

Road rage: a worldwide public health crisis

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Editorial

In recent years road rage has become a public health and safety issue bringing tragic headlines in the news on a daily basis. Driver hostility is common and creates a psychological condition of stress and anxiety on a daily basis for more than one hundred million drivers in the US where more than forty thousand deaths and six million injuries occur yearly in vehicle collisions. Worldwide, more than two million fatalities occur yearly associated with traffic accidents, exacting a heavy toll in human tragedy and economic burden.

Experimental and descriptive research studies have shown that aggressive driving increase the risk of deaths and injuries. A recent book published by the American Psychological Association, *Road Rage: Assessment and Treatment of the Angry, Aggressive Driver*.¹ reviews the literature on the psychological dynamics that causes drivers to engage in risky and unsafe behavior. The book also summarizes the measurements and psychiatric diagnoses that have been suggested or explored. Also included is a review of cognitive-behavioral treatment programs that are being implemented for angry and aggressive drivers by the courts and for self-referred drivers who acknowledge their aggressive driving habits.

My own book on Road Rage and Aggressive Driving² tries to show that a driver's explosive behavior in road rage occurs in a psychological context of constant negative mental rumination behind the wheel that expresses itself as verbal explosions and repeated perception of being wronged by some other motorists by how they are driving. The problem is difficult to solve because the majority of drivers have been raised in a culture of aggressive driving that is transmitted from parents to children who ride with them on a regular basis. To bring this to the fore I dubbed the back seat of the car, road rage nursery.

Road rage is therefore a generationally transmitted cultural style and temper tantrum behind the wheel on public streets and roads. It is marked by intolerance, lack of awareness of one's own mistakes, causal mis-attribution errors, displacement of aggression, an increase

in risky and impulsive maneuvers, uncontrolled explosive gestures and speech, desire to punish and take revenge for perceived insults, and other debilitating psychological dysfunctions that create the current hostile and dangerous road conditions.

These culturally learned aggressive and risk taking driving habits are further reinforced by movies and video games that promote aggressive driving and the fun of risk taking. Environmental conditions can cause an increase in road rage especially traffic density, unexpected slowdowns at construction areas, and cumulative number of miles driven. Verbal road rage and a habitual hostile style of driving sets up the psychological condition for explosive behavior. A disturbing development has been that more drivers now carry a gun in the car or some other object that is used as a weapon of attack or defense. This shows that the individual is psychologically prepared to use violence in an exchange that turns into a duel.

Road rage has been classified as a psychiatric disorder. The DSM-5 defines road rage as an intermittent explosive disorder exhibiting recurrent behavioral outbursts caused by a lack of control of aggressive impulses.³ These outbursts are spontaneous and apparently not premeditated and are difficult to predict. Besides road rage other forms of the explosive disorder include throwing objects, temper tantrums, property damage, child abuse, and domestic violence. Intoxication acts as an intensifier of explosive behavior and makes self-control even less likely.

Table 1 Emotional intelligence as a driver and their characteristics

Emotional Intelligence Level	Affective Orientation of Feelings	Cognitive Pattern of Thoughts	Type of Driver Actions
1	Oppositional	Irrational	Is reckless, impulsive & hostile to others; expresses criticisms and intolerance
2	Defensive	Logical	Is competitive but prudent & restrained; expresses worries & complaints
3	Supportive	Prosocial	Is helpful & friendly to others; expresses enjoyment & optimism

In my book I identify several attitudinal factors that contribute to the new road rage epidemic. These include inadequate training in emotional intelligence, going along with norms of hostility and territoriality on highways, modeling after mass media portrayals of drivers behaving badly, and enacting a vigilante ideology on highways that allows one to have disrespect for authority and law on highways. I suggest various self-modification activities including the monitoring of one's thoughts in traffic to become aware of habitual feelings

of resentment and hostility. I identify three levels of emotional intelligence as a driver and their characteristics, as indicated in this table.

Road rage has been a public health problem since ancient times. My historical research has uncovered public documents from ancient Rome that record a "furious driving" law that was enacted in order to combat the behavior of dangerous drivers in horse drawn carriages

who galloped through busy streets in an intoxicated state. In the US more people have died in car accidents since the Civil War in 1861 than all other US wars put together.

Today with more than 120million drivers on US roads every day the potential for a progressive increase in road rage is a real danger. Every country worldwide is culturally vulnerable to developing a generation of road rangers. Psychology and the mental health professions can provide significant relief to society by identifying the social and cultural factors that contribute to the philosophy and psychology of the current hostile driving culture. By counteracting these social and attitudinal factors the further spread of the road rage epidemic can be contained.

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