

Module 6 – Impaired Driving

Impaired driving continues to be one of North America's greatest and most persistent threats to public safety. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, impaired driving is the act of operating or driving a motor vehicle while under the influence of alcohol or drugs to the degree that mental and motor skills are impaired.

Anyone who travels our roadways has potential for sharing the road with an impaired driver. Drivers can be physically and emotionally impaired – or both!

At the conclusion of this module, you will be able to:

- Recognize the alcohol problem;
- Identify the physiological effects of alcohol;
- Describe drug impairment;
- Identify some intervention techniques;
- Recognize methods to avoid impaired drivers;
- Describe emotional impairment;
- Identify aggressive driving; and
- Recognize methods for avoiding aggressive drivers.

Alcohol is the deadliest drug when it comes to motor vehicle safety. Alcohol is a depressant that affects judgment, vision, reaction time, and coordination, critical to safe driving. Even if you do not drink, it is still important for you to understand how alcohol affects driving behavior.

Research conducted by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration in "Traffic Safety Facts 2009" cited that:

Florida enacted a law making it a criminal offense to operate a motor vehicle at or above a specified alcohol concentration -.08 grams per deciliter.

In Florida fatal crashes in 2010, the highest percentage of drivers with blood alcohol concentration (BAC) levels .08 grams per deciliter or higher was for driver's ages 20-24, followed by ages 25-29 and 30-34.

It is a statistical fact that alcohol is a key factor in vehicular crashes. Nationally, approximately two people die each hour and someone is injured every two minutes in alcohol-related crashes.

In the time it will take you to complete this course, between 2 and 4 more people nationally will be dead due to alcohol-related crashes. What are your odds? About three in every ten Americans will be involved in an alcohol-related crash at some time in their lives.

Safe driving requires sound judgment, reasoning and concentration. Drivers need to be focused, see clearly, interpret the situation, and react quickly. Once in the brain, alcohol affects these critical skills: judgment, reasoning and concentration are all impaired. All people are affected by the consumption of alcohol. Drinking too much of any beverage containing alcohol will cause impairment.

Alcohol works quickly to distort depth perception. It relaxes eye muscles and affects focus and peripheral vision.

If you are an alcohol-impaired driver you are less able to interpret what you see. You make errors in judging speed, have trouble interpreting shapes, and lack muscle coordination.

As your Blood Alcohol Content or BAC increases, the area of the brain that controls muscular movements begins to slow down - the brain takes longer to process information and react. Muscular reactions become slow; steering and braking actions become uncoordinated.

No matter how good a driver you are, alcohol will decrease your reaction time and impair judgment when driving. In addition, expectations, mood, fatigue, and the combination of alcohol with other drugs can have a combined effect being greater than the parts effect and alter or increase the effect of alcohol. Since alcohol is a depressant, being tired can also affect how you react to alcohol. When used in combination with alcohol, legal medications and illegal drugs can have serious drug interactions and sometimes fatal effects.

Now let's consider drug impaired crashes. Drugs are designed to alter specific body functions and consequently can alter your ability to perceive, make sound judgments, and react quickly.

Drug side effects vary and may include:

- Drowsiness;
- Blurred vision;
- Sensitivity to bright light;
- Muscle ache;
- Nausea; and
- Slowed reaction time.

All of these side effects alter a driver's performance!

The majority of drug users are under the influence of legal drugs such as medicine for colds, a headache, or muscle or joint pain. It is estimated that less than 5% of the population uses illegal drugs.

If you have prior experience with a drug and its reactions, you cannot assume it will react the same on every occasion, especially if you take additional medication. How a drug interacts with your body depends on the dosage, other drugs, food and alcohol intake, and body weight/metabolism.

Taking medicine can cause driving problems such as: Lengthened reaction time; Reduction in your mental or physical abilities; and Intense or unexpected reactions.

If you are taking over-the-counter or prescribed medication, read the warning labels, and follow the instructions given to you by your doctor or pharmacist. Inform your doctor of all medications you are taking. When you have this discussion, if applicable, be honest about the amount of alcohol being consumed while taking the drug.

Combinations of medicine can produce unpredictable and strong side effects that make it hazardous for you to drive.

How many drivers do you know who operate their vehicle under the influence of over-the-counter, prescription, and/or illegal drugs? The use of almost any drug will have an effect on driving performance. In 2009, 64 vehicular fatalities and 303 injuries were attributed to Drugs-Under the Influence in the State of Florida. Drugs other than alcohol (e.g., marijuana and cocaine) are involved in about 18% of motor vehicle driver deaths nationwide. These other drugs are often used in combination with alcohol. Don't do it.

The list of drug-related side effects is endless and can vary depending on the individual. Never assume you will not react differently or will not be adversely affected after taking some type of drug.

Legal drugs carry warning labels. The issuance of prescription drugs requires the pharmacist to tell you how and when to take the drug and what to do if there are side effects. Warning labels also carry specific instructions, such as: Do not operate heavy machinery or equipment.

As a driver, if you take medications, read the label and know what is in your system. Before driving, conduct an inventory of how you are thinking and feeling. If you are experiencing any "side effects" that affect your vision, thinking, or reaction time, do not drive.

Just about everyone has been put in a position when a friend or acquaintance has been drinking or possibly involved with drugs and it is apparent that they should not drive. The responsibility to prevent them from driving falls upon you and you are not sure exactly what to do. Don't think that coffee, a cold shower, or fresh air is all that's needed to overcome the effects of alcohol or drugs. The real truth is that the passage of time is the only solution for removal of substances from the human body.

Here are a few tips to helping the impaired person and not allow them to get behind the wheel. One of the key methods is to be the one that looks ahead for a solution. Before you and your friends head out, identify the "designated driver", contact a sober friend to come to the party and pick you up, or bring enough money for a cab or public transportation.

Be firm and polite when you say there is no way you will let them get out on the road if they are impaired, use friendship as a tool. The first time you apply this technique will be the most difficult, but the outcome will probably prevent a traffic crash and loss of life.

If you have not been drinking, take it upon yourself to drive impaired individuals home.

If you are in your own home, attempt to insist the impaired individual stay overnight. This solution ensures you won't have to drive and the impaired driver won't have to find a way back to pick up their car.

You can also insist on taking possession of the car keys. Sometimes this is more easily said than done; here are a few tips:

- Transmit this primary thought, "I am doing you a favor!"
- If the impaired driver happens to be a close friend, be extra patient and understanding. Have the conversation about not driving in private, suggesting any of the previous solutions or refuse to get in the car with them.
- If you don't know the person well, talk to the impaired driver's companions and have them take the car keys.
- Try not to cause embarrassment or to be confrontational.

Do not give up or back down. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration statistics reveal that approximately one-third (32%) of persons of driving age have been with a friend who may have had too much to drink to drive safely, including half of those under age 30. Most of these (80%) tried to stop the friend from driving and were successful in preventing the impaired person from driving about 75% of the time. Friends don't let friends become impaired and then get behind the wheel of a vehicle.

Other drivers may operate their vehicles under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and they will be sharing the road with you. Watch for indications that other drivers might be impaired such as: Erratic changes in speed; Weaving from side to side; Traveling in the wrong lane; and Running stop signs and lights. If you notice these driving behaviors in other drivers, their actions may become increasingly unpredictable and you must drive with extra caution.

Your best option is to distance yourself from the impaired driver and their vehicle. Increase the amount of space between you and the other vehicle by allowing the impaired driver to proceed ahead of you. If possible, alert the police of your observation and suspicion. Many jurisdictions have dedicated phone numbers to report impaired and other dangerous drivers such as *FHP or *347.

Anger, fear, anxiety, and extreme happiness are examples of emotions that can interfere with your ability to make safe driving decisions. Emotions affect the body physically and mentally. Emotional stress also causes dangerous fatigue. As a driver, when you are physically and mentally off balance, you need to recognize the warning signs and take control of your emotions.

We all experience stress as a part of our daily lives. At extreme levels, stress causes an increase in your heart rate, an increase in your breathing rate, muscle tension, headaches, and fatigue. All of these reactions impair your ability to operate a vehicle. Learn the warning signs. Recognize why and when your ability to make good decisions is affected by emotions.

One of the ways to manage emotions, especially anger while driving, is to leave early. Allow yourself plenty of time to get from point A to point B. This reduces the inclination to speed and allows you time to be a patient, courteous, and calm driver. Emotional impairment leads to unpredictable behavior, which increases the risk for everyone in the driving environment. Emotional impairment factors are hard to manage because they often arise suddenly, without warning.

The most common factors that create an emotionally impaired driver include unfortunate issues many of us have to deal with such as:

- Stress;
- Anger or rage;
- Fear, anxiety or panic accompanied by irrational thoughts;
- Depression; and
- Grief.

Other high-risk behaviors are present and impair drivers who surround us every day such as:

- Speed addiction;
- Habitual disrespect for the law;
- Negativity that condones hostility on the roadway; and
- Denial of one's own driving mistakes.

Avoiding collisions requires complex decisions and skilled responses. Other drivers on the road depend on you to be rational and predictable.

As we have discussed previously, driving requires interaction between your body and mental processes. You routinely drive in mental states that interfere with your ability to perceive risk and react quickly. You are impaired when your ability to operate a vehicle is limited or hampered.

Avoiding collisions requires complex decisions and skilled responses. Others depend on you to be rational and predictable, just as you depend on them to be likewise. Driving is a dynamic activity that involves high-risk incidents and interaction with thousands of unpredictable road users. Routine events are mixed with incidents that are not routine such as being cut off, tailgated, or being forced to follow a very slow moving vehicle.

Normally you enjoy the freedom and independence of driving when and where you please. Many drivers do not react well when that expected freedom is interrupted by restrictions, regulations, congestion, and the unexpected actions of other drivers.

Emotional challenges that are common reasons why drivers get angry, hostile and exhibit aggressive behavior include common situations we experience when we drive, such as:

Restriction. In a traffic jam, when you cannot get where you are going on time or at the expected speed of travel, anxiety builds up to "escape" the confinement of congested traffic. This anxiety causes aggressive maneuvers to get away from or get ahead of others.

Being confronted with danger. Congested traffic filled with impatient drivers who make unpredictable moves, cause near collisions. Being confronted with dangerous situations increases stress, fear, resentment, and rage.

Regulation. Government regulation and all of the rules associated with driving, angers some people because they feel like it is an imposition, prompting them to disregard the rules because they do not agree with them or they are just rebellious.

Lack of control over the situation. When drivers have no control over their driving environment and are stuck in traffic, the lack of control over the traffic event is frustrating and often leads to anger vented toward a nearby driver or other road user. It is the application of the old adage, "frustration leads to aggression."

While we may think of aggressive driving as "the operation of a motor vehicle in a manner that endangers or is likely to endanger persons or property" – Florida law defines aggressive, careless driving as two or more of these acts committed simultaneously or in succession:

- Exceeding the posted speed;
- Unsafely or improperly changing lanes;
- Following another vehicle too closely;
- Failing to yield the right-of-way;
- Improperly passing; and
- Violating traffic control or signal devices

The aggressive driver typically denies that these crash-causing behaviors are aggressive. But it is clear that drivers that put others in danger by the way they choose to drive are hostile, dangerous, and selfish. They want to force others out of their way. These drivers feel justified in dominating others and that's what labels this type of behavior "aggressive driving".

Road rage is an escalation of emotions often provoked by aggressive drivers. When a driver uses the vehicle or some other object to threaten or cause physical harm to another highway user as a result of a traffic incident, that's road rage!

Aggressive drivers are more likely to allow their emotions to take control and participate in road rage. Recognize the effects of emotions on your personality when you drive.

Watch for anger caused by the need for revenge or retaliation:

Do you slow down if someone is tailgating you? Is slowing down dangerous behavior?

Do you want to ram a vehicle that cuts you off or takes the space directly in front of your vehicle?

When bicyclists are in your lane do you want to get right behind them and honk the horn?

Don't! All of these thoughts and behaviors are dangerous to you and to others.

Recognize your competitive, compulsive nature. Identify characteristics that you have that are associated with impulsive, reckless driving – if you recognize any of these it is time to consciously alter your behavior.

- In heavy traffic do you want to weave in and out to get ahead?
- When you are running late, do you tailgate slower moving vehicles?
- When a vehicle pulls in front of you, do you speed up and try to get around it, even though it is risky?

- Do you drive as fast as you want when the road is clear and you do not think you will get caught?
- Do you run yellow lights?

Change those thoughts and behaviors before it is too late

Turn a negative driving situation into a positive scenario. Concentrate on the safety of your vehicle, yourself and your passengers. If you demonstrate courteous behavior, you and society in general will benefit from your decision.

Let's see if we can remember some important points. You will now be asked some review questions based on this CBT. You may select your answer by choosing the corresponding button or by pressing the corresponding letter on your keyboard.

1. Florida enacted a law making it a criminal offense to operate a motor vehicle at or above an alcohol concentration of ____ grams per deciliter.
 - a. .02
 - b. .04
 - c. .06
 - d. .08

The answer is d. .08.

2. If you have to take possession of an impaired driver's car keys try to transmit this primary thought:
 - a. the police will lock you up forever
 - b. it is certain you will be involved in a crash
 - c. you are going to kill yourself
 - d. I am doing you a favor

The answer is d. I am doing you a favor.

3. What is the best indication that another motorist is being overly aggressive towards you?
 - a. Their speed
 - b. Their use of lights
 - c. Their use of the horn
 - d. Their vehicle's position

The answer is d. Their vehicle's position.

And now let's review the lesson.

Impaired driving continues to be one of North America's greatest and most persistent threats to public safety. Impaired driving leads cancer and all other causes of death for people ages 3 to 33 years old, regardless of race, gender, or any other factor.

In terms of the numbers of involved traffic fatalities, alcohol is the deadliest drug when it comes to motor vehicle safety. Alcohol is a depressant that affects judgment, vision, reaction time and coordination—abilities critical to safe driving. Alcohol alters judgment, and under the influence, people take risks they otherwise would not take – this includes driving while impaired!

Many drivers operate their vehicle under the influence of over-the-counter, prescription, and/or illegal drugs. The use of almost any drug will have an effect on driving performance.

Emotional impairment leads to unpredictable behavior, which increases the risk for everyone in the road environment.

If you encounter an aggressive driver turn a negative driving situation into a positive scenario. Concentrate on the safety of your vehicle, yourself, and your passengers.

Increase the amount of space between you and the impaired driver - allow them to proceed ahead of you.

If you demonstrate courteous behavior, you and society in general will benefit from your decision.

The next module presents information on safe driving practices and how to safely manage various driving environments. This concludes the module on impaired driving.