

“Texting” and Your Life

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Two recent news stories focused on the tragic deaths of two persons in different states within days of each other: a student in northern Colorado and a special education teacher in southern Maine. Each involved a young driver who was driving while distracted - texting; secure in an aura of their invincibility. As these two incidents were in the news and on the front page of our local newspaper, my wife asked me, “How do you protect yourself against somebody who is doing something like this while they drive?”

The parents of the boy in Colorado publicized the actual text their son was sending when he wasn't paying attention to his driving. Eyewitnesses said the 22-year-old college student had his head down and was in the process of sending a text when he drifted into oncoming traffic. His mother was quoted saying: “In a split second you could ruin your future, injure or kill others, and tear a hole in the heart of everyone who loves you.” Good point.

In the collision in Maine, a 17-year-old was driving to school when he also drifted into the opposite lane on a busy stretch of a clear two-lane road in the early morning. The day was bright on a straight stretch of the roadway. There was a car ahead of the special ed teacher; in the back were her two young children, ages 7 and 4, who were transported with injuries. The first car suddenly swerved off the road into a ditch to avoid the teenager's car before the head-on collision with the victim's vehicle, who was pronounced dead at the scene. The teen driver was taken to a local hospital.

These types of collisions are now common fodder for the media, and yet, despite the attention being paid to the tragic consequences of distracted driving, every driver is at risk of being involved in a collision; every driver is at risk of losing their life or being seriously injured as a result of a careless decision of anyone who believes that they can drive distracted...and that only *other* drivers are the ones who can't multi-task safely.

So, what can you and I do to avoid such a predicament? Right now, only a social revolution or outcry, a concerted and focused campaign to make distracted driving socially unacceptable, will reduce the potential of these collisions from happening. In the meantime, every driver who recognizes the gravity of the situation has to take several actions to remain alive.

The first is to become part of the solution by putting down the cell phone, smartphone or other handheld device and turn it off. This is not only a teenage issue, plenty of "grownups" are guilty of using electronic devices while driving (nearly 70 percent of Americans ages 18 to 64 recently chatted on their phones while driving, and about 30 percent of this group sent text messages while behind the wheel).ⁱ The point is everybody who is tied to a device is at risk...it works both ways. You can drift into the oncoming lane or off the road, or you can be struck by somebody who is using a device.

Hands-free use is a myth. You are still mentally focused on the conversation...you become, in essence, a steering wheel holder. Crash risk is four times higher when a driver uses a cell phone, whether or not it's hands-free.ⁱⁱ

Driving while distracted has become a daily occupation that many now treat as a part of daily living. We have welcomed these devices into our cars and trucks along with breakfasts, lunches, dinners, snacks, drinks, books, newspapers, computers, etc., without any thought given to the potential of threatening somebody else's life and/or livelihood. Some activities, such as texting, take the driver's attention away from driving more frequently and for longer periods than other distractions.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet, we have trained and convinced ourselves that we can do better than somebody else in this respect. In short: we can handle it – others can't.

The next step, that may be as difficult as putting the phone down, is paying attention to driving and how safely you are driving. Drive as if your life depends on it...because it *does*! You have to be the better driver on the road and compensate for other drivers' errors of driving behavior. This means you have to concentrate on what is happening two, perhaps three or four (or more) vehicles ahead of you, not focusing your concentration on the tail lights of the one right in front of you. The action is well ahead and you have to anticipate what is going to happen so you can respond appropriately. This is called defensive driving.

Most of what we do behind the wheel of a vehicle is react to conditions. Those conditions are what is taught in defensive driving programs: weather, road, light, traffic, vehicle, and the most unpredictable, the driver.

Weather conditions can vary from hour to hour, day to day. Weather conditions often have an effect on light conditions, but day and night encompass an entire spectrum from minute to minute.

Weather conditions can also affect the road conditions as we know, but road conditions vary from town to town, county, state, etc. Road surface condition in many areas is passable, but often the road conditions require that the driver has to slow down to navigate the road safely. If you are following another vehicle, you have to be prepared to react if the driver slows down suddenly or swerves to avoid a pothole or obstruction. If you are following too closely you may not be able to react quickly enough to avoid what the driver ahead has attempted to avoid.

Traffic congestion and/or flow can affect your time schedule, making you more intent on “getting there,” which may affect your judgment. So, traffic flow will affect your vehicle speed and your frustration level, and your ability to react safely.

But, your vehicle condition will affect how safely you arrive or how you operate. Keeping your vehicle up to the safety and operating specifications is your responsibility as a driver. If you drive a commercial vehicle, you are required to make two daily inspections of your vehicle, and possibly three. You have your pre-trip inspection to satisfy yourself that the vehicle is safe to operate, then a post-trip written inspection to document any defects or problems that may have occurred during your shift. The possible third inspection is the mid-trip inspection, just to make sure everything is secured properly

and you don't see any problems. The important distinction here is that most drivers of automobiles may have an annual inspection, but do not even bother to look over their vehicles daily, weekly or monthly to identify burned out lights (safety devices!), low tire pressure, fluid levels, leaks, etc., or even take their car in for routine servicing.

But, it is driver condition that is most variable. The driver is the key factor in traffic safety. Driver condition can be affected by one's health, long term or short, drugs (prescription, over-the-counter, illegal, etc.), physical condition (e.g., a disability, fatigue, memory, mood, intoxication...the list goes on). Ever see an angry driver squeal tires leaving a parking lot? Road rage is another driver condition. We have no idea of what condition other drivers are in, but we can observe the effects and make a subjective conclusion...and make an appropriate driving response. In most cases it is to leave more room between your vehicle and theirs and *slow down*.

Drivers who text and drive or use cell phones while driving have to ask themselves: what is so important that the activity that distracts has to be conducted while you drive? Too often, the question is asked in the past tense: What *was* so important that the driver had to conduct a conversation while driving? Keep your mind on the task...and live.

ⁱ Mobile Device Use While Driving -- United States and Seven European Countries, 2011. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. March 15, 2013.

ⁱⁱ Redelmeier DA, Tibshirani RJ. Association Between Cellular-Telephone Calls and Motor Vehicle Collisions. *The New England Journal of Medicine*. February 13, 1997

ⁱⁱⁱ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Statistics and Facts about Distracted Driving. Washington, DC: US Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2011.