

### THE SIX STAGES OF DRIVING PERFORMANCE

Almost 90 per cent of all drivers believe they are good drivers themselves. However, analysis of road accidents indicates that more than 90 per cent of the accidents are due to human related factors. Considering the contradiction as the data available from the accidents are beyond discussion, it is possible to derive that the drivers have a wrong perception about their driving skills.

Safe driving and good driving performance has almost the same meaning and necessitates high concentration, so it is not easy. Otherwise, annually 1.2 million people would not lose their lives in road accidents worldwide. Though almost all drivers have an idea of "it does not happen to me" engraved in their subconscious.

Basic rules for safe driving should be thought as a part of driver training and the drivers should keep obeying these rules all throughout their lives. It is very clear that the quality of driver training, which changes from country to country, should be improved for our community. However, it should also be noted that no matter how good the driver training quality is; people may have a psychological resistance of people to obey the rules. Accordingly public awareness and effective enforcement are as important as the driver training quality. Intensive traffic inspections generate a habit of obeying the rules.

Considering the psychological phases, human beings pass through and the driving experience, the following six stages can be discussed for driver performance.

#### Learning Stage

It can be said that this is the less risky stage for most of the drivers. As they have just learned how to drive and do not have the feeling of perfect control over the car, drivers at this stage pay maximum attention as they drive. As long as they driver accompanies by a good driver trainer, they do not generate major risks as most of those drivers, who consider themselves "experienced" does.

At this stage a good trainer has an important role to play. The training should be delivered with up to date information and without transferring wrong habits that are possible to gain in time. A professional trainer should be preferred here as it is not appropriate to get this training from parents or friends. There is no difference in receiving such a training from trainers who has not received required training as a driver trainer. It is essential to set standards for driver trainers.

#### Just After Receiving the License

This is the stage where risk proneness start to scale up. While some are aware of their lack of experience, the others start taking risks with the belief of "I have received the licence, so I am good enough". Though, the road accident data indicates that number of accidents in which 18-24 age group of drivers are involved is less than the upper age group.

Drivers should keep in mind that the driving license exam is a very easy one and there is a lot to learn after passing this exam. On the other side, experience can not be under estimated for driving performance. This fact has nothing to do with the personal skills and is valid for all.

#### Self Confidence Stage

The drivers at this stage have some driving experience and have a self confidence in their driving skills. The over confidence after the experience gained in a short period, increases the risk proneness; so does the number of accidents this group of drivers are involved.

Actual age of the driver is another factor at this stage. It is very well known that young people like risks and those who enter this stage at an early age are more risk prone. In our community, people get their driving license as they are at the age required in the law. So they enter this stage at an early age. The main factor causing accidents at this stage is driver distraction. In general, those who enter this stage at age 30 or after, are better in keeping their concentration on road while driving; and they show their driving performance by obeying the traffic rules not by proving how well they manage risks.

#### Aggressive Stage

Stress of drivers is the main reason for aggressive driving. A reaction to the other drivers' aggressive attitudes is also possible. Respecting the rights of other drivers and pedestrians is very important for road safety and proper traffic flow. The profile of aggressive drivers, who are mostly at 30-40 age group, is described below:

- ▮ Driving too close to the vehicle in front or disturbing with the high beam,
- ▮ Improper overtake,
- ▮ Driving 20 km or more faster than the speed limit,
- ▮ Nervous and impolite attitudes while driving.

#### Safe Driving Stage

Statistics indicate that after age 35-40, driver's rate of involvement in road accidents decreases. This is the stage when the driving experience reaches its optimum level for driving quality; and this age group of drivers' risk proneness decreases. It should be kept in mind that experience is the best teacher, and the time spent behind the steering wheel obeying the traffic rules is the most important issue positively affecting driving performance.

#### Slow Reaction Stage

As ages go by, some physiological conditions may badly affect driving performance. The most common of these are:

- ▮ Decrease in visibility at night,
- ▮ Deterioration of sensation of distance and speed,
- ▮ Decrease in motive power,
- ▮ Increase in the reaction time,
- ▮ Decrease in capability of long term focus,
- ▮ Easier distraction and feeling more stress while driving compared to past,
- ▮ Increase in perception time for those seen or heard,
- ▮ Affect of the medicines, which are more and more needed, on the driving performance.

Especially drivers above age 60 should be aware of this situation and these physiological conditions will get worsen in older ages; accordingly they should pay more attention in traffic.

Whatever the stage they are in all drivers should be aware of the responsibility they have. The following recommendations should be taken in to consideration for driving safety:

- ▮ While driving, eye should concentrate on the road and the two hands on the steering wheel.
- ▮ Concentration on road is essential in busy traffic conditions too, and a safe distance should be kept with the vehicle in front.
- ▮ Attitudes of the other drivers should not be taken personal. It is always safe to keep a distance with the drivers who have a behavioural disorder.
- ▮ A vehicle at a close distance for overtaking must be given way. Thinking positively, there may be a good reason for doing this.
- ▮ No body has to teach others how to drive properly. If necessary, it is the job of the traffic police to impose a penalty on misbehaviour.
- ▮ At the junctions, when the green light is on, before taking the road the other sides should be controlled. There may be a vehicle violating the red-light rule.
- ▮ To control the traffic conditions around your vehicle, you should keep your concentration on the road and control the rear and side-view mirrors. For example, if the vehicle in front stops abruptly, you may need to change the lane quickly and you should know if there is any closing vehicle in the lane that will be taken. Being aware of what is going on around you, keeps you protected from unpleasant surprises.
- ▮ Drivers should control the blind spot of the car by turning head. This is an important, but mostly forgotten measure to prevent accidents especially during lane change.
- ▮ Talking via a mobile phone while driving generates similar risks to driving impaired by alcohol. It breaks the concentration.
- ▮ If it is necessary to talk over the mobile, the right thing to do is to park at a safe place at the edge of the road, use hands-free devices and still keep the conversation short.
- ▮ Especially in wet air tyres are critical for road vehicle control. Tyres must be control at least once in two weeks. Wearing at the middle of the tyre indicates excess tyre pressure and wearing at the side means tyre pressure is lower than the normal value.
- ▮ Excess speed is the most common factor causing road accidents. High speed can make you win only a couple of minutes; but against this the risk you generate for your self and the others around is very high. The roads are for common traffic, it is not a racecourse.
- ▮ Driving after alcoholic drinks is very dangerous. Stress and tiredness also boost driving risks.
- ▮ Loud music prevents you to hear the honk signal of the other drivers around to warn you on something.
- ▮ An emergency kit should be kept in the vehicle. Reflector triangle, first-aid materials, gloves, jumper cable, and tools to change tyres must be in this emergency kit. Flat tyre and flat battery are very common breakdown types. In case of a breakdown, the vehicle must be parked at the edge of the road, signalisation to warn the other vehicles must be properly done. To change the tyre, you must refrain from standing on the traffic side of the road.
- ▮ Wearing seat belts is essential for all passengers in a vehicle. This is valid for passengers sitting in both front and rear seats.
- ▮ Kids travelling in a vehicle must be fixed in child restraints appropriate for their length and age.
- ▮ Airbags are useful for safety, but they can be dangerous too. Seat belts must always be worn while travelling in a vehicle and the rib cage must be at least 20 cm far from the opening point of airbags. For this reason kids should not sit in the front seats. Only those above age 12 are allowed to sit in the front, however, this is not preferable. If it is necessary, for kids above age 12, the front seat may be used by keeping it at its rear end position.
- ▮ As drivers who lost their ways get nervous and this situation affects their driving, it is useful to determine the path before departure.

It is not possible to control the road conditions and the attitudes of the other drivers that we share the road. We can only control ourselves and endeavour for driving safely!

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