

Ask a psychotherapist

Question: My boyfriend is a terrible driver. He's fine until something happens ? someone cuts him off or drives too slow. Then he turns into a maniac ? drives too fast, curses out the other drivers and takes too many chances. I hate driving with him ? it scares me and I don't feel safe ? but he gets really mad if I say anything about his driving. What should I do?

Answer: It's not uncommon for people who are for the most part mild-mannered to turn into angry maniacs behind the wheel. This Jekyll and Hyde behaviour arises partly from the anonymity of the driving situation. Normal rules of polite social behaviour seem to evaporate for some people when they are behind the wheel. Afterall, unless there's an accident, you'll never have to see or speak to that other driver again.

People who experience excessive anger while driving are said to be experiencing road rage. The relative anonymity of the situation allows people to vent anger that both belongs to the current situation and anger that is displaced from somewhere else. For instance, a person who is frustrated by the behaviour of a boss but who isn't able to express it directly may instead become enraged at a driver who cuts in front without signalling or who is otherwise inconsiderate.

While this behaviour is understandable, it's dangerous both to the driver and passengers as well as to others on the road. Try talking to your boyfriend when you're not in the car and when he's calm. Tell him how frightened you sometimes feel driving with him. If you think he would be open to the information, share your new understanding of road rage and its causes. If your partner is usually reasonable, he may be surprised to learn that his driving behaviour can be frightening and want to take steps to change it. If not, refuse to drive with him until he gets some help.

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