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Losing It Behind The Wheel

By Kay F. Walkinshaw, RHA

Why are so many of us boiling over like overheated radiators? As we know, there are three types of drivers: the idiots (those who drive faster than ourselves), the morons (those who drive slower), and ourselves.

For many of us driving means being in control. For some, it is the only time they ever feel in control. The perception of being sealed in our transport capsule gives us a sense of individuality; at the push of a pedal, we get power; at the press of a button, a choice of music; and, with air-conditioning, even a personally tailored climate. It also gives us a "false sense" of being invincible, not responsible or accountable for our actions. When that control is threatened by another driver, common sense often flies out the window.

Unfortunately, all of us experience road rage and are aggressive to some degree. Test yourself. If you get angry while driving, and if your anger lasts more than just a few seconds, you have got road rage.

Road rage is the result of one driver becoming angry with another driver for doing something stupid or rude. The dispute usually involves a territorial aspect. You mindlessly drift into my lane. You pull out from a side street to get in front of me while I am waiting for a light to change. You pass me, pull in front of me and then drive 20 miles under the speed limit just to make me go berserk. I then pass you, get in front of you and make you slow down. Or I really fix you and pull up two inches from your bumper.

These types of disputes lead to road rage—accidents, beatings and shootings—and involve otherwise ordinary drivers who suddenly lose control in response to the unintentional and/or inconsiderate actions of another motorist.

We view our vehicles as our own private space and discount the fact that the road is a very public space. When someone does something that violates that private space, we



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get angry. The frustration of traffic gridlock, construction logjams and certainly different aspects of our lives that have nothing to do with driving, all conspire to turn a perfectly sensible motorist into a steering wheel terrorist.

A major study released by the American Automobile Association (AAA) reported that the rate of "aggressive driving" incidents—defined as events in which an angry driver tries to kill or injure another driver after a traffic dispute—has risen 51 percent since 1990. According to the report, drivers have been assaulted with weapons ranging from partially eaten burritos to canes, a favorite with the elderly and disabled, to golf clubs.

A recent study indicates that today there are 17 percent more cars and 10 percent more drivers in America than there were 10 years ago. The most aggressive drivers were found to be men ages 18 through 26, according to a AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety study.

There are many road rage self-help books on the market. Some of the commonsense suggestions to avoid road rage

follow.

- First and foremost, make every attempt to get out of their way. Treat every instance as a potentially dangerous situation. Put your pride in the back seat—do not challenge them by speeding up or attempting to hold-your-own in a lane. Wear your seat belt, not only will it hold you in your seat and behind the wheel in case you need to make an abrupt driving maneuver, but it will protect you in a crash. Avoid eye contact. Ignore obscene gestures and refuse to return them.
- Plan ahead so you have enough time for your trip. If you find yourself in slow traffic, give up arriving on time; distract yourself by listening to the radio or music; admire the scenery, practice your yoga breathing. Be patient and use your car horn sparingly.
- If you begin to feel combative with self-righteous indignation, "He cut me off, I don't deserve to be pushed around," try making funny animal sounds. Make up possible excuses. Think about your spouse, parents of children who might do the same thing. Think about being perfect. When you are behind the wheel, get in touch with your higher feelings and use them to fight your "lower feelings." Strive to gain greater emotional intelligence as a driver. Be a witness to your own thoughts and emotions. Distinguish more accurately between insult or negligence on the one hand, and mistake or incapacity on the other.
- Feeling excessively competitive and anxious about not winning or being left behind is just a habit from childhood. Remind yourself how good it feels to be civil, helpful and in control. Do not be over-critical. Tell yourself it is human to make mistakes. Recall some of your mistakes. Remind yourself that patience is a virtue.
- How would loved ones feel if something happened to you? Tell yourself you prefer to be a mature person. Anybody is a road rage candidate, but you can control it.

TAKE THE ROAD RAGE TEST:

Answer each question by checking the appropriate box on the right, then add up the number of checks of each column and then check your score.

2 or more answers in the first column. Your road rage tendency is at a dangerous level.

5 or more answers in the second column. You have moderate road rage.

7 or more answers in the third column. You are in control of yourself.

	on every trip	on some trips	never
1. I complain to myself about other drivers or traffic.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I get annoyed or irritated by some drivers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I feel frustration and anger in congested traffic.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I drive like I am in a hurry all the time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I honk at drivers who upset me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I tailgate slower drivers who refuse to move over.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I yell at drivers, and if they deserve it, I give them the finger.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I break speed limits.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I go through red lights.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. I drive impaired (alcohol, medication, fatigue).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>