



Short Safety Subject

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New Year's Resolution: I'll Be A Better Driver



When each New Year dawns, it becomes time to wipe the slate clean, start fresh, and be the person you want to be. This year, why not resolve to be a better driver?

For one thing, this may be the year to attempt something new. The problem for many of us is that soon after we resolve to stop smoking, cut down on fats or read War and Peace, we revert back to our old selves. Even before the ink on the new list is dry, we're puffing away, eating bratwurst and watching I Love

Lucy reruns.

One reason for this lack of staying power may be that we make the same old list every year. Check last year's list, and the year before, and the year before that. If this year's list is the same as last year's, it's time for you to try a totally new, never-been-tried-before resolution: I'm going to be a motorist par excellence this year.

Before you scoff at the idea, think about your driving habits. Driving in the metro area-both city and suburbs-can be a hassle. Too many cars, too many traffic signals, too many traffic jams. Like the story of the mild-mannered Dr. Jekyll who turns into the evil Mr. Hyde, traffic can do strange things to us when we get behind the wheel. Now is the time to resolve to do better.

Just because you think you're a good driver doesn't mean you couldn't stand a little improvement. Most of us consider ourselves better than average-if not excellent-drivers. Unfortunately, some of us use this belief as an excuse for bad driving: "I have better reflexes and driving skills than others drivers, which is why it's okay for me to weave in and out of traffic to speed past them." On a bad day, it even justifies tailgating and honking.

Well, if you've ever honked or tailgated another driver and felt bad about it-for example, when it turns out to be your favorite aunt or your boss-you're a candidate for a New Year's resolution. The fact is, most of us could be better drivers than we are. And there is at least one very good reason to become a better driver: the safety of our children.

So here's a New Year's Resolutions list to get you started:

Pay attention. Driving is a complex task that requires your full attention. Yet car phones and kids, cigarettes and CD players, can take your mind off the road. Fatigue and alcohol weaken your ability to concentrate. Last year, 15,000 people died by driving off the road.

Keep cool. Your judgment is better when you're calm. So make up your mind to keep your cool even if you get cut off, or when you hit a two-mile back-up that the radio traffic report failed to mention.

Be courteous. The golden rule applies to driving. Make room to let the other guy into your lane, for goodness sake. And if the other driver is a jerk, it doesn't mean you have to be one, too. Keep in mind that driving is not a competition. You don't have to be first to the mall or post office.

Be a good role model. Children watch and imitate parents, adult friends and relatives, and big brothers and sisters, too. Remember that 40 percent of all fatal crashes involve alcohol, so don't drink and drive. Also, watch your temper and use your turn signals. If you have good driving habits, chances are the children who look up to you will copy them when it's their turn to drive.

Be a good neighbor. You don't like it when other people speed through your neighborhood, so don't do it yourself. Respect other neighborhoods, drive with care, and don't litter. Also, remember that children can and will do the unexpected, so drive slowly and stay alert for them.

Share the road. Bicyclists and pedestrians have a right to use the road, just as you do. Keep in mind that we're all pedestrians at some time or another, and that bicyclists are oftentimes children.

Wear your seat belt. This is the single most important thing you and your passengers can do to protect yourselves. So insist that everyone wear them. Report traffic problems. When you come across potholes, illegible signs and uncoordinated traffic signals, report them. The Highway Department won't fix them if they don't know about them. And they will respond more quickly if they feel a little pressure from the motoring public.

Parents, get involved in your teen's driving. As a parent, you've struggled for years to prepare your child for the adult world. Don't drop the ball now. Make a "contract" with your new driver that spells out the conditions under which your teen is allowed to drive, and then enforce it. Teens need to know that you consider driving an earned privilege that you will withdraw if they don't live up to their end of the bargain. But you have a responsibility, too. Make sure that they are properly trained.

Teens, be humble. The teen crash and death rate is off the charts. Why? Inexperience and a false sense of invulnerability can lead to all kinds of mistakes. So teens, accept the fact that to be a good driver takes time and practice. Be willing to listen and learn. Be humble, because you're not as good a driver as you think you are-and you're not invulnerable. The reality is that when it comes to driving, a small mistake can destroy a bright future.

Seniors, know thyself. They say that "time and tide wait for no man." Aging is a fact of life. What we gain in experience, we lose in reflexes and eyesight. So be honest with yourself, know your limitations as a driver, and restrict your driving accordingly. This may mean no night driving, staying off expressways, or not driving after taking certain medications.

Good luck!