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Gray Matters: Driving the Point Home

by Leslie A. Gray, LCMHC, RYT

I like those bumper stickers that ask, "How's my driving?" followed by a phone number and vehicle ID so others have a place to call to answer the question. I rarely if ever see anyone driving one of these marked vehicles in a manner that is questionable. In my experience, they are typically driving safely and courteously. So, what if we all had these on our vehicles? Some way to identify us and give others a chance to report our unruly driving behavior. The truth is, we do. It's called a license plate. And the phone number to call is 911.

I've certainly had to make my fair share of 911 calls to report road rage or erratic driving of others. In one instance, I was nearly side swiped on 93 by another vehicle. The driver was completely out of control traveling at speeds well over 100MPH endangering everyone around him. I looked ahead and saw that traffic was at a standstill. While I was on the phone with 911, he slammed into the stopped traffic, flipping his own vehicle over end for end several times. Remarkably, he stepped out of the vehicle looking stupefied (I'm biting my tongue here). I, on the other hand, was a wreck having witnessed this 'accident' while on the phone with the only people that stood a chance of helping (other than the guy driving that vehicle). I checked in with the victims and astonishingly, they were without serious injury. That's not to say they were unaffected. Their vehicle was destroyed and were traveling quite a distance from home making the last leg of their trip stressful and challenging. But they felt lucky to be alive.

This was no accident. As a matter of fact, I dare say most aren't. An accident is something that occurs without the plan, intent, or desire to do so. It is unintentional and unexpected. Negligent driving is purposeful. As is road rage and driving under the influence. This is a choice, not a mistake.

So, what's happening? I'm not the only one who's noticing the increased dangers of the roadways and certainly not the only one demanding a solution.

One major issue is the speed of life. Many people are simply moving too fast, trying to do too much. You are, maybe as usual, running late. You push and shove your way through traffic, speeding through a congested neighborhood. Blow through stop signs and red lights. Somebody pulls out of a side street, and you catch up with them so quickly you have to brake to avoid hitting them. You blow your horn, flail your arms, yell and scream, blaming them for cutting you off. But did they actually cut you off?

Enter scene: common sense. If you hadn't been speeding, they would've had plenty of time to pull out. You likely would not have been affected in the least by their actions. Hence one of the reasons speed limits exist; to ensure reasonable, safe access to and from roadways.

Another major issue contributing to this are the technological advancements in today's vehicles. They can accelerate quickly and stop on a dime. They handle corners like a race car. The trouble is that the drivers are no Mario Andretti and simply do not possess the driving skills to be traveling at such speeds. Check out all the news stories about drivers plowing into houses, businesses, and... bodies of water. (When did this become a thing?)

And the technology onboard, be it your cell phone or the vehicles own console. We are no longer monotasking while behind the wheel, focusing on just driving. In many instances I dare say some are doing everything but.

Sadly, the world of technology and social distancing have contributed to a lack of social norms in terms of being thoughtful, cautious of one another (and even ourselves), displaying common courtesy and manners, and so on. In a word? Many have become uncivilized.

Maybe there is a newborn in that vehicle you are tailgating on their way home for the very first time. It's one of the scariest drives for new parents. Please don't make it worse for them.

And as we age, we need a little more time to think things through and make decisions, so it makes complete sense that older drivers are going to drive a little slower. Give them space. That may be someone's grandma or grandpa behind that wheel. Please, show some respect.

Maybe someone is looking for their destination and isn't familiar with the area, so they need a little more time to find it. Parking lot entrances are not off-ramps. And left-turn lanes are not there for you to pass the person leaving the roadway simply because you don't want to have to slow down. Where are you going in such a hurry anyway? I see many people driving this way, then they pull into the donut shop. Really?

The bottom line is this: We have to care about something other than ourselves and our own agenda... to see the bigger picture... to be aware of and understand the impact (good or bad) that we have on each other. Be better. Do better. Choose to be a good human. And get professional help if you experience road rage like tailgating and aggression. It just creates more unnecessary stress. Don't we have enough?

Slow down. Think things through. Plan ahead. For crying out loud... LOOK ahead. Put down your phone. Pay attention. Lives matter. Driving is honestly one of the single most dangerous things humans do. Let's not make it more dangerous than it already is. Honestly, we are too advanced as a species to be behaving like such barbarians behind the wheel.

So, I'll leave you with this question: How's YOUR driving?

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