Are “Macho” Guys a Danger to Other Drivers?

May 27, 2010 By David Evans

When I was 17, I failed to let a guy into my turning lane. No big deal right? It was for him. Not to perpetuate stereotypes, but he was driving a jacked up 4x4 pick up with a gun rack in the window. His bumper was about level with the roof of my tiny 1970’s era Honda Civic. After I cut him off, the guy stuck to my tail, repeatedly revving his engine for nearly two miles. I really thought for a while that I might end up dead in a ditch. Eventually, he roared around me, flipped me off and took off at high speed.

Now, a new study suggests why men like my rage-filled tail-gater take it more personally, and react more aggressively, when we drive too slowly or cut them off. Men who score higher on a test that measures stereotypically masculine, or “macho,” beliefs take far more risks on the road says Julie Langlois, a grad student at the University de Montreal Department of Psychology.

Langlois and her colleagues had men fill out a 60 question survey, developed back in 2004, that researchers now use to detect men with a hyper masculine belief system. The survey doesn’t ask if you can field dress a moose, but it does question whether you agree or disagree with statements such as “men who cry are weak,” and “generally speaking, men are smarter than women.”

After testing the men for their macho quotient, Langlois’s team put them in a driving simulator and told them to catch a car inside the simulator. The men were also told that some people were able to catch the car within seven minutes. The more macho the guy, the quicker he caught the car and the more risks he took trying to do so. Some did so in as little as five minutes.

“Some men develop a passion for driving that can verge on the obsessive,” says Langlois. “They consider cars to be an extension of themselves and they become extremely aggressive if they are honked at or cut off.”

They study didn’t measure road-rage, per se, but aggressive driving does obviously underlie most of the egregious instances of on-the-road violence that occasionally pop up on the 11 o’clock news.

So what does any of this have to do with mental health? Aside from confirming my stereotypical

beliefs about macho, aggressive guys, the study also made me wonder if the kinds of guys most prone to aggression are also more at risk of depression, and death by violence and suicide. Though I was always the guy more likely to get thrown into the trash can on the school yard, than the one doing the bullying, I sympathize with men who are so filled with testosterone that they have no impulse control and are so easily provoked. In the work I've done as a health educator in prisons and drug-treatment facilities, I've seen what happens to a lot of these guys. It's tragic.

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