

Counseling Corner

Staying Calm Behind The Wheel

from the American Counseling Association

Ever felt frustrated when driving your car? Of course, you have. With today's crowded highways there's a far greater chance that you're going to encounter problems – traffic jams, slow drivers in the fast lane, people turning without signaling, reckless drivers cutting from lane to lane – the list is almost endless.

That frustration or anger, however, is never a good thing. In extreme cases it's called "road rage" and has led to violent and tragic incidents. But even when it's only a minor level of anger that we feel, it is something that definitely impairs our driving skills.

When we feel anger or frustration, our blood pressure rises, our muscles tighten, our circulatory systems becomes constricted and even our digestive system shuts down. Psychologically, our thoughts and language become aggressive, and we become focused on the source of that frustration rather than on the safe driving we should be doing.

While feeling angry because of a bad driver or a bad traffic jam is an automatic reaction, it is also something that is controllable. You start by recognizing that what has made you frustrated is something beyond your control. Being angry won't make that traffic jam disappear. Getting red in the face, swearing or making obscene gestures won't make you feel better and certainly won't improve the driving skills of the person who just cut you off.

Instead, experts advise putting your energy into things you can control and that will help keep you calm and driving safely. Start by trying to fight the physical reaction to being frustrated. A first step is taking several deep breaths, and yes, counting slowly to ten does help. For tight muscles, try relaxing them by consciously tightening up a muscle group, perhaps in your neck or one leg, and then consciously try to relax those same muscles.

You also want to regain your mental focus. Turn on your radio or CD player and listen to the news or some favorite music. Focus on what you're hearing, rather than that traffic jam or bad driver.

The point of these simple actions is to refocus your attention from the source of that anger and frustration. Working to relax yourself keeps you alert and ready to respond to traffic. There is no reason to let road rage ruin your drive, or endanger your life.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcornet@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at counseling.org

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