

An Educational Programme for Aggressive Drivers

An Alternative Penalty for Road Rage in Belgium

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Introduction

In recent years, considerable attention has been paid in newspapers, and recently also on the internet, to all types of conflicts between road users. Sometimes the attention has focussed on unpleasant or indecent gestures, sometimes aggressive driving behaviour (tailgating, flashing headlights, deliberate obstruction, ...) and in some exceptional situations there is physical violence with 'assault and battery' or even homicide.

For the public, these facts are very frightening:

- Most people don't understand the nature of these conflicts: it seems absurd ... a very strong reaction to a simple mistake in traffic.
- it can happen to everyone. No one is safe against road rage. You can't protect yourself.
- mostly the attacks are life-threatening.

Therefore the Belgian federal government has decided to react thoroughly against this new form of violent crime. The policy is to react seriously to each complaint, to use summary jurisdiction in certain courts and to punish violators severely. A specific bill against aggressive driving has been introduced in parliament recently.

In this context, the Belgian Road Safety Institute (IBSR-BIVV) organises an alternative legal penalty for this type of traffic offender. This measure can be forced at the level of the Public Prosecutor (via penal mediation) - there is in this case neither legal action, nor a police record; or at the level of the Correctional Court (Probation) - the judges pronounce an imprisonment which can be replaced by or completed with such a course.

General Idea behind the Programme

Practical conditions

- The programme contains 20 hours of group work (usually two full days and two evenings during 2 or 3 weeks).
- A group exists of minimum 6 and maximum 10 participants.
- Depending on the number of participants, there are 1 or 2 group workers with psychological training to guide the activities.

Objectives

The general objective is to prevent recidivism in aggressive behaviour in traffic, regarding 'assault and battery' but also regarding other forms of aggressive behaviour like gestures, verbal remarks, and aggressive driving (like tailgating, deliberately obstructing ...).

At a practical level this means:

- to make the offender aware of his behaviour in the sense that he recognises the physical and emotional damage from of his behaviour (I'm responsible for my actions)
- to make the offender aware of all the stimuli that interfere in the developmental process of his aggressive conduct
- to learn the offender alternative behaviour to cope with stress and frustration in traffic (I'm can cope with stress and frustration in traffic)
- to modify his attitude with respect to traffic safety (I'm more aware of other people in traffic and I will be a more social driver)

Of course we must agree that this educational measure is not a therapy. Not all these objectives are attained after 4 sessions. In fact, we slightly touch each objective. It is considered as an initiation, a beginning, a first step in the process to modify traffic behaviour. We encourage the participants to take more responsibility for their own behaviour and to change risky behaviour. We show them alternatives and directions to do so.

Basic methods

Working in a group offers plenty of opportunities. Confrontation of experiences, thoughts and situations of other offenders gives a wider perspective. The powerful group dynamics offers more possibilities for self-awareness and motives to take action.

It is up to the group leader to encourage the communication between group members. For doing this, there are a few general guidelines:

- The group worker plays a rather neutral role in all the discussions. He can't make judgements about the conduct of the participants in traffic. He only gives his reflections and asks further questions.
- Talking in general terms is not allowed. In the group one can only speak about his own situation, his own feelings, thoughts, etc. Attention is given to the style of communication. Can we listen to each other? Do we speak about ourselves? Also, all the factual information, for example about stress, aggressiveness, or traffic safety must be immediately linked with one's own experiences.
- It is very important that all the participants are involved in the activities and discussions. Therefore it is necessary to pay a lot of attention to the general atmosphere. Sometimes we use specific activities to create a more relaxed, and open atmosphere.

Within this group dynamic framework we also use some specific techniques and principles of cognitive behaviour modification theories, such as:

- basic ideas from the Rational Emotive Therapy (Elise)
- Cognitive restructuring (Feuerstein)

General Structure of the Programme

During the course all exercises and actions are centred around three main issues:

- dismantlement of the psychological defence mechanism
- realisation and modification of the underlying attitudes and mentality
- coping with stress, especially in traffic situations

We don't work in a linear way, but more like a spiral. This means that the various themes (see aims and objectives of the course) return again and again, each time on a more fundamental level as the course progress. With each step we come nearer to the very personal level of each participant.

In the following we will explain the three issues in more detail.

- dismantlement of the defences

When the participants arrive at the course, they are not really motivated. For them the course is a penalty and they regard it as an unlawful demand from the prosecutor. As a matter of fact, they feel that they are being pushed to change their behaviour, but they have at the same time the idea that their reaction at the time of the incident was very natural and normal.

In the beginning the participants' defences are very strong and general. They express it like:

I have done nothing wrong!

It wasn't my fault! It is the other one who is to blame...

I can't change my normal way of living... it's my nature...

During the course we see some progressive evolution. In general, we can distinguish between several phases:

1. I have done nothing wrong
2. The things that I did are not so bad
3. I understand that I did something wrong, but it is normal ...
4. I don't want to do it again ... I will avoid certain situations
5. I will change my behaviour

The importance of changing their initial feelings lies in the fact that one can only modify his behaviour if he also take responsibility for it.

In what way can we reach this goal?

☞ First of all, and most important: the group leader should not make any judgement on the participants' behaviour or situation. He should accept their feelings and also their defences. At the beginning of the course, 'bad behaviour or habits' are not focused; we take a more general and neutral position. And they wonder: Are you not afraid of us? You take me as a human and not as a criminal!

☞ The course is introduced as a possibility to think and to discuss about the problems in traffic and the participants' traffic habits, and not as a therapy to learn new and more adapted behaviour. In other words: there is no pressure to change.

☞ We have developed certain exercises to make the participants more aware of the consequences of their behaviour:

- ◇ exercises concerning 'role taking'
 - ◇ working with examples and viewing the situations from different points of view
 - ◇ to make an inventory of all the situations in traffic that can make people angry or stressed and see the influence of other drivers' behaviour on their own conduct.
- ◇ to unravel the chain of causes and effects that has led to their 'offence'. It is our conviction that the offence is a result of several interdependent events which, step by step, lead to the ultimate action. The actor himself creates a certain atmosphere with his thoughts, his choices in behaviour, places and circumstances, (for a more theoretical point of view we refer to the different behaviour models for addiction and sexual offences). Together with the participants we try to reconstruct his chain. For most of them it is really a discovery to see that there are a lot of aspects that determine the offence. In the beginning of the course they have only a clear view on the last step: the fight, the direct cause. A more difficult step is to make them understand that they carry their responsibility in all these little steps. The most important question is: at which point prevention would have been possible. In other words: when could the actor have made another choice, taken a different direction to interrupt the obvious development to the offence.

- Detection of the underlying attitudes and mentality concerning the aggressive behaviour and his driving behaviour in general.

For most participants their own behaviour and especially their thoughts, opinions and attitude are most evident, natural, and obvious.

For example:

- reacting with violence is a natural and logical reaction to frustration and obstruction. The participants have no problem with it. For them it seems rather problematic when you don't react with violence. A question we receive frequently is: 'Have you never hit anyone?'
- To the participants their car is a very special thing. It is not only a vehicle for transportation but also a symbol of power, freedom, personality that gives the owner a certain status.
- In the participants' behaviour the phenomenon of the self-fulfilling prophecy plays an important role. 'When I think that people will get angry, I see only the stimuli which indicate a certain hostility.'

To become aware of these processes, and of course, to discover that other persons have different kinds of ideas and attitudes is a very important experience. A second step in this process is to realise that probably some of our ideas are not logical or make things more difficult for ourselves.

Techniques to realise these objectives are:

☞ projective techniques like

⇒ discussion of advertisements

- ⇒ 'make a dream car'
- ⇒ 'consider your car as an animal'

- ☞ games in which you must choose a certain position and give arguments about it.
- ☞ philosophical discussions about values and standards
- ☞ 'Rational Emotive Thinking', a technique used in more cognitive behavioural therapy by Ellis.

- Coping with stress

The participants have a lot of stressing events in their live. First, they don't recognise it. They believe that by not thinking about it, the stress will disappear. But when we gain their confidence and we unravel the chain of events,... they agree they have a lot of stress.

A second step in this issue concerns coping in general. What are the different ways to cope with stress and problems?

After this theoretical survey we try to apply these coping strategies to situations in traffic; e.g. we have a list of possible solutions and we discuss it or even train them.

Evaluation

Since September 1996 we have had 52 participants to our programme. There were 50 men and only 2 women.

- what kind of offences have they committed?

| offence | % |
|---------------------|----|
| assault and battery | 85 |
| verbal aggression | 9 |
| material damage | 6 |

- What are the comments of the participants after the course?
 - the most important experience during the course is to hear and realise that other people think differently about things, about the offence itself and about traffic in general
 - to talk about the problems and to discuss with each other to look for solutions rather than receive a warning or a 'lesson' from the 'teacher' is a stimulus to think further and even to change a little bit
 - some participants say that they get a better understanding of their own behaviour, and
 - that they have learned more possibilities to cope with frustration and stress in traffic; especially they have learned to put things into perspective.

- What are the future challenges with this type of course?
 - The course is a first step, not a whole therapy. Twenty hours is not enough to really change or learn new behaviour. We can only reach a hand out, put everything into the right perspective and provide experiences and ideas to think about.
 - We must look for a better selection, or more practical criteria to eliminate certain participants from the course. For example, people with severe aggression problems cannot be helped with our course, and in that case a more therapeutic intervention is needed. But how can we know this at the beginning? Where is the limit?
 - We must develop many more exercises so that we can make a good choice based on the problems and attitudes of the participants.