

Drivers Against Pedestrians: How to Assess and Change Attitudes



Psychology

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ABSTRACT

Hundreds of thousands of pedestrians are killed each year on the world's roads and streets. Although pedestrians are judged by police to be at fault in the majority of collisions, nevertheless drivers' aggressive attitudes and threatening behaviors magnify and contribute to the problem. Two checklists are provided to encourage drivers to assess their own practices against pedestrians. Some potential solutions are mentioned involving the improvement of road design and community-based educational interventions.

Introduction

The spectrum of road users in a community includes drivers, bicyclists, passengers, and pedestrians, all vying with each other for space and pacing rights. It's frightening to realize that drivers kill and injure pedestrians at an alarming rate:

- More than 270,000 pedestrians lose their lives on the world's roads each year accounting for 22% of the total 1.24 million road traffic deaths. (WHO, 2013)
- More than 5000 pedestrians are killed on the world's roads each week (WHO, 2013)
- In 2010, 4,280 pedestrians were killed in traffic crashes in the United States, and another 70,000 pedestrians were injured (CDC, 2010)
- Pedestrians ages 10-15 have the highest nonfatal injury rates.
- Elderly pedestrians are more likely to die after being struck.
- About 18 percent of fatal injuries 39 percent of nonfatal injuries to pedestrians occur at intersections.
- In 2010, nearly one in every five children between the ages of 5 and 9 who were killed in traffic crashes was a pedestrian.
- About 1.24 million road traffic deaths occur annually on the world's roads, making road traffic injuries the eighth leading cause of death globally, and the leading cause of death for young people aged 15–29 years. (WHO, 2013)
- In the US over 180,000 pedestrians have been killed in motor vehicle accidents between 1975 and 2005. (Law Information, 2008)

According to WHO (2013) older pedestrians are more at risk, while in low-income and middle-income countries, children and young adults are often affected. In developed countries both children and adults with disabilities suffer higher rates of injury as pedestrians compared to their non-disabled peers. The proportion of pedestrians killed in relation to other road users is highest in the African Region (38%) and lowest in the South-East Asia Region (12%). In some countries, the proportion of pedestrian fatalities can reach nearly two thirds of road traffic deaths, such as in El Salvador (62%) and Liberia (66%).

New studies indicate that crosswalks in the middle of a block and at intersections without stop signs or traffic lights often encourage pedestrians to drop their guard and step in front of speeding vehicles. Officials estimate that when a pedestrian is hit, 75 percent of the time the pedestrian is at fault. Safety experts point to these common emotionally unintelligent pedestrian behaviors:

- Looking down when stepping into a marked crosswalk;
- Looking up only after barging into the street;
- Looking down while proceeding through a marked crosswalk;

- Proceeding into the intersection too late (Yellow light or Don't Walk sign);
- Looking at the nearest car but ignoring approaching cars in the second or third lanes that are less visible;
- Failing to monitor the speed of an approaching car, assuming the driver will see the walker;
- Walking while impaired (drugs, alcohol, medication, rage, fatigue);
- Walking in dim light conditions (dusk, night, daybreak) wearing non-reflective clothing, assuming drivers can see walkers.

Pedestrians have the right of way when they enter either a marked crosswalk or an intersection with no white lines, but if they don't allow cars enough time to stop drivers are more likely to injure them. One pedestrian complained about drivers:

They use their cars almost as weapons and get mad at me when I'm crossing with the walk signal on. I'm legally in the right, but I could be legally dead. (Older woman)

and a cab driver agrees:

Pedestrians? They take their lives in their own hands. They're crazy to walk in this city because we're out to get 'em. It's Fahrenheit 451 time around here. Yeah, cab drivers have no use for pedestrians. (Middle aged man)

Anyone who's been in a major city has experienced the aggressive attitude of many drivers toward people on foot. The driver sees someone in a crosswalk, speeds up fast and slams to a halt on the heels of the person. Sound familiar? Pedestrians are threatened daily in cities by drivers who use aggressive tactics to force walkers to the curb:

I see them crossing on campus. Of course they cross all over the road as if it's a walkway or a mall instead of a street with cars passing through. I hate them. I disapprove of their taking the right to block me. I wish something bad would happen to them. This happens everyday, so I have experience dealing with them. They tend to poke along, so I drive up fast and as close as I can to them to make them hurry up. You should see how they scurry then. (Young woman)

This is the "me vs. them" mentality toward pedestrians. Many motorists don't mind routinely using their vehicle to intimidate defenseless people on foot. Drivers justify their road rage against pedestrians by accusing them in their minds of walking too slow, as if they didn't care that they're blocking the vehicle's progress. In short, pedestrians are just in their way:

Now I see a stop sign ahead but I'm not going to stop completely because I'm late. I'll just inch forward to make him go quicker. He could walk faster to be more considerate. (Older woman)

If we behaved this way towards people we know we would be regarded as self-centered and selfish, and many would avoid us. But in the prevailing culture of disrespect on the road, coercive driving behavior is considered normal. Drivers who are fully tolerant and respectful of pedestrians exist, not by birth or culture but as a result of training their traffic emotions.

By law, the pedestrian's safety takes precedence over the motorist's desire to get someplace. Law and logic dictate that the people on foot must receive preferential treatment even when they jaywalk. And it's not up to drivers to make pedestrians do the right thing. Nor is it up to pedestrians to make drivers behave. Yet many drivers don't hesitate to herd pedestrians, or to use their car like a cutting horse to place pedestrians where the driver wants them.

The driver's questionable reasoning is: You're invading my driving space, my domain where I'm in charge of what happens, my car is bigger than you, so I can make you behave. But this is a fantasy. Motorists aren't really in charge of the streets, and they have certain legal responsibilities toward pedestrians, to protect their safety and to give them the right of way. If you unthinkingly engage in aggressive emotions and acts against pedestrians, you're at risk of generalizing this negativity to co-workers, family members, and pets.

Changing Attitudes Toward Pedestrians

If drivers are territorial about the roads, pedestrians see things differently and they too are prone to road rage. When motorists approach a crosswalk and cross the safety line, they have intruded into pedestrian territory. Pedestrians automatically interpret this invasion of space as a deliberate challenge to their rights and safety. Pedestrians who feel threatened by drivers may have thoughts of vengeance:

I noticed the feeling of fear, either for my own safety or the safety of another pedestrian, just prior to feelings of aggression toward drivers. I feel a need to retaliate and I do it mentally by cursing drivers and wishing bad things would happen to them. I also glare at them and give them dirty looks. After an incident it takes several hours for these aggressive feelings to subside. I'm surprised by how much hate I feel for drivers who try to intimidate me when I'm an innocent and delicate pedestrian. I get momentary satisfaction by getting even, but later I feel guilty and ashamed that I'm so hostile when I believe in being peaceful. (Older man).

Even if the extremes are mostly mental and emotional, everyone is capable of venting hostility inwardly and overtly. It can be terrifying when this happens to well-meaning drivers who make unwitting mistakes:

After my doctor appointment I came slowly out of the parking garage. The drive is very steep and only flattens out on the sidewalk portion. There was another car exiting, so I had to stay on the steep part for a few seconds until he left. I thought he was leaving, so I went up onto the sidewalk a little, but then he stopped again, so the sidewalk was only about two feet wide between our cars. It wouldn't have mattered, except for the fact that an odd looking man approached down the sidewalk and began touching the hood of my car as he walked by it. Then he turned to me and said something I couldn't hear, shaking his finger at me.

The car ahead of me left, and I waited for the weird pedestrian to pass by, but I was feeling scared that he might do something dangerous. He passed by and I began to move forward, but suddenly he came back, right into my path. I braked hard and he continued to move in front of my car with something in his hand. I knew he couldn't hear me, but I automatically

said, "Be careful now." He raised his hand and threw something at me. A big green ball hit my windshield, right in my face, blocking my view for a second. I decided I had to escape, so I swerved around him and left quickly. My heart was pounding and my head throbbed. I felt lucky that he hadn't thrown a rock or tried to get into my car. It took me an hour to get over the fear, and now I'll worry about mean things happening while I'm in the car.

I thought about it later, trying to decide what I could've done to avoid that confrontation. I could've backed down the ramp to accommodate him. He might have appreciated that, been appeased. I thought of it at the time, but decided it was too much trouble, but maybe I was wrong. It's a lot more trouble to experience that confrontation and its aftermath. I could've been more helpful and considerate of the person walking. (Middle aged woman)

It's easy to feel challenged in either the driver or the pedestrian role because the same emotions are evoked in both roles by the basic emotional intelligence issues they contain (Goleman, 1995):

- Who has the right of way (pedestrians always do by law)
- What distance to keep away from each other (drivers: avoid crowding pedestrians; pedestrians: do not dart between cars or touch them)
- How to handle interactions appropriately (driver and pedestrian both can avoid showing hostile faces or gestures of impatience and displeasure)

Drivers who examine carefully how they relate to pedestrians often discover that they hold many unfavorable attitudes. Working with many drivers has proved to us that people have the capacity to become compassionate drivers and that altruism on the road exists in many forms:

There's a pedestrian and she looks like she's a jogger, dressed like that. I better speed up faster so as not to slow her down. I wonder what my exhaust smells like to her and whether she's going to get a whiff that might choke her or make her cough. Yeah, I worry about that. How do I know how much I stink and what do I do about it? I suppose most cars don't, or do they? I'll need to check my car for that. I'll smell it when I get home. (Middle aged woman)

Practicing small kindnesses brings many benefits to you and to pedestrians.

Checklist: Your Tendency to Pressure Pedestrians

Aggressive drivers have many excuses for pressuring pedestrians. Many of the aggressive strategies we use are hidden from us until we monitor our traffic emotions. If you are a driver here are two checklists to help you assess your attitude and behavior towards pedestrians. How many of these items describe you under certain conditions?

I put pressure on pedestrians...

1. ___ when I'm in an unpleasant mood
2. ___ when I feel sick or in pain
3. ___ when I'm in a rush
4. ___ when I'm in unfamiliar territory
5. ___ when I'm daydreaming, not being alert
6. ___ when I don't feel like making an extra effort for them
7. ___ when I goof up sometimes (like seeing them too late), but I don't feel like being nice about it after
8. ___ when it's too early in the day and I'm trying to wake up
9. ___ when it is too late in the day and I'm trying to stay awake

10. ___ when I'm prejudiced against pedestrians according to age, gender, size, appearance, or ethnic background
11. ___ when I think that cars should always have the right of way, for obvious reasons of weight and speed
12. ___ when I like to see them cower, as they should, given my larger size
13. ___ Add your own habits here.

Yes No

Scoring: Is it easier to answer Yes for the first 9 items and harder to say Yes to items 10-14? We know that pedestrians always have the right of way and are legally protected from drivers using the car to threaten them. But when we're sitting behind the wheel and driving under the influence of reptilian emotions, our logic wobbles and our memory clouds over.

Checklist: Emotional Intelligence Towards Pedestrians

The items are arranged in two emotional intelligence areas (Goleman, 1995):

- Knowledge and obedience to laws and safety principles, especially right-of-way issues (items 1 to 9)
- Social responsibility towards pedestrians, including tolerance, caring, and friendliness (items 10 to 14)

1. Pedestrians always have the right of way over cars.
Yes No
2. I'm happy to slow down for pedestrians and give them all the time they need to cross safely.
Yes No
3. Drivers should watch out for pedestrians no matter what.
Yes No
4. Drivers who have the green light at an intersection are still required to yield if a pedestrian jaywalks.
Yes No
5. I wait for individuals to pass before beginning a turn.
Yes No
6. I keep the car behind crosswalk lines.
Yes No
7. I slow down gradually when approaching pedestrians and drive away gradually after pedestrians pass.
Yes No
8. I stop a few feet away from walkers as they pass.
Yes No
9. I give pedestrians all the time they take to walk past the car before starting to go.
Yes No
10. I wear a pleasant expression when pedestrians can see it.
Yes No
11. If walkers wave in appreciation, I smile and wave back.
Yes No
12. If I make a mistake and threaten them unwittingly, I try to apologize.
Yes No
13. I avoid honking, yelling, and gesturing offensively near pedestrians.
Yes No
14. I don't retaliate if pedestrians do something rude or incorrect, or try to teach them a lesson.

What Can Be Done

To reduce pedestrian collisions traffic engineers have suggested a number of improvements. These include:

- Improving the roadway design and materials.
- Implementing educational and community programs.
- Separating pedestrians from vehicles by time or space like the use of sidewalks, overpasses, underpasses, refuge islands in the medians of busy two-way streets.
- Increasing illumination and improving signal timing at intersections.
- Constructing traffic calming devices such as speed humps and roundabouts
- Increasing community-based programs to reduce the number of pedestrian collisions.
- Increasing educational messages that instruct children about street crossings.

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