



Webinar

# Guidance on Messaging to Avoid Psychological Reactance and Address Moral Disengagement

September 8, 2021 | 10 am PT, 11 am MT, Noon CT, 1 pm ET

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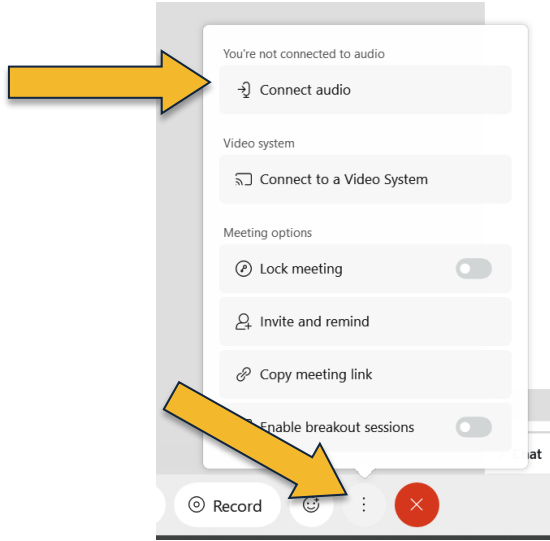
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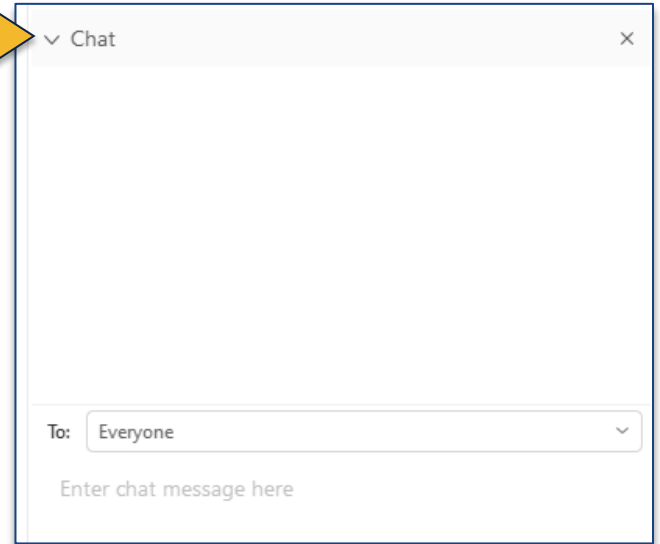
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Use the chat box to send questions. Please send questions to both panelists and host.



# About the Center for Health and Safety Culture

We are an interdisciplinary center serving communities and organizations through research, training, and guidance to cultivate healthy and safe cultures.

# Core Issues



Traffic Safety



Substance Misuse



Domestic Violence



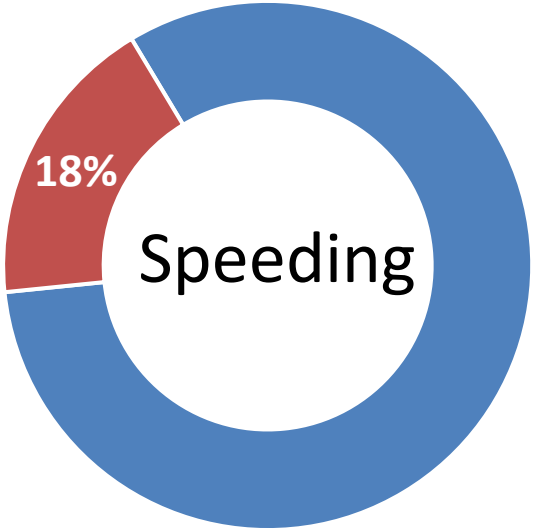
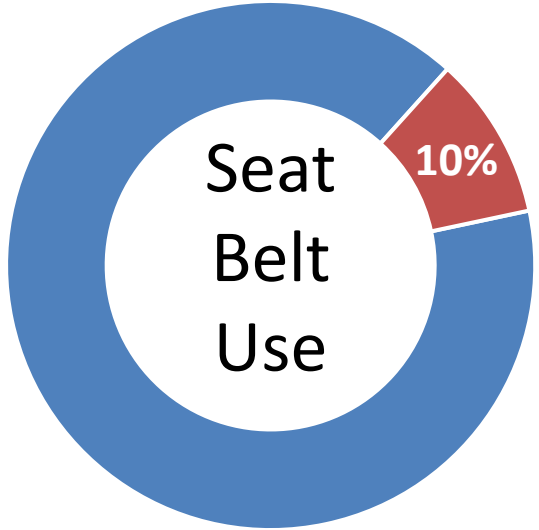
Child Wellbeing

# Quick Question

What percentage of people in your state use a seat belt?

(put your answer in the chat box)

# Challenge



National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. (2018, March). National Traffic Speeds Survey III: 2015 (Traffic Tech, Technology Transfer Series, Report No. DOT HS 812 489). Washington, DC.

National Center for Statistics and Analysis. (2019, December). Seat belt use in 2019 – Overall Results (Traffic Safety Facts Research Note. Report No. DOT HS 812 875). National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

# Purpose

- Determine if the prevalence of **psychological reactance** and **moral disengagement** are higher among adult drivers who never or rarely wear their seat belts or who drive aggressively (i.e., speed, follow too closely, and pass excessively)
- Identify potential messaging to minimize reactance and overcome moral disengagement regarding seat belt use and aggressive driving



# Agenda

- Define Psychological Reactance and Moral Disengagement
- What we learned from survey
- What we learned testing messages
- Resources
- Questions

# Psychological Reactance

**Psychological reactance** occurs when an individual feels their freedom or ability to choose is threatened.

- By a message, rule, policy, or a law
- Attempt to reinstate or restore some sense of their freedom
  - Discount information
  - Do the opposite

# Quick Question

Can you think of any contexts or situations  
(besides traffic safety)  
where psychological reactance may play a role?

(put your answer in the chat box)

# Psychological Reactance

## To Assess Psychological Reactance

- Trait Psychological Reactance (also called proneness)
  - Hong's Psychological Reactance Scale
- Create a situation and assess reaction (Situational Reactance)
  - Perception of Threat
  - Emotional Reaction

# Moral Disengagement

**Moral disengagement** occurs when an individual willingly

- disengages from their normal moral standards,
- overrides their self-regulatory processes, and
- acts contrary to their normal everyday code of behavior without guilt or regret.

# Moral Disengagement

## To assess moral disengagement

- Justifying unacceptable behavior as
  - socially or morally worthy (moral justification)
    - “It’s OK for me to speed because I won’t crash.”
  - comparing a negative behavior with an even worse behavior to make it appear less concerning (advantageous comparison)
    - “I might speed, but at least I don’t text and drive.”

# Moral Disengagement

Justifying unacceptable behavior by

- Using language that is benign or neutral to diminish the negative behavior (euphemistic labeling)
  - Tailgating is just “hurrying them along”
- Displacing responsibility
  - “We don’t have a primary seat belt law, so I don’t have to wear my seat belt.”

# Moral Disengagement

- Moral justification
- Advantageous comparison
- Euphemistic labeling
- Displacing responsibility
- Diffusion of responsibility
- Dehumanization
- Attribution of blame



# Quick Question

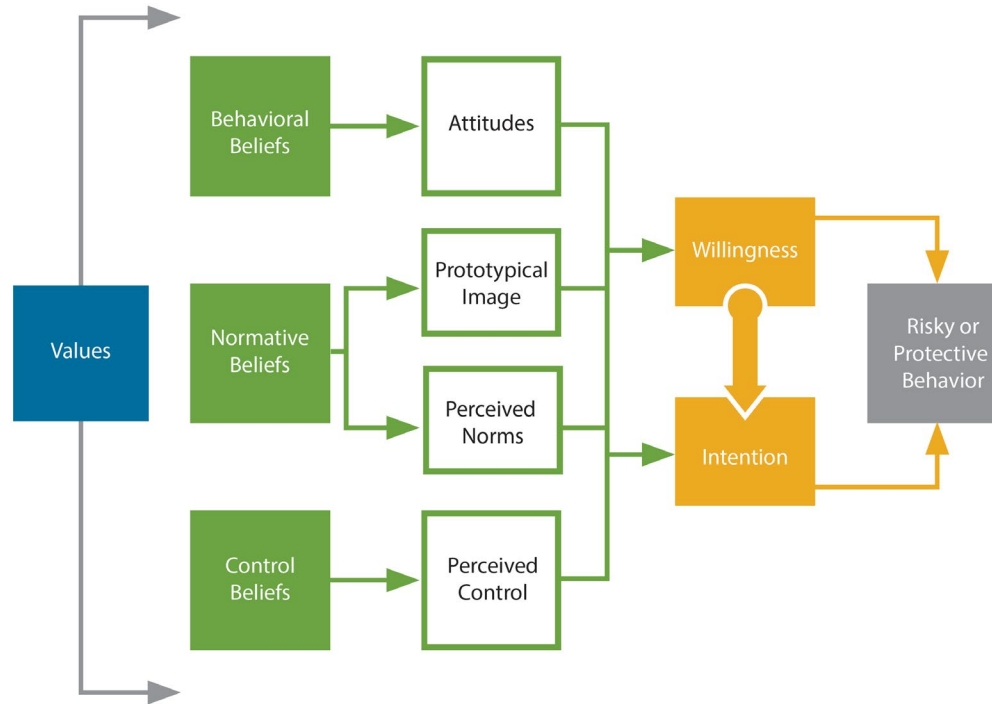
Can you think of any contexts or situations  
(besides traffic safety)  
where moral disengagement may play a role?

(put your answer in the chat box)

# Methods – Surveys (Phase 1)

- Developed surveys to assess
  - psychological reactance and moral disengagement
  - beliefs associated with (either) seat belt use or aggressive driving (following too closely, speeding, excessive passing)
- Recruited participants online who
  - Either usually/always used a seat belt OR rarely/never used a seat belt (n= 581)
  - Either usually/always drove aggressively OR rarely/never drove aggressively (n= 750)
- Conducted analyses to compare the groups

# Beliefs Based on a Behavioral Model



# Findings – Seat Belt Use

Those who rarely or never used a seat belt were found

- To exhibit more situational psychological reactance (in response to two messages about seat belt use)
- To exhibit more moral disengagement than people who usually or always used a seat belt.

No differences in proneness (i.e., trait) to psychological reactance were found based on seat belt use.

# Findings – Aggressive Driving

## Aggressive Driving

Those who frequently drove aggressively were found

- To exhibit more proneness and situational psychological reactance
- To exhibit more moral disengagement than people who rarely or never drove aggressively

# Methods – Surveys (Phase 2)

- Developed surveys to test reactions to various messages addressing seat belt use and aggressive driving
  - Assessed perception of strength and effectiveness of messages
- Recruited participants online who
  - Either usually/always OR rarely/never used a seat belt (n= 315, 365)
  - Either usually/always drove aggressively OR rarely/never drove aggressively (n= 386)
- Conducted analyses to explore their responses to different messages (perception of threat, emotional reaction, perceived effectiveness)

# Example Message

“We play important roles in the lives of many people. We are wives, husbands, partners, girlfriends, boyfriends, fathers, and mothers. And we are good friends...we are people that can be counted on.

Who are the important people who count on you in their life? What would it be like to choose to always use a seat belt for them? Did you know most people choose to protect themselves by always using a seat belt? And many people use a seat belt for someone else. Even if others in the vehicle are not. Who might you use a seat belt for?”

- Connecting to role with others
- Importance of protecting yourself
- Most people use a seat belt
- Choice language
- Being in control
- Asking questions (instead of making a demand)

# Findings – Message Testing

- Tested 3 messages against a “control” message
- Could not find any messages “that stood out”
- Testing was complicated by the current context
  - Fall of 2020
    - Competing survey efforts during Presidential Election
    - COVID-19 had interrupted “normal” driving patterns



# Stages of Change

1. **Precontemplation** – when people are not intending to take action in the near future (i.e., next six months).
2. **Contemplation** – when people are intending to change in the near future but are not ready to take action.
3. **Preparation** – when people are intending to take action in the immediate future (i.e., next 30 days).
4. **Action** – when people have taken specific steps or actions to change.
5. **Maintenance** – when people are working to prevent reverting back to the old behavior (sometimes referred to as a relapse).
6. **Termination** – when people have no temptation to revert back.

Prochaska, J. O., Johnson, S., & Lee, P. (2009). The Transtheoretical Model of behavior change. In (3rd ed), *The handbook of health behavior change* (pp. 59–83). Springer Publishing Company.

# Stages of Change – Seat Belt Use

Stage of Change “Which statement best describes you?”	Frequency
“I do not currently use a seat belt, and I have decided I will never use one.”	21%
“I do not currently use a seat belt, and I don’t really think about it.”	39%
“I do not currently use a seat belt, but sometimes I think about it.”	34%
“I do not currently use a seat belt, but I think I should use one.”	2%
“I have decided to use a seat belt, but I only use it occasionally.”	5%
“I use a seat belt every time I am in a vehicle.”	0%

Among respondents who never or rarely use a seat belt, n= 130

# Stages of Change – Aggressive Driving

“Consider the following behaviors: passing a vehicle which is driving about the posted speed limit, following so close to the vehicle in front that it might be difficult to stop in an emergency, and driving more than 10 mph over the speed limit on roads with speed limits between 35 mph and 50 mph.”

“Which statement best describes you?”	Frequency
“I currently do these driving behaviors, and I have decided I will continue to do them.”	54%
“I currently do these driving behaviors, and I have not thought about changing.”	15%
“I currently do these behaviors, but sometimes I think about changing / doing them less.”	16%
“I currently do these behaviors, but I think I should change / do them less.”	10%
“I have decided to not do these behaviors, but I still do them occasionally.”	5%
“I don’t do these behaviors.”	2%

Among respondents who never or rarely use a seat belt, n= 129

# Key Take-Aways

## Potential Message Content to Increase Seat Belt Use

- Using seat belts is a way to protect ourselves.
- Using seat belts sets a good example for our children.
- People are less likely to be seriously injured or killed if they always use a seat belt.
- Most people (in your community/at your workplace) use seat belts.
- Family/workplace rules about always using a seat belt increase use.
- People may choose to use a seat belt because they care about others and recognize that their own injury or death would negatively impact others.

# Key Take-Aways (continued)

## Potential Message Content to Decrease Aggressive Driving

- Aggressively passing, tailgating, and driving over the posted speed limit increase the likelihood of a crash, injury or death, and financial loss.
- Speeding does not really save that much time.
- Many people, even those close to you, may consider aggressive driving unacceptable.
- Most people (in your community/at your workplace) don't drive aggressively.
- Speeding, when you are late, will not get you there much sooner and may result in a crash.
- Consider the way you drive as you would any other social interaction like being in a store or waiting in line at a movie theatre.

# Key Take-Aways (continued)

Messages focused on individuals who  
**rarely/never use a seat belt** or who  
**usually/always drive aggressively**

may benefit from using language and designs that intentionally seek to reduce psychological reactance and moral disengagement.

# Key Take-Aways Messaging Considerations

## 1. Message Style

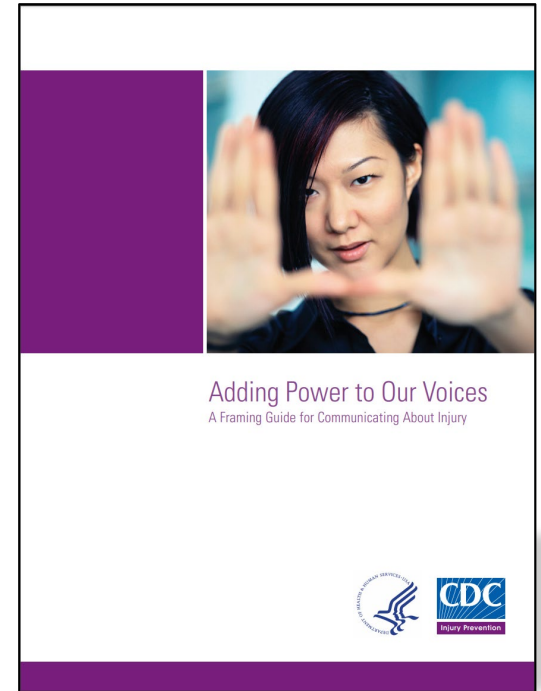
- Consider the language that is used in persuasive messaging.
- Use a narrative or storytelling approach.

# Key Take-Aways Messaging Considerations

## 2. Message Structure

- Consider how the message is framed.

“A Framing Guide  
for Communicating  
About Injury”





# Key Take-Aways Messaging Considerations

## 3. Message Content

- Offer behavioral choices.
- Promote critical thinking and social regulation.
- Emphasize empathy and prosocial behaviors.
- Accentuate perspective taking.
- Strengthen self-regulatory mechanisms.

# Key Take-Aways Messaging Considerations

## 4. Message Delivery

- Consider who is delivering the message.

# Resources

## Written Documents

- Seat Belt Use Info Sheet
- Aggressive Driving Info Sheet
- Message Guidance Brief
- Summary Poster
- Final Report

Visit <https://www.mdt.mt.gov/research/projects/trafficsafety.shtml>

[ Google MDT Traffic Safety Culture ]

# Limitations

- This project used correlation analyses. Correlation does not establish causality. Therefore, these recommendations may result in behavior change; however, we have no evidence of actual behavior change.
- The project began prior to COVID-19, briefly paused during initial shutdowns, and resumed in the fall of 2020.

# Questions

Please enter any questions in the chat box.

# Related Research



## Upcoming Webinars

- Guidance to Promote Family Rules and Workplace Policies to Reduce Cell Phone Use While Driving and Promote Engaged Driving  
Friday, 9/24 at 10 am PT / 11 am MT / Noon CT / 1 pm ET

## Current Projects

- A Review of Methods to Change Beliefs
- Resources and Tools to Reduce Multi-Risk Driving Behaviors

<https://www.mdt.mt.gov/research/projects/trafficsafety.shtml>

[ Google MDT Traffic Safety Culture ]

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