

Los Angeles Times

LOCAL CALIFORNIA
February 17, 2015

Commuters compose songs, follow pretty routes to minimize stress



Nighttime traffic on the 405 Freeway in the Sepulveda Pass. One of the best ways to reduce the stress of a commute is to stop driving. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

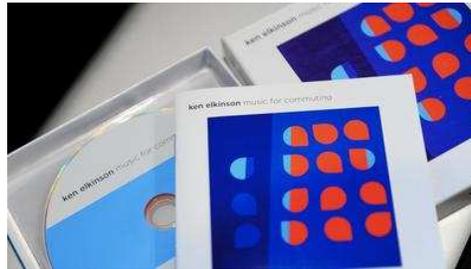
By Laura J. Nelson

Researchers have found that changing one's mindset is a great way to keep the stress of a commute low

Years of driving from Venice to Encino in stop-and-go traffic on the 405 Freeway took a toll on Ken Elkinson. But the Venice resident, who works in insurance, didn't realize how much his stress was affecting him until his 4-year-old twins began gleefully repeating his road rage phrases, such as "Come on, grandma!" — profanity included.

"That was really, really not good," Elkinson said. "I knew something had to change."

Taking transit through the Sepulveda Pass would take four hours a day, on three buses each way. Resigned to driving, Elkinson, 42, turned to his love of composing to calm down. In 2011, he recorded "Music for Commuting," an ambient, New Age soundtrack fit for a spa. Each day has a theme, from Monday's gloomy tempos to more upbeat rhythms for Friday. Since 2011, the songs have been downloaded more than 175,000 times on iTunes and several music websites.



Ken Elkinson's "Music for Commuting." Each day has a theme, from Monday's gloomy tempos to more upbeat rhythms for Friday. (Christina House, For The Times)

Commuting is among humanity's most stressful daily routines. Decades of research has documented adverse side-effects of long drives: high blood pressure, obesity, back pain — even higher rates of loneliness and divorce. Nearly three-fourths of Los Angeles County residents drive alone to work, according to U.S. Census data, and spend, on average, half an hour in the car each day each way.

The sprawl of the Southland can make freeway commuters like Elkinson feel trapped in long daily slogs to and from work, particularly those living in distant suburbs with infrequent bus service and no rail lines. But even when traffic is moving at a crawl, driving is often faster than other options. High housing prices near job centers can make relocating closer to work impossible for many.

So the key to making long commutes tolerable, researchers say, is changing one's mindset. The long commute may feel non-negotiable. But the stress doesn't have to be.



One of the best ways to reduce stress is to stop driving, even if it takes longer to get to and from your job or school. Commuter surveys conducted across the country have found walking, biking and taking transit tend to be less stressful than traveling by car. In a recent survey in Portland, Ore., researchers found something perhaps counterintuitive: cyclists commuting to work grew happier the longer they biked. Not surprisingly, the opposite held true for drivers, who were happiest with commutes lasting less than 20 minutes. Their attitudes soured dramatically as travel times grew.



Ken Elkinson knew there was a problem with his ride to work when his 4-year-old twins began imitating his road rage phrases, including profanity. (Christina House, For The Times)

Los Angeles drivers are accustomed to those pangs of helplessness and anger when the freeway slows to a crawl or inexplicably becomes a parking lot. That's one of the biggest stressors affecting commuters — but one that can be managed, said transportation researcher and consultant Alan Pisarski. Checking traffic before departing and using a navigation system or app can help. Just having a reliable estimate of how long the trip will take and what time you'll arrive gives a satisfying sense of being in control, even when you aren't, researchers say.

"When you glance at the little device and it tells you, 'Your trip will take 40 minutes, not 30,' you change your mental construct," Pisarski said. "Drivers just want to know what to expect."

Changing routes can be another good strategy. Commuters who battle more stop-and-go traffic, particularly near interchanges, are more likely to be grouchy, have high blood pressure and catch the flu, said UC Irvine psychology professor Raymond Novaco.

Ideally, alternate routes should take commuters into more natural surroundings: through a canyon, down a tree-lined street, around a large, leafy park, along the beach. Researchers at Ohio State University tested the effects of such options on different college students, who were shown one of three videos shot through a windshield. The drives ranged from a highway devoid of plantings to a road with a few trees and a route with green boughs leaning over the roadway. Participants were then asked to work on timed anagrams, some unsolvable, following the viewings. Those who had seen the greenest drive worked longer at the assignment, with more patience.

Sarah Corrice, a 46-year-old photographer who lives in Rancho Palos Verdes and drives to El Segundo, believes in the nature drive theory. "I hug the coast and take side streets — basically, anything that's visually stunning. It takes longer," she said, "but it's beautiful."

Most commuters simply try to make commutes more bearable by distracting themselves.

There's a part of your brain when you're driving that turns off. If you know your route and you're able to multi-task, it's a bit more enjoyable. - photographer Sarah Corrice, 46

Before Corrice moved to the South Bay, she spent three hours a day in her car, trekking from Pasadena to El Segundo. As she sat in traffic on the 110 Freeway, she taught herself to play the harmonica. She graduated from basic tunes like "Oh! Susanna" to Vivaldi and Bach's Brandenburg Concertos. She recalled seeing another driver practicing with drumsticks on his steering wheel.

Now, she listens to audio books and recorded college lectures — even a geology textbook. "There's a part of your brain when you're driving that turns off," Corrice said. "If you know your route and you're able to multi-task, it's a bit more enjoyable."

How drivers handle commuting is also influenced by what waits for them at the other end, research shows. A 2011 Gallup survey of more than 8,500 Americans found workers who dreaded going to the office reported four times more stress and worry than happily employed counterparts.

Despite the hassle of their commutes, most Americans tell researchers they prefer some commuting time over none, despite the cost and time savings of working from home. Time in the car or on a bus provides a buffer between work and home, a chance to think, plan ahead and be alone.

Elkinson leaves his house by 6:30 a.m. Every turn and lane-change is timed to deliver him at work by 7.

On a recent Friday, after descending the hills into the San Fernando Valley, he swung his Honda Accord onto a tree-framed Encino side street.

At a four-way stop, a silver Mercedes inched slowly through the intersection, the texting driver apparently oblivious to the cars backed up, waiting in all directions.

"Sweetie, what are you doing?" Elkinson said, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. His "violins/escape" composition drifted softly from his sound system.

"A couple of years ago, I would have been screaming at her," he said, as he eased off the brake, turned the corner and pulled into the parking garage.

It was 6:59.

laura.nelson@latimes.com

Have an idea, gripe or question? Times staff writers Laura J. Nelson and Dan Weikel write California Commute and are looking for leads. Send them along.

For more transportation news, follow [@laura_nelson](#) on Twitter.

Copyright © 2015, [Los Angeles Times](#)