

Psychologist offers tips for overcoming driving anxiety

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Feeling anxious behind the wheel is common, especially among those who live in cities with heavy traffic and little public transportation. A Baylor College of Medicine psychologist explains anxiety surrounding

driving and how to overcome it.

If you are an anxious driver, that anxiety might be compounded when situations on the [road](#) are more stressful, such as driving on a busy, five-lane highway in the peak of [traffic](#) or driving in the rain.

"One of the biggest challenges centers around anxiety related to the trigger, and that can be exacerbated by a variety of things like weather, traffic or concerns about road rage," said Dr. Eric Storch, professor and vice chair of psychology in the Menninger Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Baylor.

Besides distress, the most common symptom signaling driving anxiety is avoidance. When the anxiety becomes extreme, one might avoid driving altogether and get rides from others or use ride share apps like Uber. Other strategies might include only driving with others present or under certain conditions, like during the day or on nonhighways. Unfortunately, these are not practical options for many and might cause greater anxiety and avoidance over time.

Learning how to confront driving fears in a gradual fashion is crucial for addressing anxiety and follows a progressive approach by systematically confronting the feared trigger. Start driving on backroads, then progressively move to nonhighway roads. Take the next step by driving on those same roads during high-traffic times. Finally, step it up to various traffic situations. Some fear driving over big bridges, so start small by driving over small bridges first, then progressively drive on more robust bridges.

"The whole time, you're reflecting on being in that moment and emphasizing what you learned after confronting the feared trigger of driving, which is that you can handle it, the feared outcome typically does not occur, and that [anxiety](#) decreases the more you confront it,"

Storch said.

When other drivers are displaying road rage or other undesirable behaviors, try to be courteous and follow the norms of traffic patterns. If you are in a circumstance where someone targets you with rage, avoiding engagement is a helpful approach.

"Have a good cognitive sense—buying into someone else's rage doesn't get you any further," he said.

Storch outlines how to calm nerves for anxious drivers who encounter people with road rage:

- Give people the benefit of the doubt: you do not know what is going on in their life
- Forgive others for the mistakes they make, giving yourself the opportunity to let it go
- Remember your outcome, which is typically to get from point A to point B, and getting in a road range incident will affect your outcome
- Take deep breaths to bring down your physiological arousal a few notches

"The reality is it is difficult to drive in Houston on busy roads, especially during traffic. But avoiding those things doesn't help you accomplish what you need to in life," Storch said. "If you're anxious about something, it's all about taking [small steps](#) toward confronting it and learning what happens as you confront it."

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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