



Tailgating - Following too close

How many times have you looked in your driving mirrors and seen the word 'OVLOV' (Volvo - backwards) written in large letters against the backdrop of a huge radiator grill filling all the available view.

Tailgating is a habit that most people get away with most of the time. By 'get away with' I mean that they are not involved in accidents and do not get stopped by the police; because of this, their perception of danger is diminished.

Some categories of tailgaters...

- Dreamers
- The Distracted
- The Short Sighted
- Winners
- Bullies

Each of these are explained on the next page - this section also has some solutions to help you deal with drivers who follow too closely.

But who are these tailgaters listed above, and why do they do it? Let's start close to home.

When was the last time that you had to brake sharply to avoid colliding with the car in front?

Or cursed under your breath (or out loud!) because the driver in front was holding you up?

The next page explains each type from the list above... Do you fit any of them?

Different types of tailgaters

Most of us consider that we keep a safe distance; however, if you have had to brake suddenly because the idiot in front has taken emergency action or is simply dithering, you have been following too close. If you have been following too close, which category do you fall in to?

Dreamers

Dreamers are drivers who often drift off into a daydream behind the wheel.

Dreamers pay very little attention to what is going on around because there are more important things in life to think about! After all, who cares what's happening in front when you're thinking about a date, a new hairstyle, your girlfriend, getting away from it all ... We all daydream, but there's a time and a place - maybe that's not when we are driving.

Lots of dreamers end up getting away from it all ... permanently!

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The Distracted

We all get distracted from time to time, however, some drivers have developed distraction to a fine art.

Perhaps the most obvious are those who persist in believing that it is safe to use their mobile phones or other communication devices on the move. I've seen truck drivers watching TV, drivers reading newspapers, map readers and drivers trying to control their kids.

Then there was the lady who commuted from Birmingham to London and found the journey so boring that she devised a contraption to strap 'puzzle books' to her left knee. She did this so that she could while away the journey by completing crosswords and other brain teasers (although she didn't have a clue when she was stopped by the police!).

Still, if you are a compulsive reader or puzzle book addict, your 'hobby' will be useful to pass the time if you are faced with a long convalescence period (after you crash).

The Short-Sighted

While not literally short-sighted (although I sometimes wonder!) these drivers are unable to relate their speed to their overall journey time. In their impatience to 'get there', they try to gain extra seconds by sitting inches away from your rear bumper.

The short-sighted along with the winners (see below) have the capacity to become aggressive if they feel that you are being unreasonable by taking up the piece of road that is rightfully theirs.

If you look far enough into the future, you will discover that there comes a point where time doesn't matter anymore - that's where you are heading.

Ten seconds saved on your journey is not ten seconds added to your life - and the risks involved might well result in 20 years being subtracted from your life...

The Winners

The winner just has to come first and pass any other driver who has the audacity to be in front of him.

The crazy thing is, they don't 'win' - the cars that they pass won't appear on their driveways 10 seconds behind them. There is no one waiting at home with a chequered flag!

Winners drive in your slipstream and will overtake at any cost; they seem totally ignorant of the fact that however many vehicles they overtake there will still be a few thousand more in front.

I often wonder if winners are like train-spotters keeping a notebook with the registration marks of all the vehicles they have passed.

If you are one of the winners here's a thought for you ... Only another 22 million or so registration numbers to collect and then you'll have the set!

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The Bullies

There seem to be a small minority of drivers out there who get some kind of warped pleasure from harassing others. This behaviour was taken to an extreme in France and some other European countries in the 1990's with a spate of drivers being literally 'bumped' off the road from behind.

The best thing to do with bullies is to ignore them. They thrive on attention. Refuse to be a victim and they have no one to bully - just pull over and let them pass.

Brawn, maybe ... Brains? Definitely not!

Some others

There are others who could almost be forgiven for their tailgating, however, the risks are not diminished and in some cases could be greater.

Maybe the tailgater is rushing to an emergency, perhaps with a pregnant wife on board.

Or it could be a dreamer who is driving that way because he/she has just received some life changing news.

Then there are the advanced drivers who take up an 'attack position' prior to overtaking, but who leave less than the recommended absolute minimum one-second gap. These drivers are keen on road safety but have somehow missed the point!

It helps to recognise that whatever is happening in the mind of the driver behind it's not personal - the other drivers don't know you, all they see is some idiot in front who is in the way - if these drivers were to glance at the sat-nav estimated time of arrival they would see that it doesn't change whether they are 10 car lengths behind or 50 and that there is virtually no change even if they overtake 20 cars! They are simply stuck in their own blinkered worlds.

Solutions?

The first thing to consider is whether or not you are causing or aggravating the tailgating situation. I don't want to be impolite...

But are you a 'road hog'?

While there is no excuse for the dangerous practice of tailgating, some might argue that there are sometimes mitigating circumstances.

Do you drive too slowly on open roads?

No one expects you to drive like Lewis Hamilton; however, it is reasonable to expect drivers to make progress on today's busy roads. If you are enjoying a day out in the country, or are simply in a mellow mood, pull over from time-to-time and allow others to pass.

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Perhaps you're a 'speed cop'?

Some drivers take it upon themselves to enforce the speed limits. An example of this is the motorway driver who sits in lane three at 70mph when there are opportunities to move back into lane two (It's your neck!).

Just plain lazy?

Many drivers sit for prolonged periods in lane-two of the motorway, presumably because it's too much trouble to move back to lane-one. This behaviour can be frustrating for any following driver, but is especially so for truck drivers who lack power and need to maintain their momentum, especially on uphill gradients. By modifying your own behaviour you can do a lot to reduce the risk posed by tailgaters. However, there will always be times when you are innocent but still feel harassed.

What are your options?

If you are faced with a tailgater there are various courses of action that you can take to deal with the situation...

Just grin and bear it

The first and most obvious choice is to grin and bear it - in other words: do nothing.

While the fact that you do not get annoyed by the driver behind might show great strength of character, it still leaves you vulnerable if the car ahead stops suddenly; even if you can stop safely, the following driver is almost bound to hit you.

Teach him a lesson!

A common reaction by many people is to brake sharply in an attempt to 'teach the following driver lesson'. Other drivers will touch the brake pedal lightly to illuminate the brake lights without slowing the car down. On the face of it, this second option might seem like a good idea - after all, you are simply giving the driver a wake-up call. However, you could provoke a road rage incident with disastrous consequences; it's also possible that driver behind could over react causing someone to slam into the back of his car.

Speed up to escape

Never a good idea!

By speeding up you are decreasing your forward safety gap when there is a car in front. If you are on an open road you are at risk of driving blindly into danger without enough space to stop in an emergency. Added to this, there is a strong chance that the following driver will simply speed up with you; you will then have a situation where you are travelling faster, still being tailgated, and not paying sufficient attention to the road ahead because you are distracted by the tailgater!

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Double your forward safety gap

This is often cited as the solution for the tailgating problem. But even this solution carries a degree of potential risk.

While the extra gap ahead will allow both you and your follower to stop safely, it could provoke erratic overtaking manoeuvres as the follower sees his gap! This is particularly dangerous where visibility is restricted or in double white line systems.

The best solution?

Perhaps the best solution is one that was, as far as we know, devised by fleet safety expert Dave Nickerson.

Dave suggests that you should simply add one second to your forward safety gap.

By easing back gently and opening the gap ahead you will create more time and space in an emergency.

The extra second will allow time for you to spread your braking in order to give the following driver time to react. You can then slow down and open your forward gap to double, or greater, when a safe overtaking opportunity arises.

By simply opening your forward gap by a second it reduces the risk of erratic overtaking - especially important where there are double white lines or there is a restricted view.

Let them pass ... If the driver stays behind, slow down further or pull in and allow him to pass. I would, however, suggest that you leave out the 'cheery wave' as he drives by!

Finally, keep in mind the fact that you are not there to pass judgment. We all know that drivers who follow too close are dangerous, but remember that there are many reasons for tailgating. Your job is to stay safe for the sake of yourself and your loved ones when the situation arises. If you feel angry about the situation, note the registration number of the offending vehicle and report it to the police - at least that way you'll still be alive to complain when they tell you that they are unable to take any action!

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