

AVOIDING ROAD RAGE

More and more drivers have started acting out their anger when they get behind the wheel. After they've been cut off, tailgated, or slowed down by a vehicle in front of them, these angry drivers can commit incredible acts of violence — including assault and murder. Although many drivers involved in these incidents are men between the ages of 18 and 26, anyone can become aggressive if they let their anger take precedence over safe driving. The AAA Foundation study found that men, women, and people of all ages can drive aggressively if they are in the wrong mood or circumstances. What's more, when drivers explained why they became violent the reasons are often incredibly trivial: "She wouldn't let me pass," or "They kept tailgating me,"

How can you avoid being the victim of an aggressive driver? While there are no sure techniques, three basic guiding principles can help:

1. Don't Offend

When surveys ask drivers what angers them most, the results are remarkably consistent. A few specific behaviors seem unusually likely to enrage other drivers. You can protect yourself by avoiding them:

Cutting off

When you merge, make sure you have plenty of room. Use your turn signal to show your intentions before making a move. If you make a mistake and accidentally cut someone off, try to apologize to the other driver with an appropriate gesture. If someone cuts you off, slow down and give them room to merge into your lane.

Driving slowly in the left lane

If you are in the left lane and someone wants to pass, move over and let them by. You may be "in the right" because you are traveling at the speed limit — but you may also be putting yourself in danger by making drivers behind you angry. New Jersey law requires you to travel in the right lane and use the far left lane only for passing. Besides, it's simple courtesy to move over and let other drivers by.

Tailgating

Drivers get angry when they are followed too closely. Allow at least a two-second space between your car and the car ahead. (When you see the car pass a fixed point, you should be able to count at least "one-thousand, two-thousand" before you pass that point.) If you think another car is driving too slowly and you are unable to pass, pull back and allow more space, not less. That way if the car does something unexpected you will have time to get out of the way. You should be able to see the headlights of the car behind you in your rear-view mirror. If you feel you are being followed too closely, signal and pull over to allow the other driver to go by.

Gestures

Almost nothing makes another driver angrier than an obscene gesture. Keep your hands on the wheel. Avoid making any gestures that might anger another driver, even "harmless" expressions of irritation like shaking your head. Be a cautious and courteous driver. Signal every time you merge or change lanes, and whenever you turn. Use your horn rarely, if ever. If you and another driver see a parking space at the same time, let that person have it. And if another driver seems eager to get in front of you, say "Be my guest." When you respond this way, after a while "be my guest" becomes your automatic response and you won't be as offended by other drivers' rudeness.

2. Don't Engage

One angry driver can't start a fight unless another driver is willing to join in. You can protect yourself against aggressive drivers by refusing to become angry at them. A person who is angry can do things they may later regret, and that includes you. If you're tempted to retaliate against another driver, think: "Would I want to fly in an airplane whose pilot was acting like this?" Think about what kind of a crash your angry actions could cause. Then cool down and continue your trip.

Steer Clear

Give angry drivers lots of room. A driver you may have offended can "snap" and become truly dangerous. If the other driver tries to pick a fight, put as much distance as possible between your vehicle and the other car, and then get away as quickly as possible. Do not under any circumstances pull off to the side of the road and try to settle things "man to man."

Avoid Eye Contact

If another driver is acting angry with you, don't make eye contact. Looking or staring at another driver can turn an impersonal encounter between two vehicles into a personal duel. And once things get personal, the situation can get out of hand fast.

Get Help

If you believe the other driver is following you or is trying to start a fight, get help. If you have a cellular phone, use it to call the police. Otherwise, drive to a place where there are people around, such as a police station, convenience store, shopping center, or even a hospital. Use your horn to get someone's attention. This will usually discourage an aggressor. Do not get out of your car. Do not go home.

3. Adjust Your Attitude

The most important actions you can take to avoid aggressive driving take place inside your head. By changing your approach to driving, you can make every trip more pleasant. Try these ideas for a pleasant change:

Forget winning

For too many motorists, driving becomes a contest. Are you one of those drivers who allows the shortest possible time for a trip and then races the clock? If

something happens to slow you down do you get angry? The solution: Allow more time for your trip. You'll be amazed at how much more relaxed you feel when you have a few extra minutes. So instead of trying to "make good time," try to "make time good." Listen to soothing music or a book on tape. Practice relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing. You'll arrive much calmer, fresher, and in a less stressed-out frame of mind.

Put Yourself in the Other Driver's Shoes

Instead of judging the other driver, try to imagine why he or she is driving that way. Someone speeding and constantly changing lanes may be a volunteer fireman, or a physician rushing to a hospital. Someone who jerks from one lane to another may have a bee in the car, or a crying baby. Whatever their reason, it has nothing to do with you. Stay cool and don't take other drivers' actions personally.

If You Think You Have a Problem, Ask for Help

Courses in anger management have been shown to reduce heart attacks. These same techniques can also help angry drivers. Drivers who successfully "reinvent" their approach to the road report dramatic changes in attitude and behavior. Look for anger management courses in your area. Self-help books on stress reduction and anger management can also be helpful. Violent aggressive driving is clearly on the rise. But you can avoid becoming a victim by using the tips in this brochure. In the process you may find that driving has become a completely new and more enjoyable experience.