

# Car accident therapy

• BATYA L. LUDMAN

**W**orking at my desk, my concentration was broken by a loud bang. Running outside, shouting to my daughter to call the police, I sensed this was no small accident.

I got outside just as a mother and daughter were emerging from one car, and a man across the street was getting out of another. The woman, barreling down the street, and the man, backing out of a driveway, collided. The woman lost control of her car, crossed the road, smashed into my parked car and came to a stop after hitting my neighbor's car. It was a miracle no one was physically injured.



**REMAINING CALM** and restoring a sense of equilibrium is essential after a car accident, when your body goes into 'fight or flight' mode. (TNS)

Given that motor vehicle accidents (MVA) are such a frequent occurrence in this country, we have so many potential miracles to be thankful for; sadly, most of us are too busy or too angry to take notice. While one can't change the fact that the accident happened, one can definitely reduce the traumatic impact it has – both at that moment and for the future.

It is precisely because this accident was handled so well that I believe it can serve as a model for appropriate and healthy responses on the road. It was a surprising moment, really: Four cars seriously damaged, yet all involved remained surprisingly calm.

With so many MVAs in our small country, learning how to cope effectively both before and after a situation arises can be a matter of life and death. The first goal

is prevention; the second, to minimize physical and emotional harm.

An MVA, no matter how serious, can be potentially traumatic; if dealt with poorly, it can result in symptoms far exceeding the original medical concerns. By the time those involved reach my office as patients, they are often displaying signs of post-traumatic stress. Those who return to driving may be anxious or hyper-vigilant, with panic attacks, sleep disruption, pain, nightmares, intrusive thoughts, headaches, anger outbursts, depression and more.

Some clients refuse to ever drive again and suffer tremendously, even as passengers. Others have lost their jobs or have dealt with subsequent marital and family issues, and feel scarred for life, even if physically all their wounds seem to be healed.

With so much happening so quickly and unexpectedly, an MVA can overwhelm the nervous system, leaving one feeling out of control and unable to cope.

Running out of the house that day, my first concern was to ensure no one was physically injured. In spite of airbags inflating and debris scattered across the road, at that moment no one seemed hurt, or if so, not seriously.

The next step is what I believe changed the entire response of all participants in the accident. Trained in emotional first aid, I was able to go over to every person in turn: the mom, her nine-year-old daughter, the man, his wife who came out from the house, and our neighbor – all in some degree of shock – and focus them on the key issue. With no one seemingly hurt, I looked each one in the eyes and said, "Thank God, no one is hurt. You are safe, you are OK; you will be OK and everyone is OK."

Reassuring the injured reorients them and lets them know that at this particular moment, they are – or will be – OK and are being cared for. It gives their nervous system, which just got a jolt – physically and mentally – time to slow down, regain a state of calm and settle naturally. This first step helps them focus on what is important, keeps them in the present moment and most crucially, helps the healing process begin.

The purpose here is to give your body the necessary time to recover from the normal flight/fright/freeze response that may have occurred upon impact. Your understanding of the body's response to a traumatic event and your subsequent actions and behavior will help determine the outcome. Your body literally needs this time to recalibrate, orient itself to what just happened, realize all is OK, then recover from the shock and adrenaline surge.

Emotional first aid focuses on the body in a way that promotes physical healing, through enabling one to slow things down, use techniques that promote relaxation, and work through

potentially traumatic events without becoming overwhelmed in the process. You can be trained to effectively heal yourself, and help others become more resilient and better cope with life's surprises.

With respect to prevention, I leave you with just a few thoughts:

1. Put yourself in the best emotional and physical state before starting the car. Fatigue, hunger, preoccupation, etc. can affect your driving. Take a few slow deep breaths, scan your body to ensure you're calm and relaxed, and only then start the car, in a mindful state. Red lights, rather than being stressful, can be seen as opportunities to take a few more relaxing breaths.

2. Model good driving habits. Teach your children early on that your car only starts when everyone is belted. Make helmets compulsory when cycling, and remember that electric bikes can be lethal.

3. Drive with both hands on the wheel and your entire focus on the road. Cell-phones are a dangerous distraction; use them appropriately, and don't multi-task.

4. Your teenager is checking out your behavior. Be polite, considerate and respectful of others. Teach your child to yield the right of way and never assume that just because it's "his turn," he can actually go. Teach him that drivers will cut him off, fail to signal, tailgate, toot their horn while the light is still yellow, pass on the shoulder and double-park. Don't drive illegally just because others do. Drive defensively.

5. Don't fight with anyone on the road; it just isn't worth it. People will scream, yell, gesture and get out of their car. Remember, road rage can kill.

6. Don't drink and drive, and don't let your children go into any car with a driver who does. Assure them you'll always drive them home or pay for transportation, no questions asked. Talk to your children about peer pressure and let them know their friends may be the death of them – literally. Make sure your child had a good night's sleep before getting behind the wheel. If you don't like your child's driving, take away the keys until you do.

7. Take a course in defensive driving and basic first aid. Get involved with the local citizen's watch, the traffic police and Magen David Adom.

Car accidents are not something we generally like to think about. While an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, it helps to know that your first response can potentially save lives. ■

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