

ROAD RAGE

by Rebecca A. Stanwyck, LCSW
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It's official: CalTrans' annual survey indicates that Bay Area traffic has gotten worse, up 9% over last year. One of the worst backups occurs every afternoon on the 580 from Castro Valley to Livermore. Of course, this is only news if you haven't driven on the freeway in awhile!

As the weather heats up, engines overheat, patience evaporates, and tempers often flare. Summertime seems to bring out the bad driver in all of us, whether we're still doing the daily commute, or heading out of town for some much-needed R & R. So how can you avoid becoming a victim (or perpetrator) of "road rage" this summer?

Road rage is generally defined as a driver's aggressive acts taken out on other drivers. Some examples include speeding, tailgating, flashing headlights, yelling at other drivers, running stop signs or traffic lights, passing on the right, and weaving in and out of traffic. However, according to a study published by the American Automobile Association (AAA) in 1997, 37% of road rage drivers used firearms against another driver, 28% used other weapons, and 35% used their car as a weapon against another driver. And the numbers continue to increase.

Studies point not only to traffic congestion, but also to longer commutes to and from work, and an overall increase in the daily stresses of living in today's world as reasons for the increase. It stands to reason that stressed drivers are more likely to become road ragers.

But there may be another explanation for the behavior of that angry, horn-blasting tailgater: a recent study by the National Institute of Mental Health suggests that 5 - 7% of Americans may suffer from something called "*intermittent explosive disorder*," which is characterized by angry outbursts or aggressive actions that are way out of proportion to the situation. The biological basis for the disorder involves inadequate production of the neurotransmitter serotonin, which regulates mood. Treatment with antidepressant medications seems to be helpful.

Short of stocking your glove box with samples of Zoloft, the best strategies for avoiding road rage focus on prevention: avoid driving at peak traffic times, if possible; allow plenty of time to get to where you're going so that you won't stress out if you get caught in worse-than-expected traffic; give other drivers plenty of room and keep your speed consistent with the flow of traffic; and play relaxing music or listen to something entertaining on the radio.

If a bad driver cuts you off, slow down and stay away! if you're being tailgated, resist the temptation to slow down even more, and just get out of the way. Take a deep breath, and tell yourself, "there's no sense in letting this (descriptive noun of choice) ruin my day", or "I'm in control of my reactions, and I can choose to remain calm and relaxed." Remind yourself that you're not in a competition, your goal is simply to arrive at your destination safely.

Also keep in mind, if there are passengers in your vehicle, that your unmanaged stress or anger takes a toll on them, if they become stressed, frightened, or angry at your behavior. Instead, enlist their help in calming down or distracting yourself, so that you can live to drive another day!