

Wondering why there are so many jerks on the road?

How to avoid being a target of aggressive driving and tips for becoming a kinder, gentler road user

You might have caught a news story last month detailing what Canadians are doing behind the wheel—both what we think is bad, and what we go ahead and do anyway.

The third annual Nerves of Steel Aggressive Driving Study (a study commissioned by TheSteelAlliance and the Canada Safety Council) made for some pretty good reading, even if you aren't a road safety geek. What I found interesting were the connections made between frustration and stress and aggressive driving.

Now, most people subscribe to the theory that aggressive drivers are impatient, testosterone-laden males between 18 and 35 who are basically born to act like jerks behind the wheel.

But this study discovered that a good portion of aggressive driving behaviour, at least in the opinion of those surveyed, was blamed on frustration and stress caused by other drivers. Now this is an important distinction: we're saying that in many



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cases the aggressor (not you, of course) acted that way because of someone else (maybe you).

Hmm. Never thought about it that way, now have you.

Multitaskers

The study cites that a whopping 76 per cent of respondents stated that seeing other drivers reading, eating, talking on cell phones, shaving or putting on makeup (this really happens, folks) creates a high level of frustration that could spark aggressive driving.

Now here's the problem: for many drivers, the workplace concept of "multitasking," or doing several jobs at once, is making its way behind the wheel. Fully 75 per cent of respondents

in that same survey admitted to performing personal or work-related tasks while driving.

So, as is often the case with human nature, it's OK if I talk on my phone, take notes and grab a French fry or two while I'm driving, but if you do it I'm going to get really choked.

Bottom line: an incredible 85 per cent of Canadians surveyed said they engaged in aggressive driving this past year and 72 per cent blamed it on stress and frustration. Now, keep in mind that crossing the line between being angry behind the wheel and acting on that anger usually does involve a certain personality type. What this study shows, however, is that more of us are edging closer to that style, and that more of us are acting on it.

So, how can you A) avoid being the target of one ton of steel and bad attitude, and B) avoid morphing into that state yourself?

Well, if the study is accurate, I suggest that maybe you reconsider

eating, long-winded cell phone conversations, reading, or any form of personal hygiene behind the wheel, lest you drive (oops, another pun) an already frustrated motorist over the edge. Of course, from a road safety perspective...why on earth would you do this behind the wheel in the first place?? There. I had to get that in. And, that takes care of A.

Minimize stress levels

On to B: to avoid becoming a Driving Monster, first and foremost, take measures to minimize stress levels on the road. This is not impossible. Allow enough time for your trip, consider taking a route that avoids busy roads, be nice and, if all else fails, just accept the fact that you might arrive late and avoid speeding up. You can't control traffic, but you can control your reaction to it.

How? Well, if you start losing it, try this: first, acknowledge the fact that yes, you're feeling impatient, frustrated, and angry. Naming what

you're feeling is an objective observation, and helps take you "out" of the equation so you can figure out how to diffuse your anger.

Or, try "self witnessing." Get to know your driving style, what makes you crazy, and focus on ways of dealing with your "hairtriggers." Some try to imagine an acceptable rationale for the other driver's behaviour (maybe she just poked herself in the eye with her mascara brush and she can't see, or maybe there's a small dog with a sensitive stomach in the passenger seat).

The trick is to stay smart, and stay calm.

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

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