



Driving Under The Influence Of Emotions

Most drivers have the potential to get annoyed if the circumstances are right. Particular traffic situations or events may turn an otherwise courteous driver into an angry and hostile risk taker. Perhaps you're late for an important appointment and there's a 'Sunday driver' in front of you, or someone that seems to be on another planet. These are the kinds of circumstances when our emotions can get out of control and, before we know it, we're driving recklessly. Strong emotional needs and reactions interfere with driving performance and decision taking and compromise safety. Research shows that there is a strong link between the emotional state of the driver and their risk of being involved in a crash, and there are two accepted explanations for the link between risk and emotion: firstly, changes in emotional state (either positive or negative) can raise an individual's propensity for risk taking as a way of letting off steam or accentuating our level of excitement. Sometimes these emotions may be rather fleeting in response to a specific set of circumstances, other times they can be quite enduring, especially when we are going through particular life stresses. Secondly, poor emotional regulation contributes strongly to risk taking, especially in relation to anger and impulse. This is believed to be due to the characteristics of the individual, rather than a more temporary emotional state caused by some specific trigger or life event.

Getting Mad And Getting Even

Whether temporary or deep-seated in our personality, one of the most common kinds of emotional reactions in traffic is driver aggression, more commonly known as 'Road Rage'. Angry and/or aggressive drivers typically demonstrate hostility



towards other road users, and have poor expectations of other drivers' ability. When angered, drivers can become unpredictable, overtaking at risk, speeding and driving too close to other vehicles as a way of intimidating an imagined perpetrator. It's not surprising that angry and aggressive drivers have an increased chance of being involved in a crash.

The psychology of the driver is the most important factor causing this aberrant behaviour that's rooted in a complex mixture of personality, traffic scenarios and how the driver interprets traffic-related events. Psychologists have emphasised the importance ways of thinking have as the precursor to these emotional responses. For example, we know that drivers often blame other drivers for making them angry and consider that their behavioural response is not aggressive, whereas the same behaviour in someone else is considered aggressive. It is these kinds of thought patterns that can exacerbate a behavioural outcome.

But it's not just driver aggression that can affect the way people drive. Emotions such as boredom can lead to tiredness and driver fatigue, which is well known to impair performance and increase the risk of crash involvement. There's also the problem of driving excitement and the desire to experience the 'thrill' of driving, often through excessive speed and fast cornering to accentuate the experience of positive emotions - the driver actively seeks an adrenaline rush. Research has found that sensation seeking is

related to collisions, convictions, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, speeding, not wearing seatbelts and various other unsafe driving behaviours. Other emotional states such as driving anxiety, tension, worry and poor expectation of one's own driving ability can lead to driver error and, in particular, silly mistakes and minor crashes. Certain personality traits are known to be important in determining levels of driving anxiety, including self-confidence and self-esteem. Self-esteem is defined as how much an individual approves of, or likes, him/herself, while self-confidence is how much confidence he or she has in their ability to succeed. Low self-confidence and self-esteem are commonly associated with increased stress.

Normal But Not Acceptable

Of course, we wouldn't be human if we didn't have emotions. When we identify that we are driving under the influence of what could be described as negative emotions, our choice of coping strategy is a behavioural outcome that can make the difference between a safe and an unsafe journey.

On-going research at Cranfield University (www.drivemetrics.co.uk) focuses on six major dimensions of coping when assessing fleet driver risks. Some of these are ineffective whilst others are beneficial from a safety perspective. Ineffective strategies include:

- Work Related Risk characterised by excessive risk taking to meet work demands under time

pressure;

- Confrontive Coping in which drivers use self-assertion and get into conflict with other road users to relieve stress;
- Emotion Focus Coping whereby drivers tend to self-criticise and focus concerns on their own shortcomings as a driver, which can lead to further performance impairments;
- Avoidance Coping, in which drivers mentally detach from the stressful situation and refuse to acknowledge the problem.

The two effective approaches for dealing with emotions and the stress of driving are:

- Task Focus Coping in which drivers increase concentration to deal with demands and;
- Reappraisal Coping whereby the driver learns from the problems they have encountered and the mistakes they've made and makes a conscious effort to improve.

Pointing The Finger

As vehicles and roads become increasingly better designed and engineered, the driver stands out as the most obvious cause of the majority of crashes. To be safe, we need to be aware of our own 'Achilles heel'. To calm yourself, make a mental note of the trigger that caused you to get angry. Ask yourself what else could the other driver's behaviour mean? Did they deliberately set out to annoy you or were they just not paying attention to what was going on around them? Are your rules about how other people should behave realistic? Are there times when you break your own rules? Change the way you think about the scenarios that typically cause you emotional distress, and check whether the rules you have set for yourself, and others, are realistic. Identifying your own thought patterns is the key to changing the way you feel behind the wheel and, more importantly, your risk of being involved in a crash. **adi**

Dr Lisa Dorn graduated with a BSc in Human Psychology and was awarded a PhD in Individual and Group Difference in Driving Behaviour from Aston University in 1992. She was appointed Director of the Driving Research Group at Cranfield University and is a Reader in Driver Behaviour and Training. Lisa is an Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society, a member of the Association of Applied Psychologists and has authored and co-authored many academic publications. She is also Research Director for a2om.