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COMMENT AND ANALYSIS

**Role of stress in road accidents**

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News  
Published: July 29, 2008, 00:04

The startling rise of almost 50 per cent in fatal road accidents in the first half of this year in Ras Al Khaimah provoked an announcement by the Traffic and Licensing Department which I found almost as startling.

It said, as Gulf News reported earlier this month, that drivers were especially preoccupied with rising prices and responsibilities, at a time when the number of vehicles on the road had risen faster than ever. In other words, it attributed the problem to stress.

As a professional stress consultant, it is normally my job to try and put this message across to officialdom, often with difficulty.

Now we have an enlightened civil servant leading this discussion - and readers of Gulf News have been quick to respond with their own views in a lively public correspondence.



To me, these readers' letters were most revealing. They were written by people experiencing for the first time two things that are long-familiar to us in the United Kingdom - price inflation and traffic congestion.

Both of these have a huge potential for raising stress-levels.

In both cases, they threaten those 'fixed points' by which we take our bearings in life.

This can leave us in a permanent state of anxiety, dreading possible further escalation of the problem, as reflected in many of the letters.

**Daily preoccupations**

The first thing I noticed was people's tendency to list a lot of daily

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Traffic Watch

preoccupations, which are mainly financial pressures.

One of them says "Rent, bank instalments, credit card payments, family maintenance..." Another mentions "Personal loan, car loan, parking fee, house rent..."

This shows inflation as a many-headed monster that can occupy the mind - day and night.

One reader said that his rent took half his salary. Two others said they might have to leave the country.

Clearly this degree of worry can make you less alert at the wheel and therefore lead to accidents.

Other readers figured-out that traffic congestion makes you late, and therefore more inclined to take risks in order to catch up.

Well, none of these reasons excuses reckless driving behaviour on the road.

As I pointed out in this column a few months ago, it takes a good deal of emotional maturity to realise that the road is not our private driveway, but a section of society on the move in a communal road system.

I couldn't help wondering whether one or two of these readers might have caused a 'near miss' incident on the road, and then gone into denial about their own responsibility - by trying to assume some kind of victim status.

At any rate, they should pay heed to those other readers who robustly dismissed these 'lame excuses' and reminded us that road-deaths are in many occasions caused simply by selfish and reckless drivers, who unfortunately can be found all over the world.

However in the UAE, because traffic congestion is a comparatively new phenomenon, many drivers may be still unaware of both safety and the law.

*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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