Article FAMILY-14



Safe driving saves you

The ultimate aim of everyone who gets into a vehicle, is to go out, finish the job at hand and get back home safely.

■ by Wg Cdr (Retd) DP Sabharwal

In our day-to-day lives, we perform many acts routinely and mechanically. It starts with our getting up and carries on through brushing our teeth, bathing, eating, going to work, walking, driving etc, ultimately culminating in sleep.

Most of these acts, like brushing the teeth and eating, are inherently safe. You might have heard of a human being getting choked to death while eating, but such cases are extremely rare — say one in a billion.

On the other hand, consider driving. Though performed regularly, it is always fraught with danger and there are large numbers of people who meet with accidents every day.

What do you think is the dividing-line between these two acts, performed daily by individuals, that puts them on either side of the safety scale? Well, the most important single factor which makes an act safe or unsafe is the number of people participating in the act. When the act is performed by a single person, like eating or brushing the teeth, the chances of an accident are extremely rare. However, when more than one person is involved in an act, the chances of an accident increase manifold.

You might be riding your vehicle at a reasonable speed and in your own lane and yet get involved in an accident because someone else comes from the wrong direction and rams into you. But even such cases are not very common. Because, if you are careful while driving, you would notice the other person before he really comes and bangs into you.

If you are careful, you might be able to save a likely accident. Otherwise, an accident would definitely take place. Thus, to avoid an accident and return home safely, you have to be a safe driver. There are four basic things that you have to follow to be a good and safe driver.

1. Keep your vehicle healthy

It is next to impossible to have a vehicle that is 100 per cent fit. Yet, the major and important systems should be functional and serviceable. Your vehicle should be neat, clean and tidy as well. Windscreen and rear-view mirrors should be free of stains, dust and dirt. If it is not so, the glare of the sun during the day or the headlights of a car during night, can reflect light from the wind-shield in such a manner that can blind you momentarily. This can be hazardous.

Keep your vehicle in good shape.

Recently, I witnessed a nasty accident. A Sumo car, going at about 60 kmph during the rush hour, had a tyre-burst. Trying to control the car and get out of the fast lane, the driver steered it sharply to the left, hit the culvert, bounced and rammed into a stationary three-wheeler. Almost simultaneously, another car coming from behind hit it as, after impacting with the three-wheeler, the Sumo had moved to the right.

A look at the burst tyre revealed it was absolutely 'bald'. Had the tyre been replaced in time, the accident would not have taken place. An ideal example of 'a stitch in time saves nine.'

In another case, my friend was waiting at a crossing for the light to turn green. Two youngsters, riding on a motor-cycle, pulled up alongside his car. One of them remarked to the other, "Look, what a contrast! He is smart and well-dressed but she is dirty and filthy."

Just then, the lights changed and the youngsters pulled away and so did my friend. As he was alone in the car, he easily understood that by 'she' the youngsters meant his car. He knew that he had not cleaned the car that morning but, to ascertain whether it was really filthy, he took his head out to look at the exterior. And, before he realised what was happening, the car swerved to the right and banged into a bus coming from the other direction.

The lesson is loud and clear. Keep you vehicle in fit, trim and good condition.

2. *Be mentally alert*

There is an old saying, 'It takes two to clap'. It is more than true in the case of road accidents. Therefore, to have happy rides every day, day after day, it is of paramount importance that you eliminate the chances of your hand joining in the clapping. Be alert at the wheel.

While serving in the Indian Air Force, I came across a poster meant for the pilots. It read, 'Leave your worries behind at home. Never carry them in the cockpit.' It is equally applicable – in fact, more applicable – to road-driving because traffic here is much more than in the skies. Thus, while you are driving, you should not be thinking of anything else.

Be attentive. while you are in the driver's seat. Let nothing else occupy your mind, other than driving. Give driving your cent-per-cent attention. And, if your mind wanders off, arrest it.

Shake your head, admonish yourself and try to concentrate on some vehicle in front of you. Try to find something amiss or new in that vehicle. That way, you can prevent distraction.

Needless to say, never use the mobile-phone while driving, not even with hands-free ear-phones. If you cannot avoid taking the call, give an indication, pull to the edge of the



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road, stop the vehicle and, then, attend to the call. Do it a few times and, rest assured, you will overcome the temptation of responding to the incoming calls while driving. Believe me, you would be reducing the chances of having an accident manifold.



Be attentive while you are in the driver's seat.

3. Be aware of others

Like us, others too are prone to make mistakes. Safe driving means acknowledging this fact and anticipating the wrong moves of others. By observing the road behaviour of others, and taking timely action, many a time, you can prevent an accident.

- Get into the habit of looking into the rear-view mirror, as often as possible. That way, you can easily observe those who are behind you and are driving rashly. Let them pass.
- Be responsive to the impatient driver's persistent honking. Give them room to overtake. Never keep them at your tail. Such drivers constitute the most serious threat to safety on the roads.
- Give credence to the other's intelligence or the lack of it. Their road-sense might not be equal to yours. Thus, be extra careful while changing lanes or overtaking.
- Learn to give extra respect to youthful drivers, although it is not mentioned in any of the rule-books or guides on safe-driving! Most girls and boys, riding fancy motorbikes and cars at break-neck speed, have no concern for others. Some of them are, in fact, without any driving-sense and are ignorant of traffic rules and regulations. Many of them drive even without driving licences. Take precautions and allow them to pass you from a safe distance.

4. Speed is never fun

One finds the slogan 'Speed thrills but kills' written on many road signboards along any highway, as well as on the tail-boards of many vehicles. A few of my friends, drivers for many decades, do not agree with this particular slogan.

I, however, believe that the connotation of 'killing' in this message does not necessarily means physical death of the individual. It could mean the death of the vehicle or its parts. As a proof, I bring to your attention the following report that appeared in a journal on automobiles, quite some time back:

An interesting experiment with speed involved two identical cars fitted with instruments that measured every detail of the trip. The cars were sent out on a 1,000 mile (1,600 km) trip. One driver was told to make the best time he could and the other driver was told to avoid risk and move as traffic permitted.

The first driver, the speed-demon, drove for 20 hours and 12 minutes. During this time, he braked 1,339 times, passed 2004 cars and was overtaken by 13 vehicles. The safe driver braked 652 times, passed 645 cars and was overtaken by 142 vehicles and took 20 hours and 43 minutes to cover the distance.

Let us look at the results. The fast driver saved 31 minutes, which amounts to less than three per cent of the total time spent on the road. However, he had three times the brake and tyre wear, passed three times as many cars as the safe driver and was exposed to three times the accident risk. The extent of wear-and-tear on his physical and mental system was not measured by the instruments, but can only be guessed.

This proves conclusively that speed may or may not give thrills but it definitely kills: slowly and gradually.

The ultimate aim of everyone who gets into a vehicle is to go out, finish the job at hand and get back home safely. It seems to be a pretty simple task. However, there are many unfortunate ones who go out in their vehicles but do not return on their own. You can avoid joining those unfortunate ones if you take driving to be a serious business and take the basic and important precautions.

Keep your vehicle clean and road-worthy, observe and listen to others driving all around you, and give a pass to those who are in a hurry. And, finally, never be in a hurry yourself. You might save a few minutes a day, but are you going to earn extra from those minutes? No. In fact, you would be losing your mental peace in saving those few minutes and, one day, might lose your whole life.

Remember what Pubilus Syrus said, "It is a good thing to learn caution by the misfortunes of others." ■

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