

Distracted Driving: A Fresh Perspective

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Introduction

Everywhere we turn the issue of Distracted Driving is before us. We've read countless studies and a myriad of articles in newspapers and safety publications. Most center on distractions attributed to either the use of cell phones for talking or texting while driving; yet there exists a broad range of other distractions drivers face on a daily basis.

Four Types of Driver Distractions

In a 2011 study by the Governors Highway Safety Association and State Farm, there were four different types of distractions noted. A distraction in any one of these areas could lead to an accident. However, often we face a combination of two or more at once. This often happens as things not related to the safe operation of the vehicle compete for our attention.

Visual Distractions

As the name implies, visual distractions cause us to take our eyes off the road. When this happens, it takes only a short amount of time for a vehicle to drift out of its lane. The seconds lost by visual distractions also greatly reduce the chances of a driver being able to stop quickly without hitting another vehicle, object, or even a pedestrian (who might be focused elsewhere as well).

Examples of visual distractions while driving would include: looking at a cell phone to read a text or see who is calling; programming or looking at a GPS; searching for a specific store in a shopping center; or even glancing at your child in the back seat who just dropped their toy and has started to cry.

Recently, I was conducting a workshop and one of the participants shared a story about a visual distraction which, fortunately, only caused minor property damage. He was an AAU basketball coach and at the time had two players on the team who went on to have careers in the NBA. He said their policy was when they were out of town on trips, they would travel in two vans and the older, licensed teens were allowed to drive at times. They were traveling near the edge of a southern college campus when one of the players was driving the front van. As they were approaching a four way stop, the coach, who was in the second van, noticed a very attractive coed jogging past them. When the coach looked up at the front van, he could clearly see the teen driver's head turning slowly to follow her as she ran past. This visual distraction caused the driver to not see a stop sign at a four-way stop. He not only went straight through the intersection

without stopping (thankfully there were no other cars coming from the other directions), but also ended up going off the side of the road on the far side of the intersection and had some minor damage to the van. The coach told me how greatly relieved he was when he found out no one was hurt, but then his next thought was how tragic this could have been. (And how differently the lives of the two future NBA players could have been if they had been injured.)

Auditory Distractions

What do you hear when you're traveling down the road? More specifically, what do you hear that's not essential to the safe operation of the vehicle? Possibly it's a conversation with a passenger, two of your children bickering in the back seat, or the conference call you're taking in on your Bluetooth headset while you're on the way to the airport.

Like many people, I often listen to talk radio while driving. Well, actually at times I act like it's a two-way conversation. There's the discussion between the host and callers, plus I'm providing a running commentary as I talk back to these people... who cannot hear me! (I think I get this habit from my grandfather who would regularly fuss at the commentators on television who couldn't hear him either.) As mentioned before, this could really be a combination of two types of distractions since there is arguably a cognitive distraction as well.

Manual Distractions

Remember way back when you first started driving? If you're like me, that may be a long time back, so you'll have to dig a bit for memories of driver's education. When you were taking to road with your learner's permit you probably had the proverbial "death grip" on the wheel. You like also never took your hands out of the "10 and 2" position that had been impressed upon you by those who were teaching you to drive.

Over time, we became more comfortable behind the wheel, and manual distractions began to enter into competition for our awareness. One hand came off the wheel and began to change the channels or volume on the radio, swap out a CD (or 8 track tape for some of us), reach for a soft drink in the cup holder, or try to grab that quarter you dropped in the floor at the drive thru. Regardless of the source, manual distractions play a much larger role in our driving than we often think.

Cognitive Distractions

A lot of us live life at a very fast pace in today's society. We're on the go constantly. I tend to multi-task a lot and find myself doing this behind the wheel as well. Perhaps you're the same. My hands and feet are engaged, but often my brain is elsewhere. Not only do I have the radio on so I'll have someone to talk to; I'm also thinking about the solutions to problems I'm facing at work, things I need to do when I get home, or reprioritizing my task list.

A personal example of how a cognitive distraction affected me on the way home from the office one day. There are two main ways I drive home. One is a bit shorter and is my usual route even though it's a bit curvier. One evening my wife called as I was packing up at the office and asked if I could stop and pick-up a pizza on the way home. I told her to order it and I'd take the longer route home and get it. As I was about two miles from the turn for the shorter of the two routes, I was thinking, "Don't forget to go the long way to get the pizza". My thoughts drifted back to other things and before I knew it, I had not only made the turn, I was three miles along the shorter route – away from the pizza. What's worse, I did the same thing the last time we

ordered pizza a couple of weeks before. Such events cause me to stop and pause and wonder what else I have been missing on my commutes. Have I endangered myself or others while I had mentally “checked out” because of cognitive distractions?

Three Types of At-Risk Behavior

In the SafeStart training program developed by Larry Wilson, he describes three different types of At Risk Behavior. If you stop and think about it, each of these can easily be applied to driver actions while operating motor vehicles.

Deliberate At Risk Behavior

The first of these is Deliberate At Risk Behavior. We’ve all made that conscious decision at times to drive a few miles per hour over the speed limit, haven’t we? Despite the fact that we knew what the law was, the outcome of a few minutes saved outweighed the increased risk of an accident (or the cost of a citation).

Someone who has been out at a party may make the decision to drive while “buzzed” or intoxicated. This would fall into the category of Deliberate At Risk Behavior too. Statistically, around 25% of unintentional deaths on the road are alcohol related; yet people still think, “It’s not going to happen to me.” The same logic is often applied by drivers who use their cell phones and/or text and drive, even though several studies indicate these behaviors are as bad (if not worse) than driving under the influence.

Habitual At Risk Behavior

Whether we realize it or not, we all likely have Habitual At Risk Behaviors too. These seem to “snowball” after a bit as one behavior begets another. I’d even suggest that some behaviors start as Deliberate At Risk Behaviors and become so entrenched in our minds they become Habitual ones. If you start driving without checking your mirrors regularly, you’ll likely also begin making unsafe lane changes without using your turn signals. Likewise, using a hand-held cell phone can produce the same results, since turn signal use decreases with one hand on the wheel and the other on the phone.

Unintentional At Risk Behavior

The third category of at risk behavior includes those things we do unintentionally. In training I often ask the question, “Would you raise your hand if you’ve ever driven through a stop sign or red light that you honestly didn’t see?” As you can imagine, just about everyone in the room raises their hand because we’ve all had this happen to us at some point.

Now we’re not talking about driving through a yellow light where you “think you can make it.” We’d have to back up a step or so to Deliberate (or in some cases Habitual/Deliberate) At Risk Behavior to properly define this. Likewise, most distracted driving incidents are the not the result of unintentional actions.

Technology, Rules, Laws, Policies, and the Results

Technology

Recent technological advancements have increased our productivity in seemingly exponential ways. We see television ads promoting devices which allow the driver to update their Facebook

status, read Twitter accounts and/or text messages to them, and etc. As you can imagine, many of these “advances” have also introduced additional opportunities for distracted driving to increase.

Honestly though, it’s not the technology itself, but rather the decisions we make when utilizing it. Ultimately, each driver has a decision to make – is the cell call, text message or even desire to change to another folder on our MP3 player worth the risk it presents to us and to the other drivers around us?

Laws and Policies

The US Department of Transportation recently proposed voluntary guidelines to disable many functions of communication, entertainment, and similar functions while the car is moving. Interestingly enough, the same guidelines call for simplification of devices so drivers will either be able to perform the use of the devices with one hand and limit the amount of time they have their eyes off the road to less than two seconds. In case you haven’t done the math, at 70 MPH, you’ll have travelled around 200 feet during those two seconds. I’m not sure those guidelines are exactly what we need, even if they were followed completely.

One of the problems is we are prone to think that a guideline, law, or even company policy will automatically be followed by everyone. Perhaps we’re not quite that trusting, but we still would think the overwhelming majority follow the rules; right? Certainly they would follow them when it comes to something as potentially dangerous as driving. We all know from experience this is just not the case. For example, I’ve polled quite a few people, including numerous safety professionals, and confirmed my suspicions that I wasn’t the only one who drove a “few miles over the speed limit” on a regular basis. We all know the law, but we made the conscious decision to risk an accident (or getting caught). Simply put, we valued the reward of a faster arrival to be greater than the risk. Unfortunately, we see this compounded as many drivers make this same type risk/reward decision with other things which lead to distraction.

Another issue facing us today is the laws, policies, and guidelines may truly be nothing more than “feel good” legislation, as the overall effectiveness of these have not yet been proven. Now I’m not saying we shouldn’t stop these processes, but we need to acknowledge the limitations they have. We’ve got to get to the point where we address the actions and habits of the individual drivers behind the wheel. A recent blogger’s headline caught my eye because it summed this up very succinctly by saying, “Commenters agree distracted driving’s a menace, but question if state can save us from ourselves.”

Using SafeStart Concepts to Reduce Distracted Driving

Numerous organizations have stated for years that the individual is the source of most accidents, far more than things such as equipment failure or even the actions of others. We may not be able to “change the world” when it comes to distracted driving, at least not all at once, but perhaps we can identify tools and develop skills which, when applied, can reduce distracted driving for ourselves as an individual driver. There certainly is potential for another driver’s actions to cause us to be involved in a mishap, but if our awareness level is higher, we will at least have a greater chance to take evasive actions. The concepts of the SafeStart program can be very effective in the development of these skills when driving.

Four Critical Errors

There are Four Critical Errors outlined in the SafeStart program which we all make from time to time. These are very common mistakes people make which can increase the risk of injury.

Problems associated with Eyes Not on Task are easily identified when it comes to vehicle operation. These are at the core of the Visual Distractions previously discussed. Likewise, Mind Not on Task errors could easily be related to the Cognitive Distractions we all face on the road. Line-of-Fire errors and Balance/Traction Grip errors often compound the mistakes from the first two.

As an example of how this happens, let's say you are driving and glance down to see the number on the incoming call on your cell phone (Eyes Not on Task), while you become mentally fixated on who is calling (Mind Not on Task). Since you were not focused on maintaining your proper following distance, you have placed your car in the Line-of-Fire. Should you attempt to brake suddenly or veer off the side of the road to avoid hitting another car, you may then experience Balance/Traction/Grip issues.

Four States

There are four states we all get into from time to time which can cause or contribute to these Four Critical Errors being made. As you go through this list, I think you'll also find each of them to be very common when behind the wheel.

Rushing as defined by SafeStart is not just going fast, but rather going faster than you'd normally go. We've already established that most drivers, even safety professionals, drive at or above the posted speed limits. But what about those times when we're running a bit further behind than normal? Suppose you leave your office to pick up a child at daycare and get stopped by a passing train. You're already on a tight schedule to get there in time to avoid late fees for your child being there past a certain time, so you begin to go even faster than normal once the train passes.

By the way, how did you feel while sitting and watching the minutes ticking by with the train passing? Did looking at your watch repeatedly make the train go faster? What was your reaction when the second train came from the opposite direction? "Don't they know this is going to cost me \$1 for every minute that I'm late?" And then, to top it all off, once the tracks are clear everyone is suddenly so polite letting people merge into traffic from the side road. I can almost hear the sarcastic reaction, "Sure, you pick today to be nice!" Maybe it didn't happen exactly like that with you, but I'm betting every one of us have experienced the state of frustration behind the wheel at some point.

In presenting the SafeStart concepts to thousands of people, we often ask, "How many of you have even fallen asleep at the wheel?" Just about everyone in the room will raise their hand, especially when you talk about those "really long blinks" that we've all had at times. Fatigue is the third of these states and it's so common you can even get ideas on how to combat it while driving. Obviously the real answer is to pull over and move around a bit or even to get a quick nap to recharge yourself. While the state of Fatigue in and of itself doesn't relate directly to Distracted Driving, you can see how it can lead to any of the Four Critical Errors.

We've already touched on the fourth state briefly while thinking about how we drive now versus when we first started out behind the wheel all those years ago. Complacency is a state we

all find ourselves in at times. Have you ever been driving along on the interstate and realized you passed your exit two miles back? What else did you miss along the way? We think of cell phones and other gadgets as distractions, but sometimes we allow ourselves to even be distracted by ourselves as we allow our minds to wander away from the task at hand.

Four Critical Error Reduction Techniques (CERTs)

So what skills can we hope to develop to prevent these states from causing or contributing to these errors? The SafeStart process works to reduce these mistakes in four ways:

Self Triggering on the State (or the amount of hazardous energy) so you don't make a Critical Error in the first place is one technique we can utilize. If we go back to the scenario with the parent who is rushing to get to daycare after dealing with Frustration from the trains and traffic, what would their reaction be if they paused, took a step back, and recognized the two states they are in? Certainly they would then value arriving safely but maybe a couple of minutes late over possibly having a wreck, getting injured, and potentially being in a bigger mess. You can also see how the thoughts of Rushing and Frustration themselves can lead to Distracted Driving! (One caution with this technique, though, is it will not work with the state of Complacency, because you can't really self-trigger on something when you've "zoned out.")

One other technique we can use is to Analyze Close Calls and small errors (to prevent agonizing over big ones). Let's say yesterday a driver was changing radio stations and drifted into another lane of traffic and narrowly missed hitting a car. As they're driving along today, they recall the near-miss (or near-hit depending upon your perspective) and decide, "Maybe that song isn't so bad after all" and resist the temptation to allow themselves to have a visual, auditory, manual and cognitive distraction.

We also can Look at Others for Patterns that increase the risk of injury. Basically this skill pushes us to observe the habits and actions of others and learn from them to keep from making the same or similar mistakes ourselves. This technique can also be a very practical tool for defensively dealing with others who are distracted while driving.

Recall how we said it's next to impossible to use the technique of Self-Triggering to combat the state of Complacency? One of the best ways I've found to do this is the fourth technique we will examine – Working on Habits. When we think of the term habit, many times we think of it in a negative way. However, there are certainly good habits we can implement and practice. If you are in the habit of calling home as you leave work at the end of the day, how much longer would it take to sit in your car and complete that call before you even put the car in gear? It might cost a couple of minutes, but obviously the reward of not having to deal with the distraction of a cell phone is well worth it.

Summary

Distracted Driving remains a very hot topic in our society. While much focus has been placed on technology, rules, policies, and laws, we should instead take a secondary approach to the issue and encourage our employees, friends, and families to develop skills that will help them avoid being distracted in the first place.

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