

Road Rage

Morning commute on I-95, a stretch of road full of powerful luxury vehicles driven by powerful busy people, but traffic crawls at 15 mph. The car in front stops and you change the CD, looking away for a moment as traffic picks up again. You look up and accelerate a little to close the gap but the guy behind you is now the guy passing you in the breakdown lane, horn blaring as he cuts in to the space in front of you.

Rage... Do you feel it? Why did he do that to you? What do you do? What does he *deserve*?

For most people, it's a bad moment, dismissed with a shake of the head, and quickly forgotten. For an unfortunate few, it's a life-or-death moment – a moment when they become rage driven by revenge and aiming a huge steel projectile. How does the Boy Scout leader or soccer mom become boiling fury armed with a car and what can be done about it?

An increasing amount of psychological research says that road rage is manifestation of a fairly common clinical disorder and, most importantly, it is treatable. A recent study¹ by Harvard Medical School epidemiologists concluded that most people involved in road rage incidents suffer from “intermittent explosive disorder” (IED). The study found that IED is found in nearly 4% of the population and that more than 80% of IED sufferers also suffer from mood, anxiety, or substance abuse disorders. Road rage can be a symptom of a broader problem.

IED sufferers are people who respond with outbursts out of proportion to the situation. They are often highly functional, even calm people who can be triggered into uncontrollable rages. The rages often lead to property destruction, violence, and domestic abuse. They are often ashamed of the rage afterwards and regret its results. For many of these people, the road is full of triggers for their rage. This rage has severe consequences, too. The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety found that intentional violence with motor vehicles attributed to road rage caused 218 deaths and 12,610 injuries between 1990 and 1996².

¹ “The Prevalence and Correlates of DSM-IV Intermittant Explosive Disorder in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication”, Ronald C. Kessler, et. al., Arch Gen Psychiatry. 2006;63:669-678.

² “Aggressive Driving”, Louis Mizzell, The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, www.aaafoundation.org/pdf/agdr3study.pdf

The good news is that IED and road rage, in particular, are treatable. Dr. Jerry Deffenbacher, a psychology professor at Colorado State University, has researched road rage extensively in dozens of journal articles and a definitive book on therapy for road rage³.

Deffenbacher's research revealed that drivers at risk for road rage ("high-anger drivers"):

- Engage in judgmental and vengeful thinking about other drivers and are likely to make incorrect conclusions about others drivers' motivations
- Take more risks on the road
- Have more traffic accidents
- Have poor anger management skills and direct anger in more outward and aggressive ways than most people

Dr. Deffenbacher's research found that road rage could be effectively treated with both cognitive behavior therapy and relaxation therapy. Cognitive behavior therapy aims at identifying triggers and determining how inappropriate thoughts lead to aggressive rages. The road rage sufferer is then taught how to cope with triggers so that they never escalate into road rage. Relaxation therapy uses imagery exercises to find techniques that will allow the road rage sufferer to preempt the rage by relaxing while driving. Deffenbacher concluded that both can be effective either individually or in combination.

At Harbor Bridge Emotional Health, I can help you if you suffer from road rage or IED using these techniques. The consequences of road rage and IED can be devastating. If you are lucky, road rage can ruin your day. If you are unlucky, it can kill you, an unfortunate motorist, or someone you love. There is no earthly need to suffer with this when psychological intervention is so effective and easily available. If you need help, please contact me at (203) 661-1054 or e-mail at cwilczak@harborbridgect.com.

³ Overcoming Situational and General Anger: A Protocol for the Treatment of Anger Based on Relaxation, Cognitive Restructuring, and Coping Skills Training ... Literature and Culture, Studies and Texts, J. Deffenbacher, 2005, Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.