

There are things we can do to lower risk of driving, so why don't we?

Take a good look around you and make choices that will lower the odds in your favour next time you're on the road

Last week we started talking about relative risk. In that column, I was talking about the risk drivers take when racing emergency vehicles through intersections. I'd like to expand on that theme.

Risk, as we all know, is an inherent part of driving. Trust me, I'd love to say it wasn't, but the truth is we are taking a calculated risk every time we get behind the wheel of our cars.

Now, there are all sorts of things we can do to lower that risk. We can drive defensively, and at safer times of day. We can drive safer cars, and use the vehicle's safety devices to their fullest capacity. We can make sure we respect all of the rules of the road, and obey traffic laws and signals at all times.

Fair enough. That will go a long way to reducing the risks we're facing out there.

But what I'm curious about is why drivers up the ante, if you will, by



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measuring up a given situation and knowingly making risky, potentially dangerous decisions?

It's time to define relative risk. In my simplified definition, it's the risk your actions dictate you're taking, in relation to the situation. There are high relative risks, and low relative risks.

It's all relative

Let's put it this way. If you buy a jug of milk on Tuesday, and decide to take a swig out of the container on Thursday (come on, admit it, you've done it at least once), the risk that the milk will have gone sour, and you'll end up grimacing over the sink, is relatively small. So, it's not a

particularly dangerous decision to make.

But what about measuring up a situation, and deciding to make a high-risk decision?

I've watched drivers turn on to main thoroughfares and cut off traffic when there was more than enough space to merge safely only two or three more cars down the line.

Or how about this one: have you ever been forced to slam on the brakes when a driver waiting in the middle of the boulevard suddenly blasts across the road in front of you? Isn't it amazing how many times you've checked your rear view mirror after your heart slowed down, and realized there was no one behind you? That driver's decision created a deadly situation that simply would not have existed two seconds later.

See what I'm saying? The drivers in these examples measured up a particular driving situation, and chose

an unnecessarily high-risk action. That's where the word "relative" comes in: the risk these drivers took was relative to their decision, not the situation itself.

What gives?

Lest all the drivers out there think I'm picking on them, pedestrians make decisions that increase risk, too. How many times have you watched someone dash across the street in front of a wall of traffic, rather than wait a moment or two for traffic to clear, or actually walking the extra thirty feet to a crosswalk? Crossing the street doesn't have to be risky, but it's all relative to the pedestrian's actions, isn't it?

So, what gives? Why do road users knowingly take those relative risks? Road safety professionals have been working for years to make roads, vehicles, and drivers as safe as possible, but it hasn't been until recently that attention's been paid to the concept of risk measurement. I, for one, find it

fascinating (and wildly frustrating) that someone will cut me off rather than wait the second or two to pull in behind me, free and clear. Is it the old "me first" syndrome? Is it that drivers have developed blinders and don't see more than one or two cars in any direction, and so are unable to recognize a safer, more accommodating set of circumstances is approaching?

Please, weigh the risk of your next driving decision. Take a good look at what's happening around you: is there another way to do what you want to do that will lower the odds in your favour?

That's it for this week. Until next week, be **RoadWise**.

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