The Sound of No Car Crashing

A Guide to Protective Driving

By Mi Ae Lipe, Driving in the Real World ®
What Makes a Good Driver?

Most of us assume we’re good drivers. But some 70 percent believe they’re above average, but obviously not that many of us actually are. Cognitive dissonance, or the belief that somehow we’re the exception rather than the norm, is part of being human. It’s worth questioning what it means to be a “good” driver. For some, it might mean checking their mirrors every 5 to 8 seconds. For others, it might mean not having crashed in 30 years. But the more relevant question might be, how many close calls have you had? Were you ever surprised by something you weren’t expecting? What led up to it? And how can you prevent it from happening again?

Good drivers should never cause anyone else on the road to unnecessarily slow, stop, or swerve.

You should never be going so fast that you can’t stop safely on your own side of the road in the distance you can see to be clear.

When you drive, do you practice being risk-averse? That is, do you make several right turns instead of that one dangerous left turn at a busy intersection? Skirt the busiest parts of a parking lot to avoid unnecessary interaction with pedestrians and waiting cars? And reverse into a parking spot so you don’t have to back out blindly?

Do you look in your mirrors before you slow down, brake, accelerate, or enter an intersection? What’s your escape plan? You can never be too aware—or check your mirrors too often.

Good drivers are predictable and communicative, thinking several steps ahead in whatever situation they are about to enter—or change.

Good drivers are fully aware of the situation at hand. Do you know at any given moment what vehicles are in front, alongside, and behind you, as well as your speed and position relative to them? How often do you check for their presence? What about for other road users you may not see so easily, like bicyclists and pedestrians?

Good drivers are not passive observers but people who constantly search for hazards, or more importantly, the possibility of them. If you regularly anticipate problems, you’re more likely to be ready for them.
Good drivers understand that there are very few true “accidents.” Over 90 percent of crashes are caused by human error and are fully preventable. By not calling a crash an accident, we take responsibility for it.

Good drivers never rely on their vehicles’ technology to get them out of a pickle, like AWD, collision-avoidance systems, ABS, etc. They avoid getting into trouble in the first place by being situationally aware and proactively watching for hazards.

The most difficult part of being a good driver is that it takes tremendous honesty and self-awareness. We drive exactly how we are as people in terms of our personality, ego, habits, life values, ability to plan, confidence levels, social skills, and general outlook. Do you care about who you are as a person and a driver?

Do you look far ahead, anticipate, let the little things go, give yourself and others room, and practice courtesy? Do you often consider yourself a victim and feel violated by the rudeness of others? Or do you feel empowered to protect yourself and to avoid putting others in danger? Do you focus on improving for the future, or do you tend to obsess about what went wrong in the past? Your driving reflects all of this much more than you might think.

Good drivers are empathetic and compassionate, patient with others and watching out for them.

Good drivers are like good leaders—they empower others to be safe as well. This means giving all other road users proper room and space, not allowing others to talk to them on a cell phone (even hands-free) or texting while driving, not letting others drive impaired, and taking car keys away or setting limits when someone is obviously unsafe to operate a vehicle (or offering to drive for them). It also means being generous, empathetic, kind, and courteous, even if sometimes you don’t feel like it.

Good drivers don’t let themselves get distracted from the task of driving for too long. It’s impossible not to be distracted sometimes, but it’s critical to not let it interfere with the complicated physical and mental process of driving, especially in busy or high-risk situations.

Good drivers are aware of how their driving can change relative to a situation, especially if it is a deteriorating one. How do you adjust to changes? In road surface, the weather, your mood and fatigue levels, distractions in and outside of the car, what type of vehicle you’re driving, and traffic congestion?

Good drivers know that others are watching. That means friends, family, children, colleagues, and strangers. Humans imitate others. By the time your children are learning to drive as teenagers, they’ve been watching you for at least 15 years, and deprogramming bad learned behavior is going to be tough. So, it’s never too early to start being a good role model.
Why Can’t We See the Obvious?

We’ve all experienced it: You’re about to make a right turn. You creep up, look left, and then glance right. Your head swivels left again. Everything’s clear. You pull out and—shooooom!—a motorcyclist suddenly appears out of nowhere, and you slam on your brakes. *Where the hell did he come from? I just looked, and he wasn’t there!*

Obviously, he didn’t just come out of nowhere. Carelessness may have been a factor, but there are actually many valid reasons why you didn’t see him.

**PROBLEMS**

We never evolved as a species to drive vehicles at 80 mph. Nature equipped us to watch for predators and hunt tasty prey, so our ability to spot movement is phenomenal. But our brains can correctly register only things in our direct line of sight. Why? When we scan a scene, our eyes move in a series of jerky jumps called saccades.

Our eyes physically can’t see anything that lies within these gaps, not even flashes of light. It’s only when our eyes have stopped moving and are focused on a fixed point (even momentarily) that our brain can actually interpret what we’re seeing. The smaller an object, the more likely that it will fall within a saccade. That’s how motorcycles, people, and entire vehicles get lost when we do quick visual sweeps or glances.

We sometimes have trouble spotting movement, such as oncoming vehicles from a distance. Also, a vehicle that stays in the same position and speed relative to you (especially at an angle) can appear perfectly stationary in your windshield as you both approach the point of collision. That’s why you may not see vehicles merging onto freeway onramps until they’re practically right on top of you.

We often overlook the edges of framed images. Areas around door pillars, rearview mirrors, windows, and your dashboard all tend to get lost in even bigger saccade jumps in a phenomenon called “windscreen zoning.” You might actively see out of only two-thirds of your windshield—if it’s sharply raked or narrow, even less.

We often don’t see what we don’t expect to see. Our brains fill in these gaps with whatever they assume to be there. If you expect (or want) a space to be empty, you’re less likely to perceive that something is actually there.
Slow down when you approach roundabouts or intersections, even if the road seems empty. This changes relative speeds, so you're more likely to see others, and they you. It also gives you more time to look—and mentally process what you're seeing.

Before turning or crossing, look right and left methodically, deliberately focusing on three different points: close, mid-range, and far. This can be done quickly, but it must always be done mindfully. This “lookout scan” forces your eyes to move, and forces your brain to accurately capture visual information.

Before turning, deliberately look left and right at least twice. This doubles your chances of catching anything. It also gives time for an approaching vehicle to change its position in your windshield, making it less likely to be caught in a saccade.

Before turning, look next to, below, and beyond your windshield pillars and both your rearview and exterior mirrors. Even better, lean forward slightly so you are looking around them. Actively scan for the presence of legs and feet as well.

Never dangle anything from your rearview mirror. The swinging movement of even the smallest doodad can distract your eyes from detecting real road hazards.

Before you change lanes, always check your mirrors; then look mindfully at the spot into which you want to move. This means turning your head to double-check that a motorbike or cyclist wasn’t in your peripheral vision or in a saccade. Even if you don’t think it’s necessary, do it to establish the habit consistently.

On the freeway, train yourself to turn your head and look sideways at on-ramp merge points as early as possible. It’ll save unpleasant surprises if vehicles need to merge into your lane, especially if the onramps are short!

You may have noticed that I keep mentioning the words “mindfully” and “deliberately.” Too often we rely on rushed glances performed out of habit and haste. Remember, all the looking in the world isn’t going to work unless your mind’s actually focused on the tasks of seeing and registering. Take your time when you’re checking, and don’t let others rush, distract, or pressure you, even if they honk. The risk really isn’t worth it.

For more fascinating information about vision issues, check out A Fighter Pilot’s Guide To Surviving on the Roads by John Sullivan, a former Royal Air Force pilot.
Avoiding Risk

Life is full of risks and statistical odds. The best way to be safe is often to simply avoid risk in the first place. This takes planning ahead several steps; honesty about one’s own judgment, abilities, and weaknesses; and not relying on your vehicle to get you out of sticky situations or for others to have to move evasively to avoid you. You must never cause emergencies for others, or make others unnecessarily slow, stop, or swerve.

Left turns. If you must cross busy multilane streets or intersections unprotected by a green left-turn arrow, it’s often safer to make several right turns than one risky left. Turning left is a major factor in crashes.

Parking lots. Try to run errands or shop at times when fewer people are likely to be out at the same time. Fewer cars and pedestrians means less chance of mishaps, dented doors, and general stress and frustration.

Snowy, rainy, and foggy weather. If it’s snowing, raining hard, or really foggy, consider staying home or waiting until conditions improve. This goes for both local and longer-distance trips. Even if you’re confident about your driving, remember that you may be surrounded by drivers not so capable. Law enforcement and emergency personnel also really appreciate your staying off the roads during difficult conditions; their jobs are dangerous enough as it is.

Getting in and out of tough locations. Want to go to a gas station on a busy corner? Have to make a risky left turn to get to that one store? How about a supermarket in that strip mall with the impossible parking lot full of blind corners and errant pedestrians? Make life easier for yourself and consider going to a different place that’s not so hazardous.

Driving when drowsy. Eating, drinking caffeine, sucking fiery cinnamon candies, chewing gum, singing, listening to music or an audiobook—all of these can ward off drowsiness. But in the end, nothing can substitute for actual sleep. As tempting as it can be to push on, don’t. It only takes a moment to fall asleep—and the consequences can be deadly in that instant. Pull into a rest stop, truck stop, or a quiet neighborhood and take a nap. Better yet, delay going out on the road if you’re tired. Drowsy driving factored in at least 72,000 crashes, 44,000 injuries, and 800 deaths in 2013, and these numbers are likely to be a huge underestimate, according to the Centers for Disease Control.1

1 https://www.cdc.gov/features/dsdrowsydriving/index.html
Bad Habits

We all have bad habits. None of us drive perfectly all of the time—driving’s sheer complexity makes that physically impossible. But, it doesn’t mean that we can’t improve. The trick is to first recognize the problem, become aware of when you’re doing it and why, focus on deprogramming the bad behavior, replace it with the better action, and stay consistent with it over time until it becomes automatic. Easier said than done? Maybe, but it’s more possible than you might think.

Stop before the crosswalk, not in it.
This is one of the most common driving mistakes we make, but it’s very dangerous, especially when coupled with our tendency to look only to the left when we enter a crosswalk area. What if a bicyclist, a person in a wheelchair, or your child is approaching from the right? Over time, we often get careless with this. It is true that sometimes our vision is blocked from behind the crosswalk line, but it is critical that we stop there first, carefully look in all directions, and only then do we “creep and peep.” Don’t forget to treat unmarked crosswalks the same way!

Stop fully at stop signs. “California stop,” “farmer’s stop,” or whatever you want to call it…it is still a rolling stop, and it’s both illegal and unsafe. Stopping fully, even just momentarily, is a habit well worth adopting, because it literally slows us down and gives us a chance to look both ways and properly assess the situation before proceeding (see Why Can’t We See the Obvious on pages 4–5). We rush things because we don’t expect to see hazards, and paradoxically, that makes us less likely to see them when they’re actually present.

Don’t talk, text, or otherwise be distracted by your smartphone or any other electronic device (even if it’s hands-free). Doubtless, you’ve heard this before many times, but the results really are deadly—and costly. See Distracted Driving, pages 10–11.

Watch for pedestrians. Drivers often think to watch only for other vehicles. Train yourself to look for people—in or out of crosswalks, on sidewalks, hanging out at the edge of a curb, standing near a vehicle, darting out from between parked cars, walking on the shoulder, and everywhere else. Don’t forget to look for the presence of feet underneath vehicles!

Signal properly. You have a turn signal—use it, and not at the last minute, either.

Be patient when you’re trying to break bad habits and reprogram with better ones. You didn’t learn to drive in a day, and you won’t undo your bad habits in one, either. Nor must you fix all your bad habits at the same time. Pick a single habit that you want to change, and work on it intensively every time you drive for at least one month. If you stick with it, the new habit will start becoming more automatic in your body-sense memory. Even if you fail, don’t worry—just remind yourself to do better next time and stay diligent about improving.
Social Pressure

Each road is its own little community in which lives cooperation, respect, bullying, kindness, impulsiveness, rudeness, and tolerance. A lot of what constitutes driving in America is someone trying to make another person do something, whether it is going faster or getting out of the way. It’s easy to get annoyed, intimidated, or angry, and that emotion often causes our driving to deteriorate, which just worsens the situation. It’s essential to keep your cool and be respectful, helpful, and alert. Above all, don’t endanger yourself or others just because someone is on your tail. It’s also important to recognize when we’re being the ones not behaving so well.

Tailgaters. The best thing to do when someone is on your bumper? Avoid eye contact and move safely out of their way. Someone will always want to go faster than you. Regardless of how quickly you’re going or the speed limit, it’s not your job to take revenge or “teach them a lesson,” which might only make them angrier and worsen the situation. And don’t endanger yourself or others by speeding up or following the vehicle ahead too closely just to satisfy the pushy driver behind you. If you can, move out of their way as soon as it is safe and let them pass. If they yell, honk, or make a rude gesture, don’t engage.

On the highway, avoid holding up traffic in the first place. Left- and even middle-lane hogging by drivers who don’t properly move to the far right lane to let faster-moving traffic by often trigger tailgating and road rage without even knowing it. They also force others to make unnecessary lane changes, which increases the chances of collision. It also impedes the flow of traffic. Because of these factors, many states have “stay right except to pass” laws that make it illegal to travel in the left lane for extended periods. Stay out of the left and middle lanes except to pass only.

What if someone is honking at me because I’m obeying the speed limit in a construction zone, school zone, or residential area? Or what if someone gets angry because I didn’t move forward at an intersection because otherwise I’d be blocking it?

Or if I didn’t make a turn fast enough? That’s their problem. Your first and only job on the road is to protect the safety of yourself and others, period. Be courageous and don’t give in to the foolishness or hurry of others. You know things that they don’t, and your code of ethics is higher in that moment than theirs.
Remember that much of what is going on in the road actually has nothing to do with you—don’t take it personally. Drivers may have been arguing with someone, are under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or just running late. They may be confused tourists trying to figure out where they are. Or they may just be completely oblivious. People waste a lot of time and energy taking things personally. Don’t be one of them. Let it go with grace and fortitude, and move on—safely and easily.

When someone honks behind you, don’t just blindly react by reflexively moving forward. Drivers behind you can’t see what you’re seeing, and you must uphold your right to take the time to properly assess the situation and watch for people, traffic, and other road users at all times, every time. The most dangerous thing you can do is to let others bully you forward and intimidate you into driving into a possibly dangerous situation that you didn’t properly check out first.

Take a deep breath—and try to relax. Practice deep breathing when things get stressful. It will also help you think better by getting needed oxygen to your brain—always a good thing.

Teenagers are especially prone to social pressure when driving. Adolescents have several factors that don’t work in their favor when it comes to driving—prefrontal cortexes (which regulate judgment and decisionmaking) that have not finished developing, a lack of driving experience, and more vulnerability to peer pressure than adults. Males are more likely to seek thrills and want to impress others than females. This is one reason why many states have laws prohibiting teen drivers from carrying multiple adolescent passengers and late at night, when fatal and serious-injury crashes are much more likely to happen. It’s very important to mitigate these risks by not scrimping on driver training, talking to your teen openly about these dangers, and discouraging risky behavior, especially when it comes to speed, distraction, and peer pressure.

Are you yourself part of the problem? At some point in our driving lives, we all follow someone too closely or get pushy. Chances are that you don’t see yourself as reckless or aggressive—you’re simply unaware that you’re doing it because it’s been a bad habit for a long time or you don’t know what the proper following distance should be. You may also be rationalizing your actions, thinking you can handle this. But other drivers don’t know that, and you may be causing them anxiety, frustration, and stress. In the end, physics make exceptions for no one. Time to pay attention!

The opposite of social pressure? Praise and good deeds! Here is a habit worth adopting: Commit at least one positive act every time you drive. Whether it is letting someone through who is waiting to pull out, being patient with a driver merging in front of you, making positive eye contact or smiling at a fellow driver, or calmly letting a pedestrian or bicyclist cross safely, this is the ultimate antidote to negative social pressure. It also calms the mood and energy on the road and sets a great example for others to follow.
Distracted Driving

We’ve all heard the message many times: Distracted driving (especially talking or texting on a smartphone) is dangerous, it kills, it maims, and we shouldn’t be doing it. Most of us actually feel that it is the number-one threat on our roads. Still, are we heeding our own attitudes? Way too few of us, it appears. The result? A significant rise in both the odds of you and your loved ones getting harmed. We’re also all paying for this with increased insurance costs, regardless of whether we drive distracted ourselves or not.

PROBLEMS

The numbers don’t lie. Every day in the United States, at least 9 people die and another 1,153 are injured in crashes involving a distracted driver, according to the Centers for Disease Control.¹ That’s 3,285 people or nearly 8 jumbo jetloads of dead passengers every year. In 2015, fatal crashes suddenly jumped nationwide by 7.2 percent; much of this is attributed to distracted driving, specifically with using a smartphone.² And the National Safety Council estimates that cell phone use is a factor in 1 out of every 4 collisions in the United States.³

Insurance companies are experiencing the effects of distracted driving—and they’re passing on their costs to us. Their loss costs—payments to treat injuries, repair damaged vehicles and property, and defend insured drivers in legal actions—have jumped 16 percent over the past two years.⁴ You and I pay these costs through higher insurance premiums, even if we aren’t at fault ourselves.

On average, texting drivers take their eyes off the road for up to 5 seconds at a time. At 55 mph, that’s traveling the length of a football field blind.⁵

Texting can make drivers 23 times more likely to crash.⁶

Despite popular belief, hands-free and Bluetooth operation aren’t safer—because the cognitive load of talking on the phone is still present.⁷

It’s not safe to use a device even when stopped at a traffic light. Drivers can take up to 27 seconds to regain full attention after sending a text.⁷

What makes this technology especially dangerous is that we’re biologically wired to crave social connection and information. Answering that call or text causes our brains to release dopamine, a neurotransmitter that gives us pleasure. Respond again, and we get another little dopamine squirt. Once habituated, our brains crave more. That’s why we have such a hard time breaking this cycle. We need to recognize this compulsion as the serious problem that it is and that the odds are physiologically against us. Fortunately, there is a lot we can do.
The single best way to overcome temptation? Shut off your phone completely and put it where you can’t reach or hear it, like in the trunk, glove compartment, or in the backseat. Or put it in a mode that automatically sends messages that you’re driving and cannot answer the call or text until later.

If you use GPS, input your address before you start moving. If you need to adjust it, wait until you’re safely stopped.

Just because it’s legal doesn’t mean it’s safe. Many states have laws against using a handheld cell phone or other electronic devices but allowing Bluetooth or other hands-free operation. Because of the cognitive load involved in a phone conversation, it is still dangerous to drive because our processing power to see hazards and be situationally aware is extremely compromised.

Many vehicle technologies and apps will play incoming messages. Refrain from using even these, because of the cognitive load explained above. No message or call is ever worth anyone’s safety. If you really have to take a call or respond, pull over safely first.

Make it socially unacceptable for others to be on the phone with you when they’re driving. Social disapproval is often far more powerful than laws and penalties. Make it a priority that you won’t enable yourself or others to perpetuate this dangerous activity. It sends a message.

Contact your legislators. Advocate for consistent laws, education, enforcement, cultural stigma, and swift, heavy penalties. It has—and does—make a difference.

Teens often feel compelled to take incoming calls or texts from their parents right away. If you’re the parent of teens, you may be contributing to the problem of distraction when they’re on the road. Discuss with them the dangers of being on the phone while driving and figure out a plan on how to handle such situations. And refrain from contacting them when you think they may be driving.

Speaking of children, don’t forget that you’re modeling behavior for them. By the time they’re driving age, they’ve had at least 15 years of seeing what you do behind the wheel—a little late to tell them “do as I say, not as I do.”

1 https://www.cdc.gov/Motorvehiclesafety/Distracted_Driving/index.html
2 https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/812318
8 https://unews.utah.edu/up-to-27-seconds-of-inattention-after-talking-to-your-car-or-smart-phone/
Parking Lots

Over 60,000 people are injured and 500 more die in 50,000-plus crashes in parking lots and garages every year, according to the National Safety Council.¹ Smartphone distraction by both pedestrians and drivers account for much of this. Even at low speeds, the impact can really result in a bad day.

¹ http://www.nsc.org/learn/NSC-Initiatives/Pages/parking-lot-safety.aspx

Back in if you can. It’s always safer to drive forward out of a parking space than to reverse out of one. Backing into a parking space allows you to preview a space before entering it; if you back out, you won’t have the same opportunity to see what’s coming or who’s already in your way. And your line of sight will really be blocked if larger vehicles are parked next to you. And don’t depend entirely on your rearview cameras, either; they may be malfunctioning or obstructed by dirt or debris. Exceptions to backing in: if it’s specifically prohibited by signage or it’s angle-in parking only.

Avoid unnecessary risk. A parking lot is a pretty risky place. Why take chances? The key is to reduce interactions with other cars and pedestrians as much as possible. That means not driving in front of stores’ main entrances where lots of people are crossing, staying in the outside perimeter of the parking lot where there’s less traffic, parking in less-crowded areas farther away from entrances (also better for avoiding those annoying door dings), and leaving via the nearest exit.

Watch for people. Drivers often don’t look for pedestrians and bicyclists. Condition yourself to watch for—and expect—people in every conceivable spot. If we expect a spot to be empty, our brain may not register something that our eyes see.

As a pedestrian, stick to marked walkways and crosswalks. Any chance to limit your potential interaction with vehicles is always safer. Don’t dart out from between parked vehicles into the roadway. If pedestrian walkways, marked paths, or crosswalks are available, use them. It makes things more predictable for everyone, including drivers.

But, before you blithely stroll into a marked crosswalk, don’t assume that you’re actually seen. Make eye contact with drivers before crossing in front of their path, and then wave to acknowledge.

Be an alert pedestrian. Keep your eyes up and stay alert; avoid getting distracted by electronic devices or company. And don’t ever count on drivers paying attention or that they’ll see you—they may not, and if they hit you, guess who’ll be hurting more.

Clear snow, leaves, and frost off your car before leaving. Many drivers don’t take the time to properly scrape, clear, or defrost their windows and mirrors before backing out. Or they may clear just the windshield and think it’s good enough. It’s not. You’ll know when you bump into something you didn’t see. Or someone else who didn’t clear their windows bumps into you.
Keeping Traffic Flowing

You can feel it and even see it, but you don’t know where the rhythm starts, where it ends, or even how it is perpetuated. It’s called traffic flow, and it is the capacity for vehicles to keep moving predictably at even speeds and intervals. We’ve all experienced when traffic is not flowing and we’re stuck in bumper-to-bumper congestion, but did you know that we can all help prevent traffic jams single-handedly just by paying attention to how we drive? Strange but true!

It helps to visualize traffic as water, each vehicle representing a molecule of liquid flowing down the roadway. The spaces between these molecules are constantly fluxing. If enough space exists between each vehicle, then minor differences in traffic flow—like someone merging or changing lanes—get absorbed in that porous area between vehicles. But reduce or block that space, and then all the molecules start piling up like an accordion. This begins a rolling slowdown, or traffic jam. And each one of us is a molecule in this dynamic organism.

Maintain a proper following distance. This is the primary cause of both rolling slowdowns and rear-end, chain-reaction collisions. Always maintain at least 3 seconds (not car lengths) of following distance on dry pavement, 6 seconds on wet roads, and 12 seconds or more in snowy or icy conditions.

How do you measure following distance in seconds? Watch when the vehicle directly ahead of you goes under an overpass or past a sign or other fixed landmark. As soon as that vehicle passes it, begin counting slowly out loud—1001, 1002, 1003… taking about one second to say each number, reminiscent of how your microwave oven timer counts down. By the time you reach that fixed landmark, you’ll have counted how many seconds away you are from the vehicle ahead of you.

Avoid unnecessary braking or acceleration. If you properly modulate your speed and maintain proper space between you and the vehicle ahead at all times, this eliminates “creep” and thus needless braking (which triggers others to do the same if they’re following too closely). This “staying relaxed and steady” applies to acceleration as well.

Don’t give in to social pressure. Many drivers mistakenly believe that maintaining a 3-second gap is impossible, insisting that other motorists will zoom into the space in front of them. While this does sometimes happen, it is surprising how often it doesn’t. And you can control the behavior of motorists behind you much more than you might think; go a little slower and often they’ll calm down too. And if someone wants to get ahead of you, let ‘em; just ease off your speed slightly to regain that space.
What If? What’s Your Escape Plan?

Sometimes life surprises us. While we may not always be able to prevent the unexpected, there is plenty we can do to be prepared ahead of time. Much of it comes down to being situationally aware, expecting the unexpected, and remembering a few key principles in the heat of the moment. Also, practice by visualizing difficult situations ahead of time—athletes do.

What if an animal jumps out in front of me?

- **If surprised in the moment:** If it’s the size of a whitetail deer or smaller, brake as hard as you can if it is safe to do so, but don’t swerve. That’s right—hit it if you have to. You put yourself and others in far more danger if you swerve to avoid the animal. But if it’s larger (like an elk or moose), move to avoid it or at least lessen the impact. Regardless of the animal’s size, braking hard may allow you to stop safely before impact; at the very least, you’ll scrub off speed, lessening the chances of injury.

How to avoid in the first place:

- Slow down.
- Actively look for animals at dusk, night, and predawn by scanning ditches, roadsides, and forests.
- Drive with high beams on.
- Heed animal warning signs. They’re there for a reason.
- The presence of one deer almost always means more are nearby.
- Honking can orient a dazed animal as to your position relative to them.
- Applying your antilock brakes as hard as possible without letting up might allow you to stop in time. Most drivers have no idea how quickly antilock brakes can stop a vehicle if operated properly.

What if an unsecured load falls off a vehicle in front of me?

- **If surprised in the moment:**
  - If it is safe to do so, brake as hard as you can to reduce the impact or possibly even stop in time. But try not to swerve, or you may end up hitting other vehicles. Remember, it’s best to limit the damage to just your vehicle.
  - Change lanes quickly if it’s safe to do so—but not before checking first (this can be difficult to remember in a panicky moment).
  - Look at the safe empty space you want to go, not at the things flying at you. Why? Because you’ll steer right in the direction you’re looking.

How to avoid in the first place:

- When you see a vehicle with a potentially unsafe load, that’s the first sign that you shouldn’t be behind it. Give it plenty of following distance, then safely move out of the way as soon as you can.

What if the vehicle ahead of me comes to a sudden stop and I can’t stop in time?

- **If surprised in the moment:**
• If it is safe to do so, brake as hard as you can to reduce the impact or possibly even stop.
• Change lanes quickly if it’s safe to do so—but not before checking first.

How to avoid in the first place:
• A cardinal rule of driving: Never be going so fast that you can’t stop safely on your own side of the road in the distance you can see to be clear.
• Apropos of the above, that principle also applies to following distance. When in doubt, stay back.
• Avoid being distracted.

What if road conditions are slippery and I start to skid or slide?
If surprised in the moment:
• First, remove the cause of the skid. Lift your foot off the accelerator immediately, but don’t brake hard. No sudden steering, gas, or brakes.
• Keep your eyes up and look at the safe, empty space you want to enter.
• Keep both hands on the wheel.

How to avoid in the first place:
• Chances are that you were going too fast. At the first sign of deteriorating conditions, slow down more than you think you need to. Increase your following distance and the space between you and other vehicles.
• If conditions get too dicey for comfort, get off the road and wait until things improve. There’s no shame in being cautious.

What if a child darts out?
If surprised in the moment:
• If it is safe to do so, brake as hard as you can to reduce the impact or possibly even stop.
• Avoid looking at the child and instead aim for the safe, empty space you want to go. Why? Because you’ll tend to steer where you’re looking.

How to avoid in the first place:
• When you’re in a residential area, in a school zone, near a bus stop or a park, or any other place where kids might be reasonably expected to be, it’s your responsibility to be aware that they may run out in front of you. Slow down; stay hyper-vigilant; don’t be distracted, and watch for any signs of activity or hidden feet around cars, in driveways, and on sidewalks.
• Keep positioned near the center of your lane if possible, in case a child darts out from the sides.

What if an oncoming car crosses into my lane?
If surprised in the moment:
• Avoid swerving to the other side of the road, in case other traffic is coming.
• Again, always look at the safe, empty space you want to go.
• Angle your steering to avoid a direct head-on hit, which reduces the chance of a fatality or serious injury.
• Brake as hard as you can. Scrubbing off speed is critical.
• Honk or flash your lights to alert the other driver, but not at the expense of keeping control of your own vehicle.

How to avoid in the first place:
• As you drive, always be thinking of your escape plan—where could you safely go if the occasion did arise?
• Keep your speeds down, eyes up, attention alert, and be watching what’s going on as far ahead as possible. You never know what may happen.

Did I mention slow down? Never underestimate the deadly effect of speed. Not only will it take longer for you to stop, but going faster makes it harder for you to take in and process your surroundings.
Let’s make a pledge to drive protectively, not defensively. “Defensive” suggests danger and competition, when the goal should be to drive for the protection of yourself and others.

The Sound of No Cars Crashing: A Guide to Protective Driving

What Makes a Good Driver?
Why Can’t We See the Obvious?
Avoiding Risk
Bad Habits
Social Pressure
Distracted Driving
Parking Lots
Keeping Traffic Flowing
What’s Your Escape Plan?

To contact the author or purchase the book, visit DrivingintheRealWorld.com
Price: $10.00 USD

Got a question, idea, or comment about driving, road rules, and safety issues?
Please write in! I love hearing from you.
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Thank you and stay safe!