

## **ROAD RAGE: What It Is and How To Protect Yourself From Your Own Or Someone Else's Anger On The Highways**

It's getting scarier out there on our Minnesota roadways (and elsewhere as well). Or, at least it seems that way, as we hear more and more horror stories about drivers assaulting, ramming, and shooting one another. In fact, road rage really isn't a new phenomenon. It has happened in Los Angeles, New York, and other large cities for decades. Many people have difficulty believing that it is also an issue here in Minnesota. But, in reality, as a psychologist who has worked with thousands of angry people in both counseling sessions and community workshops, I have seen and heard numerous accounts of physical assaults and, sometimes, even deadly road rage incidents even here in Minnesota for much of that time.

I was first exposed to road rage as a regular part of my clinical practice through the domestic abuse groups I have been facilitating since the early 1980's. It quickly became apparent when these men talked about their histories of violence that partners and children were not the only targets of their explosive outbursts. Frequently, clients talked openly and honestly about using their vehicles, their fists, and weapons like baseball bats to intimidate and abuse other motorists as well.

Even up here in the northland, where "Minnesota Nice" is supposed to be the prevailing attitude, we have our share of road rage incidents that make it into the news. One newspaper article from as long ago as November 1990 that I often use with clients talks about a 33-year-old man who was shot in the chest by another motorist when the victim didn't clear a lane on Highway 280 in the Twin Cities. The assailant was never apprehended. In another incident in July 2001, a 38-year-old driver was charged with assaulting a 75-year-old man on the Crosstown Highway in Minneapolis. The younger man was driving on the highway shoulder and cutting other drivers off when he rammed the older man's car. He then proceeded to whip the senior with a belt when the two pulled over to the side of the road. Road rage happens here and everywhere else and it is critical to understand what road rage is and how to avoid it so that you don't end up becoming a victim of your own or someone else's anger.

Road rage has been occurring for a long time, but it seems to be getting worse, with more and more high profile stories in the media. Road rage is a reality in modern society. A study by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety found that road rage had increased by about seven percent every year between 1990 and 1996. During this time, road rage was credited with triggering 10,037 incidents resulting in 12,610 injuries and 218 deaths, according to reports from 30 newspapers, supplemented by insurance claims and police reports from 16 cities.

The phrase "road rage" was officially entered into the English language in 1997 when it was first listed in the "new words" section of the Oxford English Dictionary. It was in that same year that the National Traffic Safety Administration declared road rage this country's "number one" traffic problem.

Road rage can be defined as an extreme form of aggressive driving but it is much more than that. In fact, road rage involves a escalating process of feelings, decisions, and events that takes on a life of its own as it continues. It can be a desire to punish the "bad" and inconsiderate drivers of the world

who “need to be taught a lesson.” It can involve feeling entitled to drive any way we want because we believe that we are better drivers than everyone else or because we think that we are more successful, wealthy, and important than others, which means that they should clear a path for us. Or it can simply be a time where “normal” people like all of us act out the anger that our daily activities have created for us.

And road rage is not just the province of those big “macho” guys. A study by a firm in Michigan found that 53% of aggressive drivers were women. This really is not all that surprising, given the possible scenario of a woman in a 5000-pound sport utility vehicle and a man driving his 2500-pound subcompact. It is not too hard to imagine who has the potential to do more damage if the two get involved in a power struggle on the freeway under those circumstances. Women who would not think of becoming aggressive in a situation where a personal confrontation might occur outside their vehicles can become as hostile and rageful as a street thug in the “safe” confines of their automobile. Our highways have become one place where women have truly achieved equality depending on the size and power of the vehicle that they drive.

A road rage incident actually involves a step-by-step process. **Road rage starts with the emotion of anger, a normal and natural part of being human.** Anytime we are startled, feel insecure and threatened, or believe that things around us are “out of control,” we encounter the “fight or flight” stress response that all human beings are “hard-wired” to experience. Almost everyone gets impatient, frustrated, and angry at times about traffic jams, highway construction, and other drivers’ behavior. In a national poll of 875 people in 1997, an independent polling company in Michigan found that 80% of drivers identified themselves as angry much of the time they are behind the wheel. But if the escalation continues beyond simply becoming frustrated or impatient, that is where the problem really begins.

**The next step involves moving from the emotion of anger to a cynical, hostile, controlling, and punishing attitude.** This attitude consists of a negative mind set, a mistrust of other people and their motives, and a desire to control the situation or the other person, which often leads to a desire for revenge or retribution. This attitude also leads to expecting other drivers to be incompetent, unfair, inconsiderate, and untrustworthy, and expecting them to go out of their way to try to take advantage of us and “violate” us in some way. This attitude is best represented by our negative thought process. For example, you might think to yourself, *“That jerk isn’t going to get away with what he just did”* or *“OK, sucker, you’ve invaded my space. Now it’s payback time.”* Thoughts like these set the stage for a belief that we have a right to retaliate against them in whatever way seems appropriate.

And that may be exactly what we end up doing. **The next step in the process involves aggressive driving actions which are behaviors acted out with the intent to “teach,” hurt, punish, intimidate, control, and dominate other drivers who we believe to be violating our own (or others’) rights.** These actions are used as a means of getting “the last word” in a driving duel, gaining revenge for those real or imagined “wrongs” done to us, or actually trying to get our way in the particular situation. Aggressive driving can exist on a continuum from a single gesture, curse, or facial expression all the way up to actively harassing and interfering with the other driver, including things like glaring, honking, “flipping someone off,” tailgating, swerving toward another vehicle, and even chasing another car.

**The eventual outcome of the process outlined above is a road rage incident, when aggressive driving leads to extreme acts of aggression and attempts to actually damage another vehicle or even injure**

**or kill the other person.** A road rage incident can end in property damage, injury to yourself or someone else, or even death to one or more of the participants or even innocent bystanders. The road rage incident represents the end result of an escalating sequence of feelings and events meted out from one driver to another that literally takes on a life of its own. Examples can include pulling over to the side of the road and ending up in a shoving match or a fist fight, throwing something at another vehicle, forcing someone's car off the road, bumping into someone else's car, or even shooting a gun at another motorist.

Why does road rage occur? Road rage is frequently attributed to a variety of different causes, one or more of which can be a part in creating the eventual damage that is done:

### **More cars, more drivers, increased use of roadways, and more congestion on the roadways that currently exist**

Americans drive nearly twice as many miles as they did in 1980, and yet the road capacity has increased only 3%. Between 1970 and 1987, the number of cars on the road more than doubled. According to a recent study, the average Twin Cities driver spent 43 hours delayed in traffic in 2003 and the Twin Cities has become the 22nd most congested area in the entire United States. In the most congested city in the country, Los Angeles, the average driver spent 93 hours stuck in rush hour traffic. The causes of the increased congestion include capacity-related bottlenecks (40%), crashes and breakdowns (25%), bad weather (15%), road construction (10%), and poor signal timing (5%). In 2007, the gas wasted in gridlock was 2,810 million gallons, up from 500 million gallons in 1982.

### **Our vehicles becoming a representation and an extension of who we are as human beings**

A car is a highly territorialized space and, for some, may even become an extension of their own personality. Some people choose specific makes of automobiles to represent how they see themselves and some look at the vehicles other people drive as representing certain specific attributes or qualities in those drivers. Car commercials and advertisements cater to this belief. Some people might buy a little sports car that represents to them their fast-paced and daring lifestyle or personality. Some people might buy an expensive luxury car that represents to them how successful and important they have become. Some people might buy a pickup truck that represents to them how "rough and tough" they are in their dealings with the world. When others invade or infringe on our space when we are driving or when we make interpretations about others from what they drive, we may end up responding in an antagonistic or aggressive fashion to the affronts or threats we perceive to that sense of self that has been created through the choice of a vehicle.

### **The anonymity, size, power, and speed of today's automobiles**

Many vehicles today are virtually comfortable enough to live in on a full-time basis. They isolate us from the rest of the world even as they carry us through it. Tinted glass and thick metal walls separate us effectively from the rest of humanity, as they do for other drivers. It becomes easier to objectify and demean others when there is little or no ability to connect with or even see them. What makes this even worse is the enormous size, power, and speed of the vehicles themselves. The ultimate "battlegoons" of the present include sport utility vehicles and pickup trucks which can weigh two and a half tons (and more) and have the ability to create the illusion of invulnerability and invincibility. Even physically small people, who would never think about getting into any kind of altercation elsewhere, may end up feeling strong and powerful in their vehicle. This attitude can lead directly to a belief that they have the right to impose their will on motorists who offend them and that they then have the ability

to quickly disappear without any fear of being held accountable or apprehended for their misdeeds. And the other person may be thinking exactly the same thing.

### **Our hectic and fast-paced lifestyle and other related day-to-day stressors**

For many people today, there are too many things to do and never enough time to get them done. This sets up a situation when we are constantly rushing and running late. A car, for some of the reasons noted directly above, can become a handy place to let out all the stress that we feel in the rest of our lives. This becomes especially true when we feel blocked or hampered in our efforts to accomplish what we feel we need to get done. Many drivers report little or no expression of explosive anger in the rest of their lives but as soon as they get in the car, *“something happens and other people had better watch it and stay out of my way.”*

### **Individual drivers’ personal anger management problems**

There are a lot of people who already carry an enormous amount of anger in many, if not all, areas of their lives. They may be angry about their marriages, their jobs, their finances, their children, or a myriad of other issues. They may be looking for someone on whom they can vent this anger. Other drivers make great scapegoats and targets and an automobile is a perfect vehicle for “dumping” that explosive anger that they feel.

### **Cultural messages about how to drive from movies, television, automobile advertisements, and even video games and cartoons**

We are literally bombarded on a daily basis with societal communications about what to expect when driving. One of the first movies to exploit the thrill and excitement of the “out of control” car chase was *The French Connection*, where a New York City cop commandeered a car and chased the bad guy, ramming numerous vehicles and creating all sorts of mayhem in the process. This and other scenes like it that are common in the movies and television teach us that we can drive whatever way we wish and that no one will actually get hurt. Advertisements also offer distorted views on our vehicles and our driving capabilities. One such commercial shows an SUV gliding effortlessly through all sorts of obstacles including a huge falling rock and a wild animal lunging at it. Nothing can stop us once we are safely ensconced in our cars. Video games and cartoons give us another unrealistic example of what driving is really about. In *Interstate 82*, a video game, our car comes equipped with roof-mounted mortars, under-bumper machine guns, and satellite-guided lasers and we are allowed to create carnage on the highway that we only dream of doing as we navigate through real-world driving situations. And, when the game is over, we get up from the computer monitor and simply walk away to do something else. Unfortunately, in real life, there may be a vastly different outcome.

### **Messages about driving that we have received from our parents, siblings, and peers**

The family where we grow up and our early peer relationships literally become a laboratory where we learn how to view other people and how to function in the world. This is true for attitudes and behaviors we have about driving as well. Think back to what you saw in the car from family members and others. If these other important people in your childhood talked about other drivers as “idiots” and “assholes” and drove in an aggressive or intimidating fashion, this may have had an adverse influence on you when you climb in your vehicle today.

## The attitude of “rugged individualism” that exists in the United States

Europeans long ago had to learn to adapt and accommodate their personal preferences and take into account the others around them due to greater population in a smaller area and the space constraints that go with this. American societal beliefs, however, have been based on the concept that the individual person rather than the community welfare is all-important and was the driving force in settling and “taming” our vast country. One manifestation of this is the idea that driving anyway we want is an “inalienable right” for us as Americans and that we don’t need to work together in a cooperative way with other drivers on the road.

## An overall decline in respect and civility in this country

The United States has experienced enormous social change since the 1950’s, including things like the civil rights, women’s, and gay rights movements; the Vietnam war protests; and a variety of scandals involving our government and our country’s leaders. These changes have destroyed the hierarchical system from the past where people had and knew “their proper place.” This has been an important part of some very positive changes in our society, but it has also led to more frequent and overt feelings of victimization, higher expectations, and an increase in hostility and cynicism generally. When these expectations about how we should be treated are not met, there is significantly more anger, disrespect, and aggressive behavior. Not surprisingly, our driving behavior is another place where this has manifested itself.

All of the above factors can contribute the increasing prevalence of road rage. Road rage is a fact of life today that is unlikely to simply go away. So what can you do to avoid becoming a victim of road rage? Part of this involves realizing that, whether you think you do or not, you really do not know who is driving that other car. It may be a young man between 18 and 26 who is part of the group that makes up the majority of aggressive drivers. It may be an individual with a long criminal history who views the roadways as just another place to act out their unlawful activities and who is even carrying a weapon to assist in doing just that. Or it may be someone with a chronic anger problem who is continually looking a place to vent their life’s emotional pain.

But what if you’re the person who has problems with anger in the car? It isn’t just the obvious rageaholics and “crazies” who get themselves involved with incidents of explosive anger in the car. In 1994, a 54-year old Rhode Island Baptist church deacon and retired auto worker became engaged in a fatal road rage incident. He became incensed that a paramedic was tailgating a woman two lanes over from him, followed the paramedic for eight miles, and eventually pulled over to the side of the road, killing the other driver with a cross bow he normally used for target shooting. This deacon was loved and respected by his church and community and had no previous record of trouble with the law. He is now spending the rest of his life in prison with no possibility of parole. The wife whom he claimed to be defending with this actions in this incident filed for divorce.

Although many aggressive drivers fit into the categories briefly described above, some of us, for some of the reasons cited previously, are finding ourselves getting angrier in the car than is good for us, our family members, and other motorists. This anger manifests itself in several different ways. But once anger starts in the car, it **always** has the potential to escalate to a road rage incident if you do not make the choice to handle it in an effective way.

To recognize whether you're having problems with your own anger when another driver does something you don't like, take the time to think about and answer the following questions.

- Have you ever started muttering or cursing under your breath (or out loud), saying things like *“What’s the matter with that turkey,” “Move it or park it, yo-yo,”* or *“Get off the damn cell phone, lady”*
- Have you ever sped up to block someone’s lane change, tapped your brakes or slowed down in the left lane to frustrate a driver who was tailgating you, or abruptly changed lanes without using your turn signal?
- Have you ever yelled and cursed at other drivers, made obscene gestures to communicate your displeasure with them, or moved your car toward another vehicle to intimidate or punish someone for something they have done?
- Do you feel entitled to “special treatment” when you drive because of your profession, your income, your success, your innate or learned “driving ability,” or your “importance” in the world (which means (in your own mind) that others should *“clear a path and get out of my way?”*)

All these attitudes and behaviors, in the right set of circumstances, can set up a road rage incident where someone can be injured or killed. After all, you're not just driving a vehicle. It can also become a lethal weapon when you allow your anger to “take over the wheel.” An important part of changing the increasing atmosphere of anger and fear that exists on today’s roadways is to begin to take a good look at yourself. What can you do if your anger gets the best of you, at times, when you’re the one in the car? Think about putting some of the following suggestions into your driving repertoire.

### **TUNE INTO YOUR EMOTIONAL STATE BOTH BEFORE AND AS YOU ENTER YOUR CAR TO ACTUALLY DRIVE SOMEWHERE**

- Stop and ask yourself:
  - ...*“Am I feeling tense or anxious right now?”*
  - ...*“Have I had a difficult or stressful day (or week)?”*
  - ...*“Am I worried, anxious, frustrated, or preoccupied about something else going in my life?”*
  - ...*“Am I running late, feeling pressured about getting somewhere on time, or do I have too many things to do and too little time to do them?”*
- Start to become aware of the driving situations and the types of drivers that trigger anger in you when you are in the car
  - ...these triggers and cues can be part of your *Escalation Prevention Plan* in this workbook
- If you think you might have an anger problem in the car, notice how passengers react with you or ask others directly about what they experience with you and then really listen to what they have to say
  - ...use others as a helpful “reality test” and listen to their feedback
  - ...get some help with your anger if you hear from others that you need it

### **SLOW DOWN**

- Notice and slow your car’s speed, your heart rate and physical self, your mind, and your emotional process.
  - ...get yourself off “automatic pilot” and become more mindful of how you are feeling
- Leave earlier and give yourself more time to get to the places you need to go

- Learn to relax when you're driving, taking deep breaths, counting to 10, and listening to calming music when you're feeling tense, stressed, or threatened
- Actively look for ways to enjoy your time in the car
  - ...e.g. listening to books on tape or talking and connecting with your passengers
- Pay careful attention as you drive:
  - ..."expect the unexpected" and be prepared to respond in an effective and non-threatening way to keep yourself, your passengers, and other drivers safe

**DON'T TAKE TRAFFIC PROBLEMS AND OTHER DRIVERS' BEHAVIOR AS A CHALLENGE OR A PERSONAL AFFRONT THAT IS BEING DIRECTED AT YOU BY THAT OTHER PERSON**

- Don't personalize what other drivers do or what is happening around you
  - ...what happens on the road often has absolutely nothing to do with you
- Let go of the idea that you should be able to control other drivers and driving situations that are occurring around you
  - ...the more you try to control other drivers and their behavior, the more "out of control" you will end up feeling in the car
  - ...think about "*putting yourself in the other person's shoes (or car)*"
  - ...allow for the idea that people may make mistakes, be inattentive, or act confused while driving; admit to yourself that you have also done these kinds of things in the car (in fact, we all have)
- Realize that some drivers might actually be trying to get a "rise" out of you for their own reasons (which includes their being angry or entitled people themselves)
  - ...they may think that you're doing things to personally antagonize them (even when this is not the case)
  - ...some motorists are making a personality assessment about you just by how you look, how old you are, what kind of car you drive, and from information like the bumper stickers or personalized license plates that you have on your vehicle
    - ...in fact, interestingly, research has also indicated that people with bumper stickers, window decals, personalized license plates, and other "territorial markers" are more likely to express aggressive driving behavior toward other motorists than drivers who do not use these sorts of markers on their vehicles (even if the messages on the markers are about peace and love, e.g. "Visualize World Peace," "Coexist," or "WWJD")
  - ...don't respond to others' provocative behavior with offensive behavior of your own
    - ...don't stare, glare, or even look at other drivers
      - ...once eye contact is made, you and the other person are "engaged" and, potentially, "away you go" with that other driver
    - ...don't give other drivers the "satisfaction" of you reacting poorly to them or your actually becoming their "puppet" in your interaction with them
- Don't attempt to punish, retaliate, get revenge, or "teach them how to drive better"
  - ...you will never be able to effectively "teach them a lesson" or "correct" their bad driving habits; this mindset could cost you or others your lives.
- Stay aware that you know absolutely nothing about that other driver (even though you think you may know "*exactly what that other person is like*")
  - ...they could be drunk, they might be angry about a fight they just had with someone else, or they might even be carrying a knife, a gun, or some other object in their car that could be used as a weapon against you or your family

## **BE AWARE THAT YOU ARE CONTINUALLY MAKING CHOICES IN YOUR VEHICLE (AS YOU ARE IN THE REST OF YOUR LIFE)**

- Recognize that you are never “completely out of control,” although you may **feel** “out of control” at times in the car
- Think about your choice points. These are the times when you can further escalate the situation or disengage from the escalation with another driver and make the decision not to continue the power struggle that can lead to a road rage incident  
...e.g. choosing not to “tap your brakes” and slow down when another driver is tailgating you; rather, trying to move out of the other person’s way as quickly as possible

## **NOTICE WHAT YOU’RE SAYING TO YOURSELF ABOUT DRIVING AND OTHER DRIVERS: TUNE INTO YOUR SELF-TALK WHEN YOU’RE ON THE ROAD**

- Your thoughts and the statements you actually verbalize in the car are powerful and can either get you angrier and increase the potential for aggressive driving or help you look at other drivers and driving situations with a more positive attitude  
...when you start muttering comments like “*What’s the matter with that jerk,*” you are feeding and continuing the escalation process that could eventually lead to an actual road rage incident
- Rather than assuming the worst about others, start thinking that there might actually be a valid reason for another driver’s actions, even if they don’t make much sense to you at the time  
...e.g. maybe the person who cut you off actually couldn’t see you in their mirrors, is tired from a long and stressful day at work, or is preoccupied about a family emergency
- Re-think your overall attitude about driving  
...actively question your unrealistic and destructive attitudes and expectations of yourself and others  
...intervene in entitled attitudes about who you believe yourself to be, e.g.  
    ...*“I am a much better driver than other people”*  
    ...*“I’m too important (successful/wealthy/‘special’) to have to go by the rules of the road that other motorists should have to follow”*  
...stop viewing other drivers as adversaries, competitors, or “the enemy”  
    ...work hard to make driving a cooperative rather than a competitive endeavor  
    (i.e. we’re all trying to get somewhere that we need to go)

## **REMEMBER THE “GOLDEN RULE” WHEN YOU ARE DRIVING**

- Treat others as you wish to be treated on the roadways
- Don’t tailgate, change lanes abruptly, flash your bright lights at others, tap your brakes to slow someone down, and block the passing lane (even if you’re going at or above the speed limit)
- Use your horn sparingly (if at all) and use your turn signals whenever you are changing lanes or making a turn
- Don’t carry an object or weapon (e.g. a screwdriver, a baseball bat, a golf club, a knife) “*for personal protection*” or “*just in case something bad happens when I’m in my car*”  
...doing this can set up a situation where you actually may become more likely to engage with another angry driver which can then lead to significant damage and injury
- Wave in a friendly way to express gratitude for others’ positive driving behaviors  
...e.g. when someone makes space for you merge onto the freeway from an on-ramp



## **STAY AWARE OF ALL THE POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES OF EXPLOSIVE ANGER IN THE CAR**

- The physical “wear and tear” on your body
- Taking home the stress and anger from driving so that it affects your time and relationships with the people you love
- Property damage, an increase in insurance premiums, and time and energy spent trying to resolve the claim
- Being arrested, spending time in jail, and wasting time and money once you are involved with the legal system (e.g. attorneys’ fees, court fees and fines, losing your driver’s license)
- The example you are setting for your children about how to drive and how to handle their anger ...they are watching you and you are their role model for how to drive and to deal with frustration in the car!
- The fear you trigger in others who happen to be in the car with you
- Injury or death to you, your family members, or others

## **WHEN YOU ARE BEING HARASSED OR YOU SEE AGGRESSIVE DRIVING ON THE ROADWAYS, TAKE POSITIVE STEPS TO ADDRESS IT**

- If you have a cell phone, dial 911 and report aggressive driving behavior to the police, whether it affects you directly or other motorists who are nearby  
...get the license number, make and model of the vehicle, and the direction the other driver is traveling  
...**DO NOT attempt to intervene with the other driver on your own!**
- Never stop alongside the road to “talk” to any angry motorist and don’t return to your home if someone is actually following you  
...drive to a public place like a service station or a convenience store and make a call to the police from there if you don’t happen to have a cell phone

If you think you might have an anger problem when you drive, get some help. If someone who knows you thinks that you might have an anger problem in the car, listen to what they say (and how you affect them) and get some help. Help is available and it can work for you as it has for countless others who no longer vent their anger in a destructive way when they are on the road. I have seen many people change how they handle their anger, on the highways and elsewhere. It can be done. Anger in the car is too important an issue to ignore. Make the commitment that you won’t become just another road rage statistic. You owe it to yourself and the people who love you to take care of yourself (and them) in this way.

## **SOME QUESTIONS RELATED TO THIS ARTICLE TO THINK ABOUT FOR YOURSELF:**

- 1) How do you respond when you are feeling frustrated, impatient, or “stressed” in the car? What do you think about, what emotions do you experience, and how do you act? Be specific.
- 2) Describe the worst experience you have had with anger on the road (your own or someone else’s). What happened? What were you thinking and feeling and how did you act? How did the other driver respond? How did the situation end? What would you do differently in the future?

- 3) How did your parents and siblings drive? What was their attitude toward other drivers? How has this affected your driving as an adult?
- 4) Identify some of the choice points in your own driving experiences that escalated or de-escalated your anger in the car and potential road rage incidents.
- 5) What are some specific things you do (or could do) to de-escalate yourself when you are driving?