms (e.g. *“That yuppie is a fucking idiot,” “That young punk is a damn jerk,”* and *“That lady is a ditz.”*)

This type of road rager can also be pretty frightening, and is well represented by a 54-year-old church deacon and retired auto worker in Rhode Island. He became enraged that two men were tailgating a woman in the passing lane two lanes across the highway from him. He proceeded to move over those two lanes, flash his lights at them, and tailgate the offenders at high speed for eight miles. Eventually, he pulled over to the side of the road after they had done so, and used a crossbow from his trunk to “accidentally” shoot one of them dead, which he justified by saying he was only trying to “protect” himself and his wife, who was also in the car with him. He was sentenced to life in prison. He had no identified anger problems and no previous difficulties with the law. He provides another important reason to avoid engaging in angry encounters with other drivers on the roadways. Even supposed “good guys” can be killers when road rage becomes a part of the driving equation.

The fifth type is the **ROAD RACER**. These are the speeders and the Indy 500 “wannabes.” The number of Minnesota drivers apprehended for speeding at more than 100 miles per hour has quadrupled in the decade prior to 2003 to nearly 400. And those were only the ones who happened to get caught.

For some road racers, their driving habits simply involve wanting to experience the power of their automobile and the “rush” and exhilaration that driving at fast speeds can bring. For others, it is because they are late, in a hurry, and feel continually pressured to “make up time” in our turbocharged culture. For still others, the goal is to completely avoid any type of congestion that slows them down in any way in their incessant attempt to speed to their destination, whether it be to work, to play, or just to get home.

They often weave in and out of traffic at breakneck speeds (often not using their turn signals), taking unnecessary risks to try to get to their destination as fast as they possibly can. They tend to tailgate as close as they can to pressure other cars to move over and let them by and they frequently hop from lane to lane, swerving in and out of lanes to try to find the smoothest and fastest possible route for them to get to wherever they happen to be going.

Road racers expect that others should clear a path and stay out of their way. They become angry and frustrated when other drivers do not allow them to travel at whatever speed they wish to go by blocking their path in some way. Other motorists are simply impediments and obstacles to their getting

where they want to go as fast as they possibly can. Unfortunately, as a byproduct of their “need for speed,” they are totally unable to enjoy anything about the driving process because they are continually “pumped up” and so focused on decreasing the time it takes them to get from one place to another. Other drivers also react angrily to the road racers, who seem to have so little regard for anyone else on the highways.

In fact, the road racers who are so focused on saving time don’t generally save much real time. I drove 25 miles on the freeways from my home to my work in the past. At 60 mph, I got there in about 25 minutes. At 75 mph, I got there in about 20 minutes. I would only save five minutes by doing this, and it is just not worth the stress and danger that is created, for ourselves and others, by traveling at the faster speed.

The sixth type is the **COMPETITOR**. Many people in our society enshrine competition and winning as unquestioned values. Competitors take these attitudes out on the open road and become obsessive in their striving to be “number one” in the many little contests that can occur in the car on a daily basis. For them, coming out “on top” is all that counts in driving and in life. Driving becomes just another series of private and very personal challenges that are either “won” or “lost.” Whether the competitor wins or loses can lead to a feeling of victory and superiority or to a feeling of personal defeat and inferiority. They also can’t stand being behind others and having to wait in line.

Examples of the competitor’s behavior might include roaring off when the stoplight turns green or at a 4-way stop sign to beat another car through the intersection, picking another car and “racing” it to a predetermined marker even though the other driver may not even be aware of the “race” they are having, speeding into a parking space that someone else is also waiting to get, moving to the very front of the line when two lanes merge, or trying to catch up with and get by someone who has passed them.

In order to maintain their competitive edge, they have to be hyper-vigilant and primed to respond, which creates a constant state of stress arousal within them. This arousal can quickly turn to frustration and anger, especially if they perceive that they have “lost” whatever encounter they believe to be occurring around them. When they do “lose,” they often feel anxious, depressed, disgraced, and humiliated and then become angry at themselves and the other drivers who have “beaten” them in the many contests they have created as they drive their cars.

The seventh type is the **ROAD REBEL**. These drivers are also competitive but do it in a more passive-aggressive way. These are the people who are not going to be “forced” to do anything by another driver. They tend to see others’ driving behaviors as personal attacks and believe that other motorists “*are out to push me around*” and “*pick on me.*” They refuse to let that happen and have the attitude that “*nobody can make me do anything.*” They become angry if they have to “give in” or “back off” and others are able to do what they want on the roadways. In that situation, the rebels feel like “wimps” or “doormats” and think to themselves that “*someone has gotten the better of me.*” Other drivers are viewed as “the enemy.”

Road rebels would be likely to try to close the gap between themselves and the car in front of them to keep another driver from moving into the lane ahead of them or would tap their brakes and actually slow down in the left lane if someone is tailgating them and wanting to get by.

The eighth type is a category in which many people find themselves these days. It involves being a **DISTRACTED DRIVER** and is a bit different from many of the road ragers discussed previously. Distracted driving can be defined as anything that takes the driver's eyes off the road or their hands off the steering wheel for more than two seconds or, in some way, interrupts their concentration on the actual process of driving.

These distractions are relevant to accidents and road rage because, according to a National Highway Traffic Safety Administration study, some 80% of car crashes are caused by motorist inattention within three seconds before an actual accident. And, according to the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, driver distraction and inattention in 2009 were involved in the deaths of 58 people and injuries to 8,354 others (this accounted for 9% of fatalities and 20% of injuries in Minnesota that year). In addition, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety reports that looking away from the road for only two seconds doubles your risk of being in a crash (it is also frustrating and frightening for other drivers who see you swerving around the road or moving in their direction which can precipitate an angry reaction on their part toward you).

Distracted motorists may not be angry themselves initially but they often trigger irritation and anger in other drivers, especially some of the types listed above, who become frustrated about their lack of attention to the actual task of driving their car. Eventually, they too may become rageful after others have vented their anger toward them for their lack of focus in the car on the actual driving they are supposed to be doing. Distracted drivers view the car as simply another place where they can accomplish all the "very necessary and important" tasks of their daily living.

Once in the car, they are often very busy with a variety of activities that have absolutely nothing to do with driving. They talk on their cell phones; text their friends or receive texts from others; browse the internet on their cell phone; drink their lattes and eat their breakfasts or lunches; primp, comb their hair, and apply makeup so that they look "just right" when they get to where they are going; peer at the newspaper or their tablet to catch up on current events or read the latest NY Times bestseller to improve their minds; or even pet, play with, or give their dogs food and water while driving. Some drivers go even further and cradle their dogs on their laps or perch the animals on their chests with the pets' front paws clutching the driver's neck or shoulders (dogs are very lovable creatures but that's just "going a bit too far").

Distracted drivers generally have the entitled and arrogant belief that they should be able to do anything they want to do in their car all the while paying little (or no) attention to their primary task, which is actually taking responsibility for operating their vehicle safely on the roadways. Research done by the University of Utah indicates that using a cell phone while driving, even if it is "hands-free," slows driver responses as much as having a blood alcohol level of .08, which is a driving violation in every state. Texting while you are driving leads to even more problems and has become illegal in a number of states, including Minnesota. It involves three major types of activities that affect drivers the most: visual (looking away), manual (pushing keys), and mental (trying to read or create a text message).

In 2008, almost 6,000 people died and more than 500,000 were injured in our country in accidents that involved distracted drivers. But these numbers may be dramatically underestimated. In fact, they are only based on drivers who actually acknowledged becoming involved in some sort of

distracting activity before a crash occurred. In 2015, a AAA study indicated that 6 in 10 teen drivers were distracted in the six seconds leading up to an accident.

The final type is another category in which many of us find ourselves from time to time. This is the **SITUATIONAL RAGER**. This type involves reacting to specific situations that we encounter on the highways that we can't control. These ragers might get angry in rainy or snowy weather, in slow and "backed-up" rush hour traffic, when accidents slow their progress, and when confronted by highway obstructions and construction zones. It can also involve driving when you are feeling stressed about other life circumstances, when you have too many things to do, when you are late, or when you feel rushed and harried. Most people do, in fact, get angry on the roadways at times. Unfortunately, even if you only fall into this category, you might become engaged with one of the other eight types, which could eventually lead to potentially severe and destructive consequences.

Think about the nine types that are discussed in this article and about the driving habits that you and others close to you have. Do you see yourself or others you know fitting into any of the categories? If so, this is a time to start changing your attitudes and behaviors when you drive or asking those who are in your life to do this as well. **Road rage on the highways is always a "dead end street."** Changing the way you react in the car is the only way to prevent yourself from becoming involved in a road rage incident where you, those you love, or others might be injured or even killed.