

How attitudes and emotions impair brain processing

A demanding or stressful drive stretches your brain's capacity to process information. Stress and the release of negative attitudes and emotions can further affect your brain processing capacity in several ways:

- impairing your working memory so that planning, decision-making and judgement become slower and less accurate
- narrowing your visual field and reducing ability to scan so that your ability to read the road accurately is reduced
- limiting your ability to split your attention and assess hazards, making it more likely that you will take risks.

Red mist

'Red mist' is a term that has been used to describe the state of mind of drivers who are so determined to achieve some objective – catching the vehicle in front, getting to an incident in the shortest possible time – that they are no longer capable of realistically assessing driving risks. Their minds are not on their driving but on some other goal; they have become emotionally and physiologically caught up in the incident. Another term sometimes used is 'target fixation'.

The key to preventing red mist is to concentrate on the driving task in hand rather than on the incident. You will

need to develop your own strategy for achieving this, but there are some key steps you can take:

- **Don't get into a personality conflict with the driver you are pursuing.** Be dispassionate and concentrate on behaviour rather than personality; use neutral, non-aggressive language to describe the other driver (to yourself and others).
- **Don't try and imagine what you will find at the incident** – assess the situation when you get there.
- **Concentrate on driving** – giving yourself a running commentary can help you to focus on processing information and keep negative emotions under control.

Other physiological factors

Some other factors can affect driver attitudes, emotions and behaviour:

- **minor illness** (colds, viral infections, hay fever, postviral states)
- **medication** (especially those causing drowsiness)
- **residual blood alcohol**
- **low blood sugar** arising from hunger
- **cyclical mood swings** caused by hormone changes (this applies to men as well as women).

Be aware of the things that can affect your driving behaviour and take steps to counter their possible effect.

Practical steps to counter unwanted attitudes and behaviour

- Maintain a calm and professional approach to your driving, especially in emergency situations.
- Concentrate on applying the techniques you have learned during your training and use the system of car control (Chapter 3).
- Maintain a wide range of attention scanning and avoiding 'coning' of attention (red mist).
- Focus on the driving task in hand rather than what might be happening at the scene.
- Avoid 'personalising' other drivers, in thought or speech.

- Try to identify your own personality type and get to know the behaviour patterns it produces – especially the unwanted ones.

- Be aware of what is happening within your body and be alert to anything (hay fever, alcohol from the previous evening, hunger) that might affect your driving.

- Consider the consequences of making a mistake.
- Develop your self assessment skills (see below).

Speed and safety

Speed has a major impact on safety and a central aim of *Roadcraft* is to equip you with the attitude and practical abilities to use speed safely.

One of the most important messages in *Human Aspects of Police Driving* – summarised in the section above – is that you need to know your own limitations to be a safe driver. The ability to use speed safely depends on:

- understanding how speed affects your perception and judgement
- always staying within the limits of your competence.

Drivers who drive fast regardless of the circumstances have a collision risk three to five times greater than drivers who don't. Your safety and that of other road users depends on your being able to accurately assess what is a safe speed. This depends on your driving capability, your vehicle's capabilities and the road and weather conditions.

Underestimating speed

We looked at some common errors of perception earlier in this chapter. It is easy to underestimate the speed at which you are driving. This is because your perception of speed depends on several factors:

- the difference in detail perceived by your forward and side vision
- engine, road and wind noise
- the evenness of the ride
- your idea of 'normal' speed
- the road – its width and whether it is enclosed or open
- your height off the ground.

Below are some common situations where speed perception can be distorted:

- When you come off a motorway or other fast road onto a road where speeds below 30 or 40 mph are appropriate, you will feel as if you are travelling much more slowly than you really are. Allow time for normal speed perception to return.
- Low visibility – in fog, sleet, heavy rain and at night – can distort your perception of speed so you find yourself driving faster than you realise.
- If you drive a vehicle that is smoother, quieter or more powerful than your usual vehicle, you may go faster than you realise because you use road noise, engine noise and vibration, as well as sight and balance, to assess your speed.
- On wide open roads, speeds will seem slower than on small confined roads.

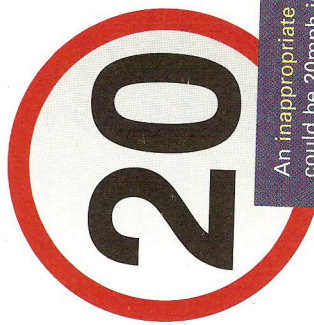
Always keep a check on your speedometer. Take particular care when you leave a motorway or fast road, especially at roundabouts.

Using speed safely

At higher speeds you have to process more information in less time, so you must always allow for any other factors which may reduce your ability to do this, such as divided attention, stress, negative attitudes or emotions, or extreme tiredness.

Always drive within your competence, at a speed which is appropriate to the circumstances.

Whatever your speed, if it is inappropriate to the circumstances it is dangerous.



An inappropriate speed could be 20mph in a narrow street crowded with pedestrians moving in and out of the road ...



... or 60mph on a straight open road if you are tired and your attention is split between several tasks.

In this chapter we have looked at a number of internal and external pressures on police drivers that will at times encourage you to drive faster than your competence or the circumstances justify. Learn to recognise these pressures and take steps to counter them. Every driver has their own speed limit – this is the highest speed at which they are safe and comfortable in a given situation. Know your limit and never go beyond it.

The principle that you should always drive at an appropriate speed for the circumstances is central to the system of car control (Chapter 3) and you will meet the idea again throughout *Roadcraft*. It is most clearly expressed in the safe stopping rule:

Always drive so that you can stop safely within the distance you can see to be clear.

Check your safety at speed

Over a journey of at least an hour, monitor your speed and whether you would always be able to stop within the distance you can see to be clear.

Assess yourself carefully – do you always keep to the safe stopping distance rule at higher speeds?



Half the rear end shunts occur when the vehicle in front brakes sharply and the driver behind is too close to stop in time.

Accurate self assessment improves driving skills

Accurately assessing your own performance is central to developing your driving ability, both during and after training. As well as monitoring your actions as they are actually happening, you need to be able to review your performance after a drive. Being honest with yourself about what you did well and not so well is vital if you want to continue to improve. This means looking back on a drive to consider your situational awareness, your ability to anticipate and plan for hazards, and whether your attitude or emotions affected your performance, as well as considering your practical skills in using the system of car control and manoeuvring your vehicle. The first thing to focus on when you review a drive should be your own and other road users' safety.

Reviewing things that went well and analysing why you handled them well is also important. It will help you to transfer your actions in that particular situation to other situations, broadening your ability to make accurate decisions and judgements from the specific to the general.

Studies show that people who develop a high level of skill in a particular area have better than average self assessment skills. They are continually

reviewing their performance, analysing their mistakes, and working out how they can improve. People who are not very good at assessing themselves find it difficult to develop a higher level of skill.

Knowing your vehicle is part of knowing your limitations

A vital part of knowing your own limitations as a driver is knowing the vehicle you are driving and what it can and cannot do. During a demanding drive you cannot process information accurately and make safe decisions unless you are thoroughly familiar with the condition of your vehicle (e.g. tyre tread depth, brakes), its capabilities (e.g. type of fuel, type of drive), and how to use the controls correctly (e.g. type of transmission, type of active safety device).

Always check your vehicle before you drive. See 'Know your vehicle' on page 164 for roadworthiness and pre-driving checks and brake tests.

Becoming a better driver with Roadcraft

Roadcraft will develop your awareness of traffic situations, and show you how to improve your observation and anticipation so that you can spot hazards early. It will explain how to use the system of car control to process information and make decisions and judgements efficiently and accurately, giving you more time to react in demanding situations and to negotiate hazards safely and smoothly.

Each chapter includes self assessment questions to help you check your understanding of police driving techniques and develop your driving ability to its full potential.