

Driving With Hazards In The Mind

It has long been known that we are drawn to behave in ways that are consistent with our beliefs. Beliefs serve as a mental framework from which we can assess, explain and integrate observations. In other words, they help us make sense of the world, and this 'rule of thumb' in human behaviour is no different when it comes to driving.

Believing Is Seeing

Driver beliefs are fairly consistent patterns of thinking that determine the way in which a driver interprets or makes sense of traffic related events - they provide a sense of certainty about how the roads and traffic work. Researchers in this field like to assess the way a driver thinks and feels about driving so that predictions can be made about their behaviour. Put simply, if a driver thinks that speeding is safe, they are likely to speed. To understand driver behaviour then, it is absolutely critical to get to the bottom of how drivers think.

Traffic Psychologists have discovered many different types of beliefs, but there are two extremely common, and particularly delusional, ways of thinking that most drivers demonstrate to a greater or lesser extent. First, drivers believe they are more highly skilled than other drivers and feel justified in taking risks. Second, when asked to rate their chances of having a crash in the next 12 months, most drivers think that other people are at greater risk than they are. In reality, they can't all be right, all of the time!

These pervasive beliefs distort perception of others and the self, and have been associated with risk taking and crash involvement. Traffic Psychologists think that these beliefs serve to rid the driver of fear or increase their sense of control over their fate, leading to misguided actions, especially amongst young inexperienced drivers. In combination with a

lack of driving experience, they create a lethal cocktail. In effect, some drivers are driving around with more deadly hazards in their mind than they ever encounter on the road.

The GDE

The good news is that a framework exists that considers all the knowledge and skills a driver needs and, if you didn't know already, it's called the Goals for Driver Education (GDE) Matrix. It is likely to be central to the eagerly awaited new strategy for the training and testing of learner drivers in the UK. The GDE has been developed through decades of research in the field of driver behaviour and shows that there are major gaps in driver knowledge and skills. The GDE shows that in order to improve road safety, drivers need to possess not only knowledge and skills relating to the actual driving task or the physical and mechanical skills of driving (Level 1) and negotiating through traffic (Level 2) but, more significantly, the skills to self evaluate personal risks associated with individual journeys (Level 3) and the personal values and goals that

influence their behaviour in traffic (Level 4). They also need to understand risk increasing factors and develop skills in self-evaluation so that they can understand how their beliefs and behaviours increase their risk of being involved in a crash (see the 'matrix' opposite). The fact that Level 1 (vehicle handling skills) and Level 2 (negotiating through traffic) are at the bottom of the hierarchy is no mistake. These lower levels represent the knowledge and skills needed to pass a driving test in the UK.

The goals and context of a particular journey (Level 3) and the goals for life and skills for living (Level 4) are not currently required for licensed driving, but they do consider the human factors that contribute to most crashes. The higher levels emphasise the importance of being able to recognise your 'mind hazards' in order to evaluate yourself and your driving abilities, which shows the importance of understanding what your limitations as a driver actually are. If learner drivers were taught these skills with full awareness of the risks they run, there would almost certainly be a major reduction of the

numbers of people killed and seriously injured on the roads.

Driving Without Awareness

It's fair to say that the vast majority of drivers are completely unaware of these 'mind hazards'. With the best of intentions, driving instructors often spot these attitudes and point out their student's human deficiencies using 'Q&As'. Ever had any problems doing this? You might have noticed that some people can become quite defensive. There are also a significant number that won't tell if they've had their ego dented but, instead, either change instructor or create an even stronger affiliation with the mind hazards than ever existed before! Worse still, they won't discuss it with you anymore - they just want to pass the test. Psychologists know that you have to tread very carefully around people's thought processes if you want to awaken them to any potential dangers. Understanding our delusional beliefs is the key to changing driver behaviour. Psychologists know that the first stage in behavioural change is recognising that there is a problem to address. The key to addressing hazards in the mind is teaching self-reflection skills. Self-reflection enables a learner to understand how their own personal goals on a particular journey, and their personal characteristics, influence their risk of being involved in a crash. Thinking without awareness needs to shift to thinking WITH awareness. Safe drivers adjust their driving to the traffic and road circumstances, and their present human abilities and skills, but this requires more competencies than Q&As. A safe driver is not only skilled in vehicle control and manoeuvring, but also makes good choices by reflecting on his/her abilities prior to a journey as well as during a drive.





Salvation

Thankfully, we don't have to wait for the 'new strategy' announcement from the DSA and the Minister for Transport, or wait for it to be introduced nationally; there is a structured curriculum already available that enables learner drivers to develop the knowledge and skills gap as illustrated in the GDE matrix. Better still, it is available to all driving instructors in the UK. On top of this, the a2om driving school has just developed a GCSE equivalent qualification (BTEC Level 2) in 'Driving Science', which provides learners with a more comprehensive knowledge about the risks of driving and the self-assessment skills they need to be safe for life. **edi**

The Goals of Driver Education (GDE) Matrix. (Harakka et al., 2002)

Hierarchical level of behaviour	Content of driver education		
	Knowledge and skills the driver has to master	Risk-increasing factors the driver must be aware of and be able to avoid	Self-evaluation
Goals for life and skills for living (Level 4)	Knowledge about/control over how general life goals and values, behavioural style, group norms etc. affect driving.	Knowledge about/control over risks connected with life goals and values, behavioural style, social pressure, substance abuse etc.	Awareness of personal tendencies regarding impulse control, motives, lifestyle, values etc.
Goals and context of driving (Level 3)	Knowledge and skills regarding trip-related considerations (effects of goals, environment choice, effects of social pressure, evaluation of necessity etc.).	Knowledge and skills regarding risks connected with trip goals, driving state, social pressure, purpose of driving etc.	Awareness of personal planning skills , typical driving goals, driving motives etc.
Mastery of traffic situations (Level 2)	General knowledge and skills regarding rules, speed adjustment, safety margins, signalling etc.	Knowledge and skills regarding wrong speed, narrow safety margins, neglect of rules, difficult driving conditions, vulnerable road-users etc.	Awareness of personal skills , driving style, hazard perception, etc. from the viewpoint of strengths and weaknesses.
Vehicle manoeuvring (Level 1)	Basic knowledge and skills regarding manoeuvring, vehicle properties, friction etc.	Knowledge and skills regarding risks connected with manoeuvring, vehicle properties, friction etc.	Awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses re: basic driving skills, manoeuvring in hazardous situations etc.

Dr Lisa Dorn graduated with a BSc in Human Psychology and was awarded a PhD on 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.

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