

THE DANGEROUS PSYCHOLOGY OF TEXTING WHILE DRIVING

By Brooke Crothers

Drivers know it's dangerous to text but do it anyway. Maybe worse, some believe they can multitask while driving.

Over 90 percent of frequent drivers in an AT&T-sponsored survey said they know texting and driving is dangerous -- but that doesn't stop them from doing it.

That can lead to disastrous consequences. "People drive more erratically when they're texting than when they're drinking and driving [and] we know that people are six times more likely to be in an accident if they're texting and driving," Dr. David Greenfield, founder of The Center for Internet and Technology Addiction and Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at The University of Connecticut, told Foxnews.com. Greenfield was instrumental in designing the survey for AT&T.

About three-fourths of survey respondents also admit to glancing at their phones while behind the wheel. But here's the scary part: drivers are, if nothing else, resourceful when it comes to finding reasons to justify their behavior.

For example, nearly three-in-ten believe they can easily do several things at once, even while driving.

"Addiction is what drives the behavior. There is a psychological mechanism where [people] deny the fact that this one instance will not be dangerous. That is a complete cognitive distortion. And this flies in the face of the fact that they know intellectually that it's dangerous," Greenfield said.

Indeed, drivers are deluding themselves if they believe they can multitask. "It is difficult for pretty much everyone to do several things at once. In fact, studies have shown that people who have the most confidence that they can multitask are actually the worst at it," Earl K. Miller, Ph.D., Picower Professor of Neuroscience at MIT, told Foxnews.com.

Miller continued. "They don't multitask more because they are better at it. They multitask more because they are sensation-seeking and impulsive. They rationalize their behavior with an inflated confidence in their multitasking abilities."

The problem is, drivers think they're monitoring the road while they're texting but actually they're relying on the brain's prediction that nothing was there before, according to Miller. That's an illusion that can lead to tragic results.

"Because of our limited capacity for thought, we can only perceive a small fraction of the world at a time. We sip the outside world through a straw. But we have the illusion that the straw is large because your brain fills in the blanks. If you are focused on your cell phone, you may see an empty road just because it was empty a few seconds ago. The problem is it might not be now," Miller said.

And the impulse to continue dangerous behavior is strong. We compulsively check our phones because of a neurochemical in the brain that makes us feel happy, according to Greenfield. This creates a sense of withdrawal when we're not using the phone.

"Every time we anticipate a response, there's an anticipation that the message is positive and if it is positive, we get a hit of dopamine. And if it isn't, we don't. But because it is unpredictable, the smartphone functions as the world's smallest slot machine. That unpredictability keeps us in that anticipatory search and that's what creates that withdrawal," according to Greenfield.

AT&T has posted a video that provides a sampling of why drivers persist with texting despite the danger. Drivers mention feeling disconnected, anxious, and experiencing symptoms of withdrawal.

But there is still hope for the worst offenders. Those who are most likely to text and drive are also the most likely to take steps to stop, according to the survey.

To combat texting and driving, AT&T is offering a DriveMode app for the iPhone.

The app silences incoming text message alerts, turns on automatically when one drives 15 MPH or more and turns off shortly after one stops, AT&T said in a statement. When activated, it automatically responds to incoming SMS and MMS text messages so the sender knows the text recipient is driving. It also allows parents with young drivers to receive a text message if the app is turned off, according to AT&T.

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