

Living with the Covid-19 behind the wheel, what effects will it have on the traffic? Will we be more empathetic with other road users? Will we go back behind the wheel with that "legacy" of solidarity and sense of community that we developed from the balconies during the two months of lockdown? If road accidents are necessarily disappeared from the news, the scenario that opens from May 4 is all to be written. We need caution and self-control, perhaps to an even greater extent. The epidemiological emergency is not closed, economy is returning negative figures. If someone had to convert her/his own house into an extension of the office, for many it is now an extension of schooling for their children: an extra task. We talk about "going back to our cars after the lockdown" with the traffic psychologist Federica Biassoni, who works at the Research Unit in Traffic Psychology and at the Laboratory of Communication Psychology of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan.

"Driving a car is an experience that combines two aspects, both of them always present, sometimes conflicting. On the one hand, as road users we share the public space of road with other users, therefore in a context of complex interactions. On the other side, in the cockpit we feel inside our "bubble". A micro-space, in which a high sense of self-protection is perceived. During these two months, the lockdown has forced us to focus on an even more isolated space ».

How this experience will impact our comeback behind the wheel?

"We are going back to driving after our most recent experiences with an accentuation of attention and alarm around our space. Of course, it is now difficult to draw a prediction on the behavior of motorists. We will see it in the next few weeks ».

Is the sense of alarm, almost of invasion of our micro-space, equivalent to anger?

"It can turn into anger, yes. The opportunities are the most disparate. For example, think of the traffic jam, a chaotic situation that we perceive as impersonal. Or slowdowns for road works. They are perceived as obstacles standing between me and my goal. One of the only ways to regulate anger is to remember that what I perceive as obstacles on my path are road users like me. People are not hindering us voluntarily. We are instead in a common area, maybe where two road users or more have to co-exist. Other road users mainly don't want to represent an obstacle between me and my goal ».

An appeal to empathy. Does the legacy of solidarity that we have lived from the balconies, where we have sung or danced with the neighbor in front of us that we hadn't even said hello to a few weeks before, turn out to be useful now?

«In cars, more than other road users, we tend to protect ourselves. If that "treasure" of empathy will produce some effect on driving, it may be more caution. Another factor that comes into play is that the threat of virus transmission is not over. I think we will hardly see aggressive scenes like when someone even got out of the car to scream at the window of those who had cut their way. We will tend to protect ourselves, in this sense we will be more prudent ».

Traffic also means facial interactions, signals that say a lot and that can help resolve potential conflicts. How will it be, now that we will go around with masks, and also in the car, if we have a passenger?

"This is a further factor of novelty, of course. Not being able to read the facial expressions of others put us on alert. A smile, in a misunderstanding, has a sedative effect. Not being able to rely on these signals increases the state of alert to understand the intentions of others ».

In a word, further stress.

"To which other external factors are added: the tension accumulated at home in these two months without the possibility of easing the presence, possible economic difficulties or concerns for the future, even the request for new procedures and behaviors in the workplace and in many aspects of daily life, to which we will have to pay close attention. These are all requests that increase the possibility of feeling stressed when we'll sit back behind the wheel ».