

Managing Anxiety While Driving

ADED – The Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists

Anxiety surrounding community mobility (driving, riding, walking) varies from person to person. Some people may be a little nervous when driving and not really know why. Some avoid certain areas or times of day when driving because it makes them uncomfortable. Some drivers have been involved in a traffic accident and are now worried that it might happen again. Anxiety surrounding driving can be so severe that some don't want to drive at all. If any of these scenarios describe you, know that you are not alone, and driver rehabilitation services can help.

Driving anxiety is a real thing, and while it does not have an official name, it is common, and the effects can range from mild to severe. Driving anxiety can be caused by a variety of sources but most often it occurs because something thought of as “bad” has happened associated with driving, or there has been some other significant trauma which led the person to be afraid. Fear can be a nervous-type feeling or it can escalate to a panic attack. Regardless of the severity, when you feel anxious, it makes driving more difficult.

In a study conducted by QUT Centre for Accident Research and Road Safety*, it was found that highly anxious drivers had significantly longer response times as tasks increased in difficulty. Furthermore, they reported that being anxious makes drivers unable to fully focus their attention on the road, particularly in urban areas, where there are plenty of distractions and when pressured for time. The researchers concluded that being anxious can affect driving ability in the same way as taking your eyes off the road or talking on a mobile phone.



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Driver rehabilitation specialists can help you recover or compensate for your driving anxiety. They can use a variety of strategies and training techniques to help you overcome and manage the symptoms that you are experiencing, whether these are issues you have while driving a car, riding as a passenger, or walking in the community.

Signs that you might need professional assistance:

- Not returning to driving after a trauma due to fear
- Feeling more nervous than other people when you drive
- Avoidance of different places or specific types of driving maneuvers due to anxiety
- Feeling headachy, upset stomach, nausea, sense of unease, exhaustion or panic when driving or even when just thinking about driving
- Over-checking the weather, news reports, etc. prior to driving
- Cancelling or not attending social events in the community because you would rather not drive
- Missing out on life events and activities because you are too anxious to drive, ride in a car, or walk.

If you or someone you know is having difficulty with anxiety while driving, travelling as a passenger or a fear of walking, contact a driver rehabilitation specialist who has experience with reducing the effects of anxiety while performing aspects of community mobility. The specialist will conduct an evaluation to determine where, what, and how your anxiety is affecting you and determine the best course of treatment to help you get back to emotionally comfortable and confident driving, riding, or walking.

By Wendy Nieuwland, Occupational Therapist, Certified Driver Rehabilitation Specialist , Licensed Driving Instructor

*Wong, Ides, Mahar, Douglas P., Titchener, Kirsteen, & Freeman, James E. (2013) [The impact of anxiety on processing efficiency : implications for the attentional control theory.](#) The Open Behavioral Science Journal, 7(6), pp. 7-15.