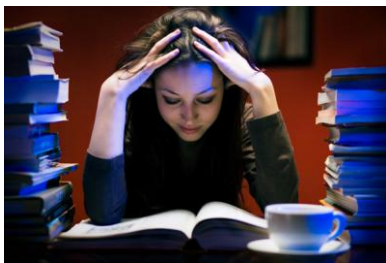


Are You Juggling While Driving?



What would you say if I told you that distractions now join alcohol and speeding as leading factors in fatal and serious injury vehicle crashes, or that hands-free cell phone devices offer no safety benefit when driving? In addition, what if I told you that **“multi-tasking” is a myth?** A myth? Really? I know what you’re thinking, you could see the first two points as being possible, but the third point just cannot be right. On behalf of all multi-taskers, that statement took me aback too, until I read more on the topic.



In a report done by the National Safety Council (4-21-2010), they state, and I quote, **“Human brains do not perform two tasks at the same time. Instead, the brain handles tasks sequentially, switching between one task and another. Brains can juggle tasks very rapidly, which leads us to erroneously believe we are doing two tasks at the same time. In reality, the brain is switching attention between tasks – performing only one task at a time.”** **“The brain also juggles focus and attention”**. When I

read that last sentence, I picture our brain in a game of ping-pong. Our brains are ever changing our focus back and forth while we are attempting to multi-task. With that being the case, just how focused are we really while driving. Are we talking on the phone, texting, or taking a peek when we hear the tone for incoming text? “But I only text at the red lights or when stopped by a train.” Oh, really? I would imagine that your answer to that text would be coming through right after the green light or the RR crossing sticks pull up and you are on your merry way. Can we really afford to put our brains through all this while driving? I not only think it unsafe, but irresponsible! Even though “multi-tasking” is highly valued in today’s culture, there is no place for it while driving behind the wheel, and unfortunately, we don’t want to admit it. Instead, we think we can handle our phones and drive at the same time.

The report goes on to describe how drivers who use cell phones have a tendency to **“look at”** but not **“see”** up to 50 percent of the information in their driving environment. This reminds me of when I look down at my watch to check out the time while in a hurry and **“look at”** the watch, but don’t really **“see”** what time it is. Is that just me or do you do that to? A form of **inattention blindness** occurs, which

results in drivers having difficulty monitoring their surroundings, seeking and identifying potential hazards, and responding to unexpected situations.

The danger of inattention blindness is that when a driver fails to notice events in the driving environment, either at all or too late, **it's impossible to execute a safe response** such as a steering maneuver or braking to avoid a crash. ¹

To put it into simpler terms, for every information input to the brain, the brain must make many decisions: whether to act on information processed how to act, execute the action and stop the action. While this process may take only a fraction of a second, all of these steps do take time. When driving, fractions of seconds can be the time between a crash or no crash, injury or no injury, life or death.

More than 1.6 million
crashes are caused
by cell phone use
and texting while
driving each year.

Source: National Safety Council

As adults, we know the rules of the road and the risks, but sometimes we feel that we are skilled veteran drivers and we know how to handle juggling while driving.

Stories on cell phone use and texting while driving have saturated the media almost to the point of ignoring the subject. With that being said, I will stop here with only two things for you to ponder (one point and one question):



Point: Back in the day when driver's training was taught in high school and FREE, we were taught "Defensive Driving" were we not? Wouldn't our responsibility to defensive driving in this day and age be that we chuck our phones while driving? Ok, maybe not *chuck* them, but safely put them away until our car is in permanent park? Whether or not you feel you do well while driving and on the phone, wouldn't you rather use that attentive time driving defensively looking out for those who are not giving their full attention to driving?



Question: Can *your* brain handle the outcome of a cell phone-related crash and the outcome – whatever it may be? Watch the following clip entitled "***It Takes Just Seconds***". (Located on the far right side of the home page). <http://www.nsc.org/Pages/Home.aspx>

ON THE ROAD, OFF THE PHONE

Resources:

National Safety Council: “Understanding the Distracted Brain.”

¹ Wickens, C.D. , & Horrey, W.J. (2009). Models of Attention, Distraction, and Highway Hazard Avoidance. In Driver Distraction: Theory, Effects, and Mitigation. Ed. Michael A Regan, John D Lee, Kristie L Young. CRC Press, Taylor & Francis Group: Boca Raton, FL.

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