

How To **Avoid** Aggressive Driving

After they've been cut off, slowed down by a vehicle in front of them, or tailgated, angry drivers can commit incredible acts of violence—including assault and murder. When the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety studied more than 10,000 incidents of violent aggressive driving committed between 1990 and 1996, it found that at least 218 people were killed and another 12,610 injured when drivers get angry. Since 1996, these numbers have increased. There has been an increased awareness of road rage, and more people are reporting incidents.

Although many drivers involved in these incidents are men between the ages of 18 and 26, anyone can become aggressive if they let anger take precedence over safe driving. The AAA Foundation study found that men and women of all ages can drive aggressively if they are in the wrong mood or circumstances. What's more, when drivers explained why they became violent, the reasons were often incredibly trivial: "She wouldn't let me pass," "They kept tailgating me," or, as one driver accused of murder explained, "He practically ran me off the road. What was I supposed to do?"

How can you avoid being the victim of an aggressive driver? While there are no sure techniques, three basic guiding principles can help:

1. Don't Offend

When surveys ask drivers what angers them most, the results are remarkably consistent. A few specific behaviors seem unusually likely to enrage

other drivers. You can protect yourself by avoiding them:

Cutting off. When you merge, make sure you have plenty of room. Use your turn signal to show your intentions before making a move. If you make a mistake and accidentally cut someone off, try to apologize to the other driver with an appropriate gesture. If someone cuts you off, slow down and allow that driver room to merge into your lane.

Driving slowly in the left lane. If you are in the left lane and people want to pass, move over and let them by. You may be legally right because you are traveling at the speed limit—but if you are traveling at a speed below the flow of traffic, you may be putting yourself in danger by making drivers behind you angry. Besides, it's simple courtesy to move over and let other drivers by. Select the proper lane, based on your speed and the flow of traffic.

Tailgating. Some drivers get angry when they are followed too closely.

Don't tailgate. If you think another car is driving too slowly, and you are unable to pass, pull back and allow more space, not less. That way, if the car does something unexpected, you will give yourself, and more importantly drivers behind you, more time and space to react.

You should be able to see the headlights of the car behind you in your rear-view mirror. If you feel you are being followed too closely, it may be safest to allow the other driver to go by.

Gestures. Almost nothing makes another driver angrier than an obscene gesture. Keep your hands

on the wheel. Avoid making any gestures that might anger another driver, even “harmless” expressions of irritation, like shaking your head. If another driver makes an obscene gesture toward you, it is best to ignore it.

Be a cautious and courteous driver. Signal every time you merge or change lanes, and whenever you turn. Use your horn sparingly. A short blast of the horn is appropriate when you think another driver does not see you, or to warn of an impending crash. A blast of the horn to express your opinion of another driver’s actions is not. If you and another driver see a parking space at the same time, let that person have it. And if another driver seems eager to get in front of you, let him. In terms of safety, you have the most control over the area directly in front of you. When you realize this, you are less likely to be offended by another driver’s rudeness.

2. Don't Engage

One angry driver can’t start a fight unless another driver is willing to join in. You can protect yourself against aggressive drivers by refusing to display anger toward them. Orator Robert Ingersoll said, “Anger blows out the lamp of the mind.” People who are angry can do things they may later

regret, and that includes you. If you’re tempted to retaliate against another driver, think about what kind of crash your angry actions could cause. Some drivers find it helpful to count to 10, allowing them to cool .

Steer clear. Give angry drivers lots of space. A driver you may have offended can snap and become truly dangerous. If the other driver tries to pick a fight, put as much distance as possible between your vehicle and the other car. Then get away as quickly as possible. Do not, under any circumstances, pull off to the side of the road and try to settle things “man to man.”

Avoid eye contact. If another driver is acting angry toward you, don’t make eye contact. Looking or staring at another driver can turn an impersonal encounter between two vehicles into a personal duel. And once things get personal, the situation can get out of hand fast.

Get help. If you believe the other driver is following you or is trying to start a fight, get help. If you have a cellular phone, use it to call the police. If you don’t have a phone, drive to a place where there are people around, such as a police station, gas station, convenience store, shopping center, or even a hospital. Use your horn to get someone’s attention.



This will usually discourage an aggressor. Do not get out of your car. Do not go home.

3. Adjust Your Attitude


The most important actions you can take to avoid aggressive driving take place inside your head. By changing your approach to driving, you can make every trip more pleasant. Try these ideas for a pleasant change:

Forget winning. For too many motorists, driving becomes a contest. Are you one of those drivers who allows the shortest possible time for a trip and then races the clock? If something happens to slow you down, do you get angry? The solution: Allow more time for your trip. You'll be amazed at how much more relaxed you feel when you have a few extra minutes. So instead of trying to "make good time," try to "make time good." Listen to soothing music or a book on tape. Practice relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing. You'll arrive at your destination much calmer, fresher and in a less stressed frame of mind.

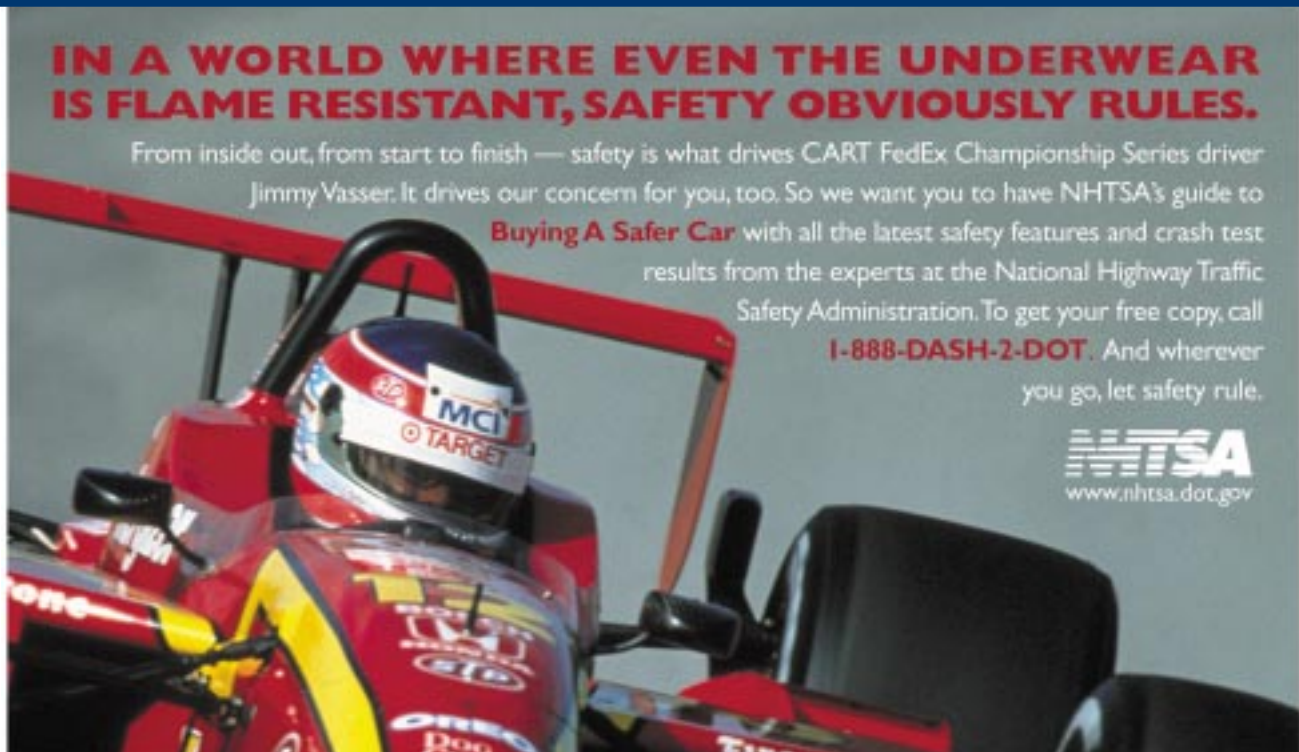
Put yourself in the other driver's shoes. Instead of judging the other driver, try to imagine

why he or she is driving that way. Someone speeding and constantly changing lanes may be a volunteer firefighter, or a doctor rushing to a hospital. Someone who jerks from one lane to another may have a bee in the car or a crying baby. Whatever the reason, it has nothing to do with you. Stay cool, and don't take other drivers' actions personally.

If you think you have a problem, ask for help. Take an honest look at your own driving attitudes. Courses in anger management provide techniques that can help angry drivers. Drivers who successfully reinvent their approaches to the road report dramatic changes in attitude and behavior. Look for anger-management courses in your area. Self-help books on stress reduction and anger management can also be helpful.

Violent, aggressive driving is clearly on the rise. But you can avoid becoming a victim by using the tips in this article. In the process, you may find that driving has become a safer and more enjoyable experience. 

Information courtesy of AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. Visit them on their web site: <http://www.aaafoundation.org>



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