

Road Rage

By Suze Hargraves

The average American drives 12,000 miles per year. Living in a rural area requires more driving and longer distance driving to get just about anywhere. Our commutes are not plagued by massive traffic jams the likes of which we see in Boston daily, but we do have something in common with those infamous Boston drivers; road rage.

Road rage isn't just dangerous driving. Anger, stress and aggression all have serious impact on your health. Professor of Traffic Psychology at the University of Hawaii, Leon James has conducted multiple studies on road rage. Professor James reports, "when you are angry, you are pouring stress hormones into your blood system, which are harmful to your heart and other functioning of the body," he said. "So if we experience this kind of anger or impatience in driving every day, all our lives, you can see that over the years it's going to have a very strong negative health effect on the driver."

To find out how you measure on the road rage-scale review this list of road rage behaviors provided by Professor James. Check off those behaviors you have done in the last 90 days while behind the wheel. Once you've looked at the list for yourself, have someone who is a frequent passenger in your car review the list also. Obviously some of the items on the list are felonies and require intervention from law enforcement.

1. Mentally condemning other drivers.
2. Verbally denigrating other drivers to a passenger in your vehicle.
3. Closing ranks to deny someone entering your lane because you're frustrated or upset.
4. Giving another driver the "stink eye" to show your disapproval.
5. Speeding past another car or revving the engine as a sign of protest.
6. Preventing another driver from passing because you're mad.
7. Tailgating to pressure a driver to go faster or get out of the way.
8. Fantasizing physical violence against another driver.
9. Honking or yelling at someone through the window to indicate displeasure.
10. Making a visible obscene gesture at another driver.
11. Using your car to retaliate by making sudden, threatening maneuvers.
12. Pursuing another car in chase because of a provocation or insult.
13. Getting out of the car and engaging in a verbal dispute, on a street or parking lot.
14. Carrying a weapon in the car in case you decide to use it in a driving incident.
15. Deliberately bumping or ramming another car in anger.
16. Trying to run another car off the road to punish the driver.
17. Getting out of the car and beating or battering someone as a result of a road exchange.
18. Trying to run someone down whose actions angered you.
19. Shooting at another car.
20. Killing someone.

If you're among the millions of Americans who experience road rage you can take control of your driving behaviors. At www.drdriving.org/articles/three_step.htm, Dr. Leon offers a very simple and comprehensive "Three-Step Driver Self-Improvement Program" to help you manage your behavior behind the wheel. While going through this self-analysis you may find that there are off-road issues such as work, family or money issues that are affecting your mental state behind the wheel. No matter what you discover realize that sometimes, in order to deal effectively and proactively with our emotions, we need professional guidance.

Road rage is "fixable". By learning how to recognize and manage road rage triggers and behaviors we protect our lives, our health and the lives of others.

Now that's a healthy habit.

Suze Hargraves is a staff member and writer for White Mountain Community Health Center, a non-profit health care provider serving the Mount Washington Valley. Call (603) 447-8900, Ext. 1, for an appointment or information. Online at www.whitemountainhealth.org or find us on Facebook.