

The American Counseling Association's "*Counseling Corner*" Weekly Columns

Handling The Stress Of Driving Today

from the American Counseling Association

Most people's lives would be very difficult without their cars. But it's also true that our automobiles can be a consistent source of stress and frustration in our lives.

The problem, of course, is all those other people on the road. Not that you or I ever do anything wrong behind the wheel, but those drivers going slow in the fast lane, turning without signaling, switching from lane to lane, playing with their cell phones... well, we've all seen their mistakes.

Then, for more frustration, there are traffic jams, construction slow-downs, flat tires, overheated engines and lots more. No wonder we end up angry behind the wheel. But that's something we need to control, and that we can control.

Frustration or anger, even at fairly low levels, has been shown over and over to impair our driving skills. When angered our blood pressure rises, our muscles tighten and we become focused on the source of our frustration rather than on the safe driving we should be doing.

So how can we reign in our frustration and improve our driving skills? One important step is simply to recognize that whatever is making us mad is beyond our control. Being angry won't make traffic jams disappear. Making faces, swearing or making obscene gestures really doesn't make us feel better, and certainly won't improve the driving skills of the person who just cut us off.

Experts suggest that we instead channel our energies into things within our power to control and that will help keep us calmer and driving safer. A first step is to fight the physical reaction to frustration by simply taking several deep breaths. And yes, slowly counting to ten really does help.

It also helps to get our minds refocused off whatever made us angry. Turn on the car radio or CD player and listen to the news or some favorite music. When we focus on what we're hearing, rather than that bad driver or that traffic jam, we're able to think more calmly and avoid the unsafe physical changes that anger can bring.

Our goal with these simple actions is to refocus our attention from that source of our anger. We can't change whatever it was so instead we change ourselves. When we relax it helps us stay alert and ready to respond to traffic. And ready to finish our trip safely and less stressed.

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

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