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**Consumer Safety - Aggressive
Driving**

An 'epidemic' of aggressive driving

*Consumer safety -
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Angry motorists, not drunks, now top list of commuters' concerns

By Kevin V. Johnson
USA TODAY

CHICAGO — Tom Bracken, 56, a pleasant English professor, has noticed distinct changes in his driving since he moved to Chicago from the suburbs five years ago.

Before, he rarely honked his horn. Now, "I honk my horn if the traffic stops to let somebody back into a parking place," he says.

But that's just the beginning. "If somebody tries to pass me on the right, I speed up," he says. "I make left turns after the light turns red, even if I'm the second or third person in the lane." And on the highway, "I get in the left lane and sort of tailgate anybody who isn't doing the speed of that lane. I never used to do any of that." Why does he do it now? "I don't know," James says. "Aggressiveness begets aggressiveness, I guess."

Maybe. A new poll by the Potomac chapter of the Automobile Association of America (AAA), serving the Washington, D.C., area, says that 44% of area drivers think aggressive driving is the biggest threat to highway safety. Respondents said they were more worried about aggressive driving than about drunken driving. And over half confessed to having been aggressive drivers themselves in the last year.

The poll reinforces a study of more than 10,000 media and police reports, done for the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, that found a 51% increase in violent driving incidents between 1990 and 1995.

"It's an issue of concern all over the country," says Stephanie Faul of the AAA Foundation: "There is a perception that it is getting worse."

"It's becoming a national epidemic," says Bob Wall, traffic safety coordinator for the Fairfax County, Va., police, who speaks on the issue around the country.

There's no official definition of aggressive driving, but almost everybody knows it when he or she sees it. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA) list currently includes: weaving in and out of traffic, excessive horn honking, running red lights, tailgating, passing on the right, making obscene gestures, screaming and headlight flashing. NHTSA says about 66% of all traffic fatalities annually are caused by such behaviors — more, even, than fatalities involving alcohol.

These actions are illegal in many jurisdictions. But laws are seldom enforced because citizens don't tell police it's a priority, says Lisa Shelkh, a Washington area child welfare researcher who started Citizens Against Speeding and Aggressive Driving, modeled after Mothers Against Drunk Driving. "For years, we've asked police for protection from murderers and rapists, but not from tailgaters and



Putting on the brakes: Bill Barth, right, tries to get his aggressive driving under control with the help of therapist Arnold Nerenberg, who advises his patients to have compassion for other drivers by thinking of their own mistakes and visualizing nonaggressive responses.

Shifting gears on behavior

Therapists and traffic experts are beginning to use strategies that aim to help drivers recognize and change their behavior before they act it out.

"People typically continue their behavior until it becomes painful enough for them to stop," says Julie Hinton, director of the Safety Council of the Ozarks in Springfield, Mo.

She is co-creator of an eight-hour video course aimed at reducing aggressive driving. A 1994 review of the program in Massachusetts — where drivers were offered

the course in lieu of license suspension — found that the drivers had 77% fewer accidents in the year after taking the course than the year before.

"If you can get people to look at their behavior and see what's coming, you can hopefully get them to change before the consequences become too painful," Hinton says.

Meanwhile, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration offers this advice to people who encounter aggressive drivers:

▶ Do not challenge them

by speeding up or attempting to hold your own in your travel lane.

▶ Avoid eye contact.

▶ Ignore gestures and refuse to return them.

▶ Report aggressive drivers to the appropriate authorities.

▶ If you have a cell phone, and can do it safely, call the local police.

▶ If an aggressive driver is involved in a crash farther down the road, stop a safe distance from the crime scene, wait for the police to arrive and report the driving behavior you witnessed.

speeders," she says.

Last year in McLean, Va., a tailgating incident between drivers in a Jeep and a Beretta quickly escalated to a race. And then, according to witnesses, the drivers — traveling at speeds well over 50 miles an hour — swerved into oncoming traffic. Three people were killed in a four-car crash that saw the Beretta hurtle into a van.

Police took notice. In the Washington, D.C., area, a crackdown on aggressive driving that involves 20 police agencies started April 28. The campaign, called Smooth Operator, runs until September and includes four separate weeks of intense "enforcement waves," interspersed with random crackdowns on offenders.

"The idea is that people are getting too upset and driving too fast," says Wall, the cam-

paign coordinator. "We want to yank their chains and say, 'Hey, cool out.'"

But experts say aggressive driving has a welter of causes and curbing it will require more than just traffic tickets. To begin with, drivers feel "a baseline, physical buzz," says Carol Tavris, author of *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion* (Touchstone Books, \$11). "Driving is a stressor, and the body generates adrenalin and stress hormones to help you deal with it. The body basically does all the things it would do to prepare you to fight. So a provocation that you might otherwise laugh off can more easily set you off."

California psychologist Arnold Nerenberg is more blunt: "You feel like you're in a war."

Psychological factors, on the other hand, arise both on and off the road. On the road, driv-

ers are mentally stressed simply because congestion is increasing: In the last 10 years, according to NHTSA, the number of vehicle miles driven annually is up 35%, while the number of miles of road has increased just 1%. The number of vehicles has also risen.

And lives are faster paced. "We'd probably all like to just e-mail ourselves from Point A to Point B," Shelkh says.

That pace, says Redford Williams, director of the Behavioral Medicine Research Center at Duke University, means that frequently "people are not as much in control of their lives." And that means an increase in hostility. Result: At least 20% of adults, Williams says, have hostility levels serious enough to be a health hazard.

All of which is compounded by a cultural change that, Tavris says, de-emphasizes civility.

"It used to be there was a rule of courtesy, for the road just as for writing thank-you notes. Now, everything is a personal insult." And we react in line with years of pop psychological advice that says "anger is good to get out," Tavris says. "Never mind who it lands on."

Especially if we are in a car. "If someone on the road upsets you," Nerenberg says, "that individual's whole identity is encapsulated in this bad thing he did. He is not seen as a whole person. There's an urge to express your aggression on this anonymous other, to think, 'I can't let him get away with this.' The thin veneer of civilization is removed."

And a car, which literally cocoons the driver in a shell, offers anonymity in a virtual tank. "You feel like you're invincible," says Richard Wark, researcher at the Northwestern University Traffic Institute. "They provide a buffer zone" that makes it easier to de-humanize the other driver than it would be if, for instance, you were walking down a crowded hallway. "Face-to-face contact with others acts as a restraint, and people are much more polite," he says.

Nerenberg says he advises patients to have compassion for other drivers by thinking of their own mistakes and to visualize nonaggressive responses without acting it out.

"Actually," he says, "half the battle is recognizing that you have a problem."

Still, suppressing aggressive desires is difficult. "Nothing makes me happier," Williams admits, "than to have a really fast car and be at the head of the line at the light and leave everybody in the dust."

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*Elizabeth -
whatever happened to our idea
of doing some kind of initiative
this? Eleanora
Bruce*