

# Ways to Address Seat Belt Use Among Those Who Rarely or Never Use a Seat Belt



Not wearing a seat belt is a significant contributing factor in motor vehicle-related fatalities. Significant efforts, including messaging, have sought to increase seat belt use. These efforts have been largely successful as most adults wear a seat belt. However, traditional messaging may not be as effective with individuals who still do not wear their seat belt 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 who still do not wear their seat belt 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>.

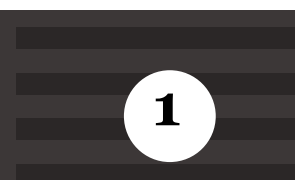
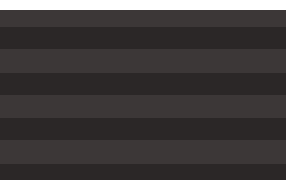
**PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTANCE** occurs when an individual feels their freedoms or ability to choose is threatened by a message (or rule, policy, law), so they immediately discount that message and attempt to reinstate or restore some sense of their freedom and ability to choose.<sup>1</sup>

**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>2</sup>

## 7 Key Takeaways and What You Can Do

**1 People who rarely or never use a seat belt displayed more psychological reactance than people who usually or always use a seat belt. Some perceive being told to wear a seat belt as a threat to their freedom and, because of psychological reactance, resist this request.**

- Using messages that reduce psychological reactance may be more effective at increasing seat belt use.
- 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 to freedom.<sup>3,4</sup>
  - Frame messages in a way that focuses on the benefits and positive outcomes of complying with a message.<sup>3,5</sup>
  - Evoke empathy<sup>6</sup> and help people take the perspective of others.<sup>7</sup>



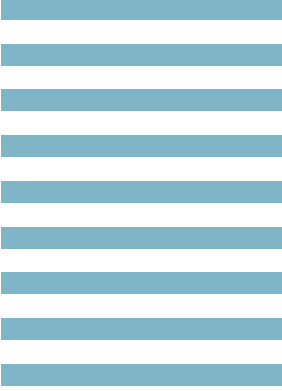
**2****People who rarely or never use a seat belt report more moral disengagement than people who usually or always use a seat belt.**

- Messaging that connects individuals with their core moral, self-regulatory processes may be more effective.
- Researchers have identified ways to deter moral disengagement including:
  - Avoid loss or negatively framed messages as personal distress affects moral disengagement.<sup>8</sup>
  - Promote critical thinking skills.<sup>9</sup>
  - Teach skills to recognize moral disengagement and how to reengage.<sup>9</sup>
  - Cultivate moral norms (an individual's inner sense of obligation).<sup>10</sup>
  - Promote empathy,<sup>8,11</sup> and help people take the perspective of others.<sup>11,12</sup>

**3****People's attitudes and beliefs about seat belt use are a significant predictor of their willingness and intention to use a seat belt.**

**Attitudes are influenced by behavioral beliefs.<sup>13</sup> Behavioral beliefs are expectations about the physical and social consequences of a behavior (e.g., "It is important to protect myself by always wearing a seat belt." "I wear a seat belt because I don't want to get a ticket."). Those who rarely/never use a seat belt and those who usually/always use a seat belt had meaningfully different behavioral beliefs about seat belt use.**

- Potential messages to increase seat belt use should focus on:
  - Using seat belts is a way to protect ourselves.
  - Using seat belts sets a good example for our children.
  - People are less likely to be seriously injured or killed if they always use a seat belt.



**4** **People’s perceptions of what other people do are a significant predictor of their own willingness and intention to use a seat belt. Those who rarely/never use a seat belt had significant misperceptions about the prevalence of seat belt use of others around them (like their coworkers and most adults in their community).**

- Messages clarifying the prevalence of seat belt use in workplace and communities may be effective at changing these misperceptions.
- Potential messages to increase seat belt use should focus on:
  - Most people (in your community/at your workplace) use seat belts.

**5** **An individual’s perception of their own sense of control to wear a seat belt is important.**

- Developing family and workplace rules may be an opportunity to grow beliefs supportive of seat belt use without focusing on compliance with state laws (potentially reducing psychological reactance).
- Potential messages to increase seat belt use should focus on:
  - Family/workplace rules about always using a seat belt.
  - People may choose to use a seat belt because they care about others and recognize that their own injury or death would negatively impact others.

**6** **Three moral disengagement beliefs stood out among those who rarely/never use a seat belt.**

- The three moral disengagement beliefs were:
  - “I might not use a seat belt, but at least I don’t text and drive.” (advantageous comparison)
  - “Not using a seat belt is no big deal when you consider that others are choosing more dangerous behaviors like drinking and driving.” (advantageous comparison)
  - “Not using my seat belt is okay because it doesn’t impact anyone else.” (distortion of consequences)
- Grow the understanding that not using a seat belt has significant health risks and that getting injured or killed in a crash may have significant impacts on other people.
- Potential messages to increase seat belt use should focus on:
  - People may choose to use a seat belt because they care about others and recognize that their own injury or death would negatively impact others.

**7**

**It may be particularly challenging to change the behavior of those who rarely/never use a seat belt, especially if only using messaging. The examination of individuals' stage of change regarding their seat belt use revealed that some people 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 campaign might focus message appeal to 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 rarely/never use a seat belt, messages could try to engage those around these individuals and provide guidance on how to speak to these individuals about always using a seat belt. 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 determined against change (i.e., have decided they will never use a seat belt).

## **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 seat belt use and surveys to test seat belt use messages. A total of 581 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 seat belt use.

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