

# **If only we were all driven by some Loving Kindness**

**By Ruth Ostrow**

DURING a bad patch in my life, I did a meditation and healing retreat for three days. The training focused on how to calm the nerves and lower blood pressure by imagining peaceful harmonious things, and by saying certain words to still the mind.

Like the hilarious Seinfeld episode where the characters all run around uttering ``Serenity Now! Serenity Now!``, ours was something equally saccharine. By memory it was ``Loving Kindness! Loving Kindness!``, which we sent to friend and foe.

I left the course like a cult victim, walking around with a beatific smile, dazed and feeling incredibly tolerant of all that was happening around me. When things seemed a little disturbing, like the fact that someone had used my computer in my absence, I purred in a detached fashion and handled things sweetly.

I was a ball of glowing generosity for days. And then came the big test, my Achilles heel -- driving. Loving Kindness! Loving Kindness! I whispered to the unfair traffic light, Loving Kindness! to the driver in front crawling along like a snail in the pouring rain, Loving Kindness! to myself as I noticed the irritation rising in my stomach.

Then screech went the breaks, my car skidding madly, as the car in front decided in a split-second to take a car spot. The most horrible vile sounds filled the air. And before you could say Loving Kindness! I realised that the vile expletives were coming out of my own mouth.

My loving self watched powerlessly as my arm unwound the window, my head reached out and belched five days of pure suppressed anger. When it was over and the other driver had driven off in terror, I felt a calm peacefulness descend on my person. Loving Kindness! I said, smiling to myself and driving away feeling better than I had for days.

But apparently the calm I felt was just an illusion.

As some may have read, a new study published in The New England Journal of Medicine based on bedside interviews with heart attack survivors has found that these survivors spent more time on the road in the days preceding their attack than normal.

The stress caused by incidences such as mine, where blood pressure rises, veins constrict, and fight-or-flight hormones are produced, has long been believed to lead to strokes, heart attacks and other illnesses, which is precisely why I did the relaxation course.

Now scientists have found that sitting in traffic alone nearly triples the risk of suffering a heart attack -- and that's even before the fisticuffs and road rage. There is considerable debate about why driving can lead to heart attacks. Whilst traditionalists like Harvey Hecht, the director of preventative cardiology at Beth Israel Medical Centre in New York, solely blame the emotional stress of road travel for ill health (citing the proven toxic effects of anger), others disagree.

Apparently, in 2002 a report published in British medical journal The Lancet, found that people living near major roads in the Netherlands had double the risk

of dying of a cardio-pulmonary disease, whilst other studies found an increased risk of cardiovascular problems among traffic cops and those whose jobs required them to be on or near roads.

Peter Stone, an associate professor at Harvard University, said recently in The New York Times that drivers are likely to experience far more frustration than cyclists or bus passengers, yet they all face similar risks.

Traffic poses a risk regardless of the mode of transportation. Heart attacks are three times more common for people stuck in cars just before the attacks, and for those stalled in traffic on public transportation, and four times greater for those on a bicycle.

Thus whilst researchers are unclear of the exact cause of the increase in heart attacks after exposure to traffic, Stone believes air pollution to be a big contributor. It seems pollution from traffic can influence plaque build-up along the walls of arteries creating clots that block the flow of blood and set off heart attacks, or at least cause disturbed heart rhythms and increased inflammation. Whether it's the bad driver in front, the annoying delays, or the revolting air, being on the road clearly causes profound stress to the body.

And perhaps it's time for some public rather than personal Loving Kindness around the matter. It would be great to see tougher regulations on emissions from car exhausts. Great also to see a stricter education process for bad drivers. But best of all would be to see the introduction of little horns that do more than honk rudely. I rather fancy horns that have several sounds, so you can let people know you're running late for collecting kids, or looking for a parking spot and might stop suddenly, or pre-menstrual and dangerous.

We have to think laterally if we are to be saved from the most dangerous roadside emissions of all -- the harmful toxins that spewed from my mouth recently, which are bad for everyone's heart!

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