

# TORONTO STAR

GREATER TORONTO Saturday, June 25, 2011



René Johnston/Toronto Star

## Incivility on the rise, etiquette expert says

by Wendy Gillis

In the urban jungle of Toronto, it seems animals are everywhere you go.

One jumped the queue to board the bus before you this morning. Another failed to hold the door when you walked into work. Then one eagerly stepped onto the elevator before you could get off (or worse, performed a foul social indiscretion on the way up).

For a so-called advanced civilization — where we speed around in high-tech cars below skyscraping architectural marvels — people can be awfully uncivilized.

And according to a Toronto etiquette expert, it's only getting worse.

"I think indications of incivility are increasing," says Linda Allan. "Really in the last couple of years, what I see, what I'm hearing, is that people want to prevail with their own preferences, even if it's at the expense of the combined interest."

Specializing in social behaviour, Allan has a few theories as to why Torontonians are increasingly neglecting their Ps and Qs.

For one thing, construction in an already jam-packed city might be causing a detour around decency.

"Construction is big in Toronto right now, it has been for the last couple of years, and with detours and slow downs and added lights everywhere, it's taking a lot more time for people to do what they need to do." This is one reason you'll see cyclists hopping from the road to the sidewalk, or crossing on red lights, she says.

Thanks to innovations like smart phones and tablets, distraction is another big problem.

Not only have they brought about a new crop of social offences (texting during movies, phones going off at all hours, answering calls while dining at a restaurant, take your pick), they're diverting our attention from our surroundings, causing us to walk into each other, stop abruptly on a busy street, or simply be clueless to others.

The stress of city living itself could be at the root of the problem. Allan notes that with a large population, and so many people rushing to go about their day, it's hard to stay courteous.

In fact, a new study published this week in the online journal *Nature* shows evidence that where you live could change the stress regions of the brain.

The research, which involved taking brain scans of volunteers under stressful conditions, showed a higher level of activity in the areas that process stress in the brains of those who live in cities, and even higher in those who have spent their entire lives in urban centres.

So is a hard-wiring towards stress-induced rudeness amongst city dwellers to blame?

It's a bit of a scapegoat, perhaps — ultimately, it's the 'me-first' mentality that causes people to be unmannerly, says Allan.

The funny thing is, while many are quick to be rude, the rest of us are often too polite to say anything.

Thankfully, Allan says it's perfectly polite to point out bad manners, so long as it's done as discreetly as possible without raising one's voice or using profanity. Indeed, it may be the only way things will change.

"Civility has to prevail, and being civil does not mean being nice at all costs to the point of not mentioning something. Always being silent, always putting up, that is not what civility is about."

*The Star* asked Etiquette Expert Linda Allan and Star readers for their top incivility complaints

#### **Eating smelly food on transit vehicles, or open-mouthed chewing in restaurants**

There's nothing like the smacking of lips at the next restaurant table to ruin an appetite. And even if you don't have motion sickness, the pungent odour of somebody's spicy fast food could make anyone upchuck on the streetcar.

#### **Loudly speaking on the phone in a lineup**

"When you're really talking into someone's ear who's standing ahead of you, you're not really speaking on your cellphone," says Allan. "It's just rude."

#### **Barging in front of other passengers to have a seat on the TTC, or refusing to give up their seats**

That woman doesn't really need to sit down — she barely looks eight months pregnant. I'm sure it's fine to stay in the seat reserved for people with mobility issues, and keep your bag on another.

#### **Not walking on the correct side of the street**

"People don't seem to know anymore," says Allan. "When you're walking down the street, you stay to the right side and people walk right into you and they look at you like 'Geez, you just ran into me lady.'"

#### **Cyclists riding on sidewalks and running red lights**

Pedestrians should be able to assume they're safe from being plowed over while walking on the sidewalk. And red lights tend to be non-negotiable.

#### **Smoking directly near a door**

"There are signs that say 'Please stand 20 meters away from the door if you're going to smoke,' yet, if the weather's inclement, it's too hot, too windy, they all gravitate toward the door," says Allan. "Then they throw the cigarette butts on the sidewalk or by the door when there are receptacles for them."

#### **Flicking cigarette butts out of the car window**

The precision with which smokers flick their butts is often astounding. If you're going to improperly dispose of your cigarettes, at least try and do so without burning a hole in anyone's dress shirt.

#### **Getting into an elevator before letting others off**

"You see people trying to squeeze on when there's a whole throng of people getting off and you just think, 'Are they just not thinking? Are they unaware? Or are they just discourteous?'" wonders Allan.

#### **Failing to dispose of litter properly**

Is it so hard to walk a few steps to the nearest trash can? They're really not that hard to spot.

#### **Standing on the left side of escalators**

"No one can go up or down, and you say 'Excuse me,' because maybe you're in a hurry, and they barely move or they give you a dirty look," says Allan.

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