

# Guidance for Developing Effective Messages to Address Aggressive Driving

This guidance is intended to support traffic safety stakeholders, such as state and local departments of transportation, highway safety offices, law enforcement agencies, public health organizations, and advocacy groups, in developing and disseminating messages that address aggressive driving. It draws on findings from a national message development and testing study conducted with drivers who report engaging in aggressive driving behaviors.<sup>1</sup> Overall, messages were viewed positively by drivers and they reported encouraging changes in awareness and beliefs.

## Recommendations for Aggressive Driving Messaging

### Use a Supportive, Nonjudgmental Tone

Messages that avoid blame or shame are more likely to be well received by drivers who engage in aggressive behaviors than messages that allege fault or scold. Tested messages were intentionally framed to encourage reflection without directly instructing drivers or labeling behaviors as “bad.” Drivers responded positively to these types of messages, suggesting that nonjudgmental framing can reduce defensiveness and psychological reactance.

#### Practice implications:

- Avoid language that accuses, scolds, or threatens.
- Frame messages as invitations to reflect rather than demands to change.
- Emphasize understanding and shared experiences of driving stress.

### Focus on Reflection Rather Than Immediate Behavior Change

Messaging alone may not produce measurable changes in aggressive driving behavior. However, messages can effectively influence beliefs such as self-awareness, concern about driving habits, and perceptions of other drivers, which can ultimately shape behavior. In the study, participants reported increased concern about their driving and considered making changes in their driving behavior after viewing the messages, even one week later.

#### Practice implications:

- Design messages to prompt thinking, awareness, and self-reflection. These messages can raise awareness and concern without explicitly calling for change.
- Treat messaging as one component of a broader traffic safety culture strategy.
- Set realistic expectations for messaging outcomes such as awareness or changes in beliefs rather than immediate behavior change.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hanson, B.L., Green, K., MacFarlane, J., Charbonneau, B.Z., Guajardo, K., & Finley, K. (2026). *Understanding aggressive driving and ways to reduce it, Phase 2: Engaging bystanders and developing effective messages* (Report No. FHWA/MT-26-002/8882-444-26). Montana Department of Transportation and Center for Health and Safety Culture. <https://doi.org/10.21949/m4se-g893>

<sup>2</sup> Note: Consider evaluation activities such as pre-test and post-test surveys of awareness and beliefs as part of messaging campaigns.

## Message Themes

Study results suggest flexibility in message content, as messages were tested across three themes that were rated as equally positive and similarly effective. Stakeholders can select themes based on campaign goals, audience, or local context or vary themes across messages. Messages can focus on one primary theme and also incorporate elements of another. For each theme, example messages are included. They do not need to be used verbatim.

### Promote Prosocial Driving

Messages that emphasized courtesy, empathy, and shared responsibility on the road were consistently the most favorably rated by participants. Prosocial driving messages were seen as positive, relevant, and motivating.

#### Practice implications:

- Reinforce norms of respect, patience, and community-minded behavior.
- Frame safe, calm driving as something that benefits everyone on the road, including the driver.

#### Example messages:



Yesterday, I was running late and weaving through traffic when someone actually slowed down to let me merge. Just a simple wave, but it instantly made me feel calmer. Then it hit me: when's the last time I did that for someone else? I like to think of myself as a decent person, but on the road I'm not sure I always am. The truth is, pushing through traffic doesn't just stress me out, it makes me the very driver I complain about. I can do better.



Think about the drivers you appreciate most - the ones who signal, who let you in, who don't tailgate. They make your drive better just by being considerate. You have that same power to improve someone else's day. Every trip is an opportunity to be that appreciated driver.



## Encourage Cognitive Reappraisal

Cognitive reappraisal messages help drivers think differently about the actions of others, such as viewing driving errors as unintentional mistakes rather than hostile actions or considering the other driver's perspective. After seeing messages, study participants reported increased perceptions that other drivers are generally good and safe, indicating reduced hostile attributions.

### Practice implications:

- Normalize the idea that mistakes happen and are often unintentional.
- Encourage drivers to avoid assumptions about others' intent and try giving them the benefit of the doubt.
- Present reinterpretation as a way to reduce stress and avoid escalation.

### Example messages:



That "aggressive" driver might be rushing to the hospital. That "slow" driver might be 16 and just learning. That person who cut you off might have just received devastating news. You don't know their story. Assume the best rather than getting furious when someone cuts you off. It'll make your drive more peaceful and keep you focused on what really matters - getting home safely.



You know that driver who's going "too slow" in front of you? Yesterday I realized that person might be elderly, or learning to drive, or just being extra careful because they have precious cargo. Same situation, totally different feeling when I think about it that way.



## Support Adaptive Responses While Driving

Adaptive response messages provide drivers with strategies for managing frustration, stress, or anger while driving. Messages in this category were rated positively and were among the most memorable and motivating.

### Practice implications:

- Offer simple, achievable coping strategies (e.g., pausing, breathing, focusing on what is controllable).
- Emphasize personal agency and self-efficacy.
- Reinforce that choosing calmer responses benefits both safety and personal wellbeing.

### Example messages:



My stress level while driving used to depend entirely on what other drivers were doing. It's weird - I'd never let strangers at the mall or waiting in line at a concert ruin my whole day, but somehow I'd given random drivers complete power over my mood. Now I'm experimenting with focusing on what I can control - my music, my breathing, my route. Can't control traffic, but I can control my response to traffic. Still figuring it out, but it's interesting how I'm treating driving more like any other time I have to wait for other people.



When you feel the urge to speed, weave, or tailgate, pause and ask: "Is this worth the risk?" Most aggressive driving saves only seconds but increases crash risk significantly. A few extra seconds is worth your safety and the safety of everyone around you.



# Message Format and Delivery Considerations

## Pair Longer Messages With Short Reminders

In the study, message sets included both a longer narrative message (e.g., radio or social media) and a brief, reinforcing version (e.g., roadway message boards). This complementary structure supports both comprehension and recall.

### Practice implications:

- Use longer formats to convey nuance and emotional tone.
- Use brief formats for reinforcement and repeated exposure.
- Ensure consistency in tone and theme across formats.

## Plan for Repetition and Multi-Channel Exposure

Message recall and impact require repeated exposure, so consistency and duration of message dissemination are critical. Especially with messages that encourage people to thoughtfully reflect, hearing similar messages multiple times can offer needed opportunities for that reflection. Using multiple channels increases the breadth of people who would see or hear a message.

### Practice implications:

- Disseminate messages across multiple platforms (e.g., social media, radio, billboards, roadway message boards).
- Plan campaigns that emphasize frequency.
- Reinforce messages consistently rather than relying on one-time exposure.

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