

Another Highway Hazard: 'Road Rage'

Is there anyone here who hasn't read at least one horror story about an angry motorist taking "revenge"—even to the extent of a fatal shooting—against someone who cut in front of him, or sounded a horn too loud or too often?

More to the point, is there any one of us (including myself) who hasn't been severely annoyed by someone who tailgated us or who wouldn't move over to let us on the highway? And haven't we sometimes dreamed of, or even indulged in, some minor retaliation—not homicide, of course, but a loud beep or an offensive gesture? We've excused ourselves by saying that it's a way of letting off a little steam, calming us down so that we can get back to concentrating on a safe drive. Unfortunately, nowadays an angry response from us may be like waving the cape in front of the bull—asking for real trouble. So in a sense, your own anger has put you in danger.

Reasons

Why is this? Behavior experts have come up with a number of possible explanations for this rapidly increasing type of attitude and action. They've even coined a name for it: "road rage." The most common theory is that the stresses of everyday life—both on and off the job—have for many people become so intense that it leads to a coping mechanism they may not even be consciously aware of.

It supposedly goes something like this: "My boss treats me unfairly; I'm doing more work for little if any more money—and could even lose my job at any time; I'm not getting the attention and support I need from my boyfriend/girlfriend, husband/wife, or friends; prices and taxes are getting way out of hand. But by gosh, when I'm in my car, I'm in charge. Nobody's going to push me around here. So if you know what's good for you, you'll stay out of my way!" Of course, this is not verbalized; it's an attitude.

Responses

What should you do when you encounter this kind of attitude on the road—either in another driver or, for that matter, in yourself? First of all, exert whatever effort it takes to refocus your mind. Ask yourself whether your true goal is to win some kind of competition with the other drivers on the road, to get where you're going a little faster, or to reach your destination in one piece by being a cool head rather than a hothead.

Let's assume you've given yourself the commonsense answer to that question. Now what? Now concentrate on not allowing the situation to escalate. Don't let either your own anger or the other driver's put your safety at risk. Patiently remind yourself that the more courteous driver—you— is the better driver—you. So yield the right-of-way even to someone who obviously isn't proceeding in the right way. Then congratulate yourself on having been wise enough to avoid a confrontation in what could very likely have been a lose-lose situation.

Rewards

Sometimes this is easier said than done, of course. But it will be worth the effort, not only by increasing your odds of a safe trip but for peace of mind. You'll know you've used mature, sound judgment; you can feel superior to that clod who cut you off; and you'll actually have avoided an increase in your own level of stress. "Road rage" is like a contagious disease. Protect yourself from it with daily doses of common sense and safety consciousness and by steering clear of any obviously infected drivers you see on the road with you.