Understanding the Danger

There’s an adjustment period after coming home from deployment. Everyone has different experiences and some of those experiences can stay with us for life. Especially with driving, it’s important to realize that techniques used while deployed can be very dangerous on our domestic roadways.

Returning Vets Have More At-Fault Accidents

In 2010, the Department of Veterans Affairs noticed that service members returning from deployment were getting into more traffic accidents. To better understand the situation, we conducted a study in 2012 that focused on accident trends among service members before and after deployment. The study revealed a 13% overall increase in at fault accidents in the first six months after deployment. The increase ranged from 12% to 36% depending on the number of deployments a service member had.

Finding a Solution

Since USAA has served the military community for more than 90 years, we are uniquely positioned to help draw attention to this problem and join with others to see what can be done to address it. We worked with researchers, academics and veterans to create a tool that helps you think about your driving behaviors and suggests simple ways to help you handle them.

Since returning home, does your loved one tend to drive too fast or too slow?

During deployments, speed limits are set by the base or post commander. Back home, it may take time to adjust to posted speed limits.

To help improve control when speeding is an issue:

- Each time a speed limit sign is posted, say the speed limit out loud and check current speed.
- Use cruise control if road conditions make it safe to do so.
- Consider how little time is saved by speeding.

Tell yourself things like:

- “Military members are supposed to be role models.”
- “Speeding puts you and everyone around you in danger.”

When driving too slowly is an issue:

- Ride with someone as a passenger for awhile to get used to highway speeds.
- Start off driving slowly in a neighborhood and then move to other areas to build speed gradually.

For example:

- Start driving on residential roads that have a speed limit of 25 to 35 mph.
- As you gain confidence, add multi lane roads with a higher speed limit of 35 to 40 mph.
- Progress to roads and highways with a 45 to 60 mph speed limit.
- Finally, drive multi lane highways with a 60 to 70 mph speed limit once the slower roads are comfortable to drive.
Does your loved one avoid using a seatbelt?

Wearing a seatbelt over combat gear can be uncomfortable and restrictive, so many service members get in the habit of not wearing one. Some even remove the seatbelt from the vehicle completely, saying that they’d rather be thrown free in a crash than risk being trapped.

With everything a service member survives in combat, it would be a tragedy to get injured due to not wearing a seatbelt. Research shows that being thrown from a vehicle has a much higher risk of causing serious injuries to the brain and spinal cord. Wearing a seatbelt properly keeps the driver in a position where other safety features, like airbags, can work.

If not wearing a seatbelt is an issue:
- Remember that wearing it is a strong way to model safety for kids and other passengers.
- Put a reminder note in the car — somewhere it won’t be missed, like on the steering wheel or dashboard.
- Give passengers permission to say something like “Everybody buckle up,” or “I’m putting on my seatbelt. Does everyone else have theirs?” when they get into the car.
- Before every trip say out loud, “First thing to do is buckle up.”

If wearing a seatbelt causes anxiety:
*With the car stopped and seatbelt on, take 3 or 4 minutes to:
- Sit so that the seat fully supports the back, feet are flat on the floor and eyes are shut.
- Take a few deep breaths and try some muscle relaxation exercises.
- Be reminded that the seatbelt is an important part of your safety.

Does your loved one seem anxious or on high alert when driving near parked cars and curbside debris?

In combat, parked cars and curbside debris can hide IEDs and insurgent attackers so it’s natural to stay as far away as possible. At home, that may turn into straddling the center line or driving on the far left side of the right lane.

To help improve control in these situations:
- Focus on the car ahead or on the white line near the right shoulder to reinforce where to be in the lane. *Say out loud what the curbside objects are to reinforce that they aren’t a risk. For example:*
  - “This is just neighborhood parking. I’m fine.”
  - “It’s trash day. There’s no need to move over.”
Does your loved one get nervous in construction zones or are they easily startled by common road noises?

For service members in a combat zone, loud noises often signal danger nearby. This creates a heightened sensitivity to loud noises, which may continue to trigger an automatic response.

To help improve control in these situations:

Find ways to reduce external noises and then gradually lessen those efforts. For instance:

- Drive with the windows up.
- Play some relaxing music and sing along.
- Choose roads that have less traffic.
- Say what the noise is and where it’s coming from to support the idea that it isn’t a risk.
  - “There’s construction here and I may hear a jackhammer. I’m OK.”
  - “It was just a rock that hit my windshield. Everything is fine.”
  - “A nearby car just backfired. There’s no danger.”
- When possible, travel in civilian clothes and change on base in order to separate yourself from the military mindset.
- Use an air freshener that has a relaxing scent like vanilla and cinnamon. Seriously, this helps!

Does your loved one seem anxious or uncomfortable in traffic jams, between cars or stopped at lights and stop signs?

In combat it’s normal to keep moving, no matter what was there to slow you down. Here in the U.S., traffic jams, stop signs and stop lights can bring on a lot of anxiety, causing some service members to drive through stops or into the median or shoulder to get away from traffic.

To help improve control in these situations:

- Put a photo, a drawing done by someone special or a simple phrase like “Keep cool” on the steering wheel or dashboard so it’s easy to see.
- Choose routes and times where traffic jams are less likely to occur.
- Ask passengers to announce that a stop light or stop sign is coming.
- Travel at or below the speed limit to allow plenty of time for a smooth stop.
- Tell yourself things like:
  - “We’re all in this traffic jam together.”
  - “There’s no rush and no benefit to the few seconds I’d save,” when approaching a yellow light.
  - “I need to set an example for others,” when at a stop.
Does your loved one focus too much on things like pedestrians and other drivers instead of on the road ahead?

Some service members may have to relearn civilian driving habits and figure out what’s dangerous and what isn’t. Service members often learned to be hyper-vigilant with everything around them in a combat zone.

- Know the difference between helpful and harmful focus habits. Helpful habits need to be reinforced with regular practice.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>It’s helpful to focus on:</th>
<th>It can be harmful to excessively focus on:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tail lights and turn signals</td>
<td>People talking on mobile phones at the curb or on the sidewalk.</td>
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<tr>
<td>on the car ahead.</td>
<td>Drivers of nearby vehicles.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pavement markings.</td>
<td>Accident scenes.</td>
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<td>Street signs and traffic lights.</td>
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Reduce distractions inside the car by:

- Keeping conversations to a minimum.
- Putting the phone away so it isn’t a temptation.
- Not eating or drinking while driving.

Have you noticed that your loved one gets nervous or anxious around road kill, potholes and other objects in the road?

Service members learn that road debris and uneven places in the pavement can hide dangerous IEDs. Drivers may have swerved away from road kill or potholes as a protective response, but sudden moves like that can be dangerous here.

To help improve control in these situations:

- Say what the object is and have a plan ready for how to handle it. For example, try a phrase like “There’s a pothole ahead and I need to straddle it to avoid damaging my car.”
- Focus on the car ahead to reinforce where to be in the lane.
- Know the road conditions before driving. If they’re under construction or heavily damaged, try a different route.
Does your loved one appear uneasy driving through or near tunnels and underpasses?

Special precautions were taken around tunnels and underpasses because they were places where insurgents could be waiting. Often this meant driving erratically and changing lanes inside a tunnel, which is a behavior that may have carried over into driving at home.

**To help improve control in these situations:**
- Review the route before leaving so that coming across a tunnel or underpass isn’t a surprise.
  
  *When approaching a tunnel or underpass, use a reminder statement like:*
  - “At home, these things are safe.”
  - “There’s no one trying to hurt us.”
  - “No threat, no sweat.”
  - “Keep right!”
- Consider using a different route to avoid tunnels and underpasses.

Do you feel uncomfortable riding in the car with your loved one?

Driving is very personal, and it’s easy to take offense when someone has negative comments about it or doesn’t want to be a passenger.

**To help improve control in these situations:**
- Avoid anger and making excuses for the behavior — the person is just concerned about everyone’s safety
  
  *Ask questions to understand specific driving behaviors that are worrisome. When having this conversation:*
  - Set guidelines about when to bring up concerns.
  - Find a quiet time outside of the car to address the issue.
  - Agree on one or two behaviors that will be a priority to work on.
  - Avoid minimizing their concerns.
- See more tips for having this type of conversation at the end of this driving guide.
Do you feel like your loved one has a hard time controlling anger behind the wheel?

After coming home, some service members find driving frustrating. They may feel that driving laws or common rules of the road unreasonably limit them, that the behavior of other drivers puts their family at risk or they may see other drivers getting away with traffic violations. Because of this, service members may exhibit driving behaviors that are dangerous for themselves and their passengers.

To help improve control in these situations:
- Keep the windows rolled up on crowded highways and in other tense situations to limit the likelihood of yelling at other drivers.
- Put a photo, a drawing done by someone special or a simple phrase like “Keep cool” on the steering wheel or dashboard so it’s easy to see in stressful situations.
- Listen to the concerns that passengers may have and take a look at the “How to Talk About It” section at the end of this driving guide.
- Let passengers drive if they ask.

Use reminder statements such as:
- “Driving aggressively does not protect my kids or spouse. It actually puts them in danger.”
- “When there’s a dangerous driver on the road, the safest place to be is well behind them.”

Avoid using “should statements” such as:
- “Other drivers should respect my right to be in the left lane.”
- “Other drivers should give me more road space.”
- Recognize that if there’s anger on the road, there could be anger off the road, too. It may be helpful to talk with someone in a peer network or at a treatment facility.

Changing Habits
In combat it was important to learn certain driving techniques to stay safe. On the homefront, it’s equally important to recognize which of those habits can be dangerous so it’s easier to figure out the habits that need to be reversed.

How to Talk About It
If you’re looking for a way to talk to a returning service member about their driving, consider these tips:
- Stay calm. They may be going through a lot.
- It’s all about timing. Avoid making comments about their driving while you’re in the car. Choose a quiet time at home to bring up any concerns.
- Be specific. If you have a concern, talk about the situation and behavior in detail.
- Ask for the driver’s thoughts on the situation. Hearing it from them can help you understand their reaction.
- Ask if you can share your thoughts about what happened.
- Talk about things you can both do to control or reduce the behavior.