

# Ways to Address Aggressive Driving



Speeding, following too closely, and passing excessively can be considered forms of aggressive driving and significantly contribute to motor vehicle-related fatalities. In 2018, 9,378 people were killed in speeding-related crashes.<sup>1</sup> Traditional traffic safety messaging may not be as effective with individuals who engage in aggressive driving because of psychological reactance and moral disengagement.

A project supported by the Traffic Safety Culture Pooled Fund sought to better understand if psychological reactance and moral disengagement were more prevalent among individuals engaging in aggressive driving and how messaging might be adjusted to mitigate them. For more detailed information on this project and the Traffic Safety Culture Pooled Fund go to:

<https://www.mdt.mt.gov/research/projects/trafficsafety.shtml>.

## 8 Key Takeaways and What You Can Do

### 1 People who frequently drive aggressively report more psychological reactance than people who rarely or never drive aggressively.

- Using messages that reduce psychological reactance may be more effective at decreasing aggressive driving.
- Researchers have identified ways to reduce psychological reactance in messaging:
  - Avoid demands and instead use suggestive language and offer choices to reduce the perceived threat.<sup>4,5</sup>
  - Frame messages in a way that focuses on the benefits and positive outcomes of complying with a message.<sup>4,6</sup>
  - Evoke empathy<sup>7</sup> and help people to take the perspective of others.<sup>8</sup>

**PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTANCE** occurs when an individual feels their freedoms or ability to choose is threatened by a message (or rule, policy, law), so they immediately discount that message and attempt to reinstate or restore some sense of their freedom and ability to choose.<sup>2</sup>

**MORAL DISENGAGEMENT** occurs when an individual willingly disengages from their normal moral standards, overrides their self-regulatory processes, and acts contrary to their normal everyday code of behavior without guilt or regret.<sup>3</sup>

## **2 People who frequently drive aggressively report more moral disengagement than people who rarely or never drive aggressively.**

- Messaging that connects individuals with their core moral, self-regulatory processes may be more effective.
- Researchers have identified ways to reduce moral disengagement including:
  - Avoid loss or negatively framed messages as personal distress affects moral disengagement.<sup>9</sup>
  - Promote critical thinking skills.<sup>10</sup>
  - Teach skills to recognize moral disengagement and how to reengage.<sup>10</sup>
  - Cultivate moral norms (an individual's inner sense of obligation).<sup>11</sup>
  - Promote empathy<sup>9,12</sup> and help people take the perspective of others.<sup>12,13</sup>

## **3 Those who usually/always drive aggressively and those who rarely/never drive aggressively had meaningfully different behavioral beliefs about driving aggressively.**

**Growing beliefs about safety (e.g., “Driving the posted speed limit makes our roads safer.”) and challenging perceptions about saving time (e.g., “Passing a vehicle that is driving about the posted speed limit saves time.”) may be effective.**

- Potential messages to decrease aggressive driving should focus on:
  - Aggressively passing, tailgating, and driving over the posted speed limit increases the likelihood of a crash, injury or death, and financial loss.
  - Speeding does not really save that much time.

## **4 People’s perceptions of what other people consider acceptable or expected behavior are a significant predictor of their own willingness and intention to drive aggressively. Many people who drive aggressively perceive that others consider this behavior acceptable. This perception gives some drivers a sense of permission to engage in these behaviors. However, their perception may not be accurate.**

- Encourage people around the person who drives aggressively to speak up about these behaviors. This may be an effective approach to changing beliefs without eliciting psychological reactance.
- Potential messages to decrease aggressive driving should focus on:
  - Many people, even those close to you, may consider aggressive driving unacceptable.

**5**

**People's perceptions of what other people do are also a significant predictor of their own willingness and intention to drive aggressively. About one-third of people who drive aggressively perceived that most people usually or always drive aggressively.**

- Messages clarifying that most people do not drive aggressively may be effective at changing these misperceptions.
- Potential messages to decrease aggressive driving should focus on:
  - Most people (in your community/at your workplace) don't drive aggressively.

**6**

**An individual's perception of their own sense of control to avoid driving aggressively is important.**

- Messaging that includes ways to stay calm, avoid frustration, and accept being late (instead of speeding) may be important to decrease aggressive driving.
- Potential messages could focus on:
  - Speeding, when you are late, will not get you there much sooner and may result in a crash.

**7**

**Six moral disengagement beliefs stood out among aggressive drivers.**

- The six moral disengagement beliefs were:
  - "It's alright to abuse drivers who are behaving like jerks." (dehumanization)
  - "It's ok to tailgate if it gets people to realize they are doing the wrong thing." (moral justification)
  - "Following too closely or cutting someone off is just a way of teaching someone a lesson they need." (euphemistic labelling)
  - "If a driver is pushed into being rude to other drivers, they shouldn't be blamed for it." (displacement of responsibility)
  - "It's ok to go over the speed limit if it means you are keeping up with the rest of the traffic." (diffusion of responsibility)
  - "Drivers don't mind being honked at because they know it just means hurry up." (distortion of consequences)
- Addressing these beliefs using simple messaging may be ineffective because shifting these beliefs likely requires growing social and emotional skills to help drivers better manage frustration, empathize with other drivers, and increase self-management.
- Potential messages to decrease aggressive driving should focus on:
  - Approaching your driving behavior as you would any other social interaction such as shopping at the store or waiting in line at a movie theatre.

**It may be particularly challenging to change the behavior of those who drive aggressively, especially if only using messaging. Those who drive aggressively may have higher levels of psychological reactance, may respond to messaging with psychological reactance, and may experience moral disengagement. However, some people who engage in aggressive driving are more receptive to change than others. For those who seem deeply committed to not changing, messaging focused directly on them may be unproductive.**

- It may be prudent to focus on individuals who are somewhat willing to change.
- Universal media campaigns might focus messages on those who are already open to some degree of change as success with this group is more likely.
- Perhaps, messaging that seeks to engage those around these individuals may be more effective. For example, instead of messaging directly to individuals who drive aggressively, messages could try to engage those around these individuals and provide guidance on how to speak to these individuals about not driving aggressively. Such an approach shifts the message carrier from an authority figure (like federal/state government or law enforcement) to someone the person knows. This shift may increase trust, reduce reactance, and make the individual more willing to listen.
- More interactive and involved strategies may be required for individuals who are more determined not to change.

## Project Overview

The information provided in this document is based on a literature review of ways to reduce psychological reactance and moral disengagement and surveys that were conducted as part of the Guidance on Messaging to Avoid Psychological Reactance and Address Moral Disengagement Project, which included a survey to understand beliefs about aggressive driving and surveys to test aggressive driving messages. A total of 750 adults living in the U.S., between the ages of 18 and 79 who drive daily, or most days responded to the survey to understand beliefs about aggressive driving.

# References

- 1 National Center for Statistics and Analysis. (2020, April) *Speeding: 2018 data* (Traffic Safety Facts. DOT HS 812 932). National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Retrieved from <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/812932>
- 2 Steindl, C., Jonas, E., Sittenthaler, S., Traut-Mattausch, E., & Greenberg, J. (2015). Understanding psychological reactance. *Zeitschrift Fur Psychologie, 223*(4), 205–214.
- 3 Cleary, J., Lennon, A., & Swann, A. (2016). Should we be aiming to engage drivers more with others on-road? Driving moral disengagement and self-reported driving aggression. *Centre for Accident Research & Road Safety - Qld (CARRS-Q); Faculty of Health; Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation; School of Psychology & Counselling*. Presented at the 26th Canadian Association of Road Safety Professionals Conference, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Retrieved from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/96337/>
- 4 Shen, L. (2015). Antecedents to psychological reactance: The impact of threat, message frame, and choice. *Health Communication, 30*(10), 975–985.
- 5 Miller, C. H., Lane, L. T., Deatrick, L. M., Young, A. M., & Potts, K. A. (2007). Psychological reactance and promotional health messages: The effects of controlling language, lexical concreteness, and the restoration of freedom. *Human Communication Research, 33*(2), 219–240.
- 6 Cho, H., & Sands, L. (2011). Gain- and loss-frame sun safety messages and psychological reactance of adolescents. *Communication Research Reports, 28*(4), 308–317.
- 7 Shen, L. (2010). "Mitigating Psychological Reactance: The Role of Message-Induced Empathy in Persuasion." *Human Communication Research, 36*(3): 397–422.
- 8 Steindl, C., & Jonas, E. (2012). "What Reasons Might the Other One Have?-Perspective Taking to Reduce Psychological Reactance in Individualists and Collectivists." *Psychology (Irvine, Calif.) 3* (12A): 1153–1160.
- 9 Paciello, M., Fida, R., Cerniglia, L., Tramontano, C., & Cole, E. (2013). "High Cost Helping Scenarios: The Role of Empathy, Prosocial Reasoning and Moral Disengagement on Helping Behavior." *Personality and Individual Differences 55*: 3-7.
- 10 Bustamante, A. & Chau, E. (2014). "Reducing Moral Disengagement Mechanisms: A Comparison of Two Interventions." *The Journal of Latino - Latin American Studies 6*(1): 52-63.
- 11 Kim, H. (2018). "The Role of Legal and Moral Norms to Regulate the Behavior of Texting While Driving." *Transportation Research Part F: Traffic Psychology and Behaviour 52* (January): 21–31.
- 12 Bussey, K., Quinn, C., & Dobson, J. (2015). "The Moderating Role of Empathic Concern and Perspective Taking on the Relationship Between Moral Disengagement and Aggression." *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly 61* (1): 10–29.
- 13 Bandura, A. (2016). *Moral Disengagement: How People Do Harm and Live with Themselves*. New York: Worth Publishers.

## Suggested citation:

Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2021). *Ways to Address Aggressive Driving*. Montana State University.



Center for Health and Safety Culture  
Montana State University  
P.O. Box 170548  
Bozeman, MT 59717-0548  
Phone: 406-994-7873  
Fax: 406-994-1697  
[www.CHSCulture.org](http://www.CHSCulture.org)



Montana Department of Transportation  
2701 Prospect Avenue  
P.O. Box 201001  
Helena, MT 59620-1001

This document is disseminated under the sponsorship of the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) and the United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) in the interest of information exchange. The State of Montana and the United States assume no liability for the use or misuse of its contents.

The contents of this document reflect the views of the authors, who are solely responsible for the facts and accuracy of the data presented herein. The contents do not necessarily reflect the views or official policies of MDT or the USDOT.

The State of Montana and the United States do not endorse products of manufacturers.

This document does not constitute a standard, specification, policy or regulation.

---

MDT attempts to provide accommodations for any known disability that may interfere with a person participating in any service, program, or activity of the Department. Alternative accessible formats of this information will be provided upon request. For further information, call 406/444.7693, TTY 800/335.7592, or Montana Relay at 711.

---

This document is printed at state expense. Information on the cost of producing this publication may be obtained by contacting the Department of Administration.

---

Other sponsoring agencies: California DOT, Connecticut DOT, Idaho Transportation Department, Illinois DOT, Indiana DOT, Iowa DOT, Louisiana DOT and Development, Nevada DOT, Texas DOT, Utah DOT, Vermont Agency of Transportation and Washington State DOT.