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A formula for stress-free driving

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News
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For Dubai's motorists, the New Year has not begun well. First, the unexpected visit from President Bush, bringing instant gridlock to a city still not mentally accepting of urban traffic crawl.

Then the equally unaccustomed sight of Shaikh Zayed and Emirates Roads partially flooded during exceptionally heavy rainfall. And then the UAE road-accident figures for 2007, one of the worst in the world - 829 deaths and more than 10,000 injuries - a most unwelcome symptom of increasing traffic jams and driver frustration, in this fast-expanding emirate.

To you, all of this may look like something new and unnatural on your horizon. To me, as a UK-based stress consultant, it is something depressingly familiar and inevitable. So perhaps this is the moment for me to offer you my little rule-of-thumb guide to stress management on the road. It takes the form of a simple acronym - S.A.F.E.

S is for SURE. Be sure of your vehicle, sure of your itinerary, and sure of your own fitness to drive. Stress builds up especially when you're driving an unfamiliar vehicle, either new or borrowed. So take trouble to check all the features, especially those that you need in an emergency. And when someone else is having to familiarise themselves with new controls, don't raise the tension by standing over them, expressing impatience.

A is for ACCEPTING. This is an underlying philosophy which takes the heat out of many potentially stressful situations at the wheel. It is to accept that you are not master of the road, and that your journey will always be influenced by conditions you can't change. You can't stop it raining. You can't stop your children grumbling. You can't speed up that traffic jam as you approach the bridge to cross the creek. So - don't get excited or agitated - it will not get you there any faster.

F is for FOCUSED. A driver's first duty is to concentrate on the road. Even under perfect conditions, mistakes can be made. So when the car is full of distractions like music, quiz-games or long-running arguments with the children, driving errors can happen. Equally, the sheer familiarity of the same daily route may cause loss of concentration. To stay focused, try to make a habit of ignoring distractions, and make sure you're properly nourished and exercised and take breaks on long journeys.

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Olympics 2008

E is for EGO-FREE. Your car reflects your ego, and this lies behind many reckless actions on the road - trying to live up to that macho image, and wanting to hit back at any insults to your dignity or driving skills. Ego can be a major stressor, and you will do better to practise remaining calm and not rising to challenges that can spiral into fatal accidents.

Four little letters that may keep you safe by helping to set up the right kind of atmosphere in your car, as you learn to combat the growing pressures of driving in Dubai.




Good luck!

Key points: Safe drive

- Dubai's traffic congestion and high accident rate is predictable.
- Constant pressure on the road leads to harmful stress for drivers.
- Be Sure, Accepting, Focused and Ego-free.

- *The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.*

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