Avoid Distracted Driving: Don’t Get Teary & Put Down Siri

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Whether it is sending a quick text or recalling a very emotional memory or event, distracted driving is incredibly commonplace on roads throughout the United States and abroad. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) describes three primary varieties of distraction:

1. visual—taking your eyes off the road
2. manual—taking your hands off the wheel
3. cognitive—taking your mind off driving

Effects of Distracted Driving

Activities that may serve to distract a driver in one or more of the ways identified by the CDC include talking on the phone, texting, eating and drinking, having conversations with passengers, tuning the radio or setting your GPS, or thinking about an emotional event that happened during your day.

Some of these distractions may seem insignificant, but distracted driving accidents and injuries are a huge problem in the United States. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), in 2015 alone, 3,477 people were killed and 391,000 were injured in motor vehicle crashes involving distracted drivers.

In fact, the CDC reports that each day in the United States, more than nine people are killed and more than 1,000 people are injured in crashes involving distracted drivers. Texting is widely believed to be one of the most dangerous distracted driving behaviors, due to the fact that it can involve all three types of distraction (visual, manual and cognitive) defined by the CDC. In response to the growing knowledge and understanding about the risks of texting while driving, the majority of states have enacted laws banning texting while driving, and some states, such as Maryland, prohibit the use of handheld devices entirely. Other states, like Arkansas and Texas, limit the use of handheld devices for certain groups, like young drivers, or in certain situations, such as when driving through active school zones.

Although the state laws help remind many of us that texting while driving is a bad idea-both because of the potential injurious consequences, and the possible fines and other legal penalties-research supporting the effectiveness of these laws is still not conclusive. The best strategy to help end the distracted driving epidemic and avoid costly and dangerous accidents and injuries to your employees, volunteers and clients, is to educate your team and advocate for safe driving, starting at your nonprofit today.

Don’t Get Teary

While most drivers know the effect that distractions such as eating a meal or using a cell phone while driving have on their safety, there has been much less widespread recognition of the effect of emotions on driving ability. Recent research has demonstrated that emotional factors such as stress, anxiety, fatigue, agitation, and other common emotions experienced while driving can be just as distracting as being under the influence or

texting.

The Virginia Tech Transportation Institute (VTTI) was founded more than 25 years ago and conducts transportation research in order to save lives, time, and money, and to protect the environment. A recent research study from VTTI, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, indicated that drivers who get behind the wheel while observably angry, sad, crying, or emotionally agitated increase their risk of crashing by nearly tenfold.

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Each driver is susceptible to these emotions, and oftentimes it is necessary to drive after facing some type of challenging emergency or upsetting notification, such as after learning of an accident involving a loved one or after a confrontation with another person. Because these situations are common, it is especially important to increase awareness about the risks associated with driving while emotional, and what can be done to minimize downside consequences.

Emotions can cause even the most experienced drivers to:

- Have impaired or diminished observation and reaction times
- Fail to recognize situations such as abrupt slowing of traffic or debris in the road
- Make risky maneuvers and changes, such as cutting across several lanes, or passing in an area where doing so is not safe or permitted by law
- Feel detached from other drivers, vehicles, and conditions on the road

Reducing the Downside Risk

Recognizing when you are not at your best is the first step to preventing emotion-related driving risks. Follow these additional safety tips in order to recognize and manage an emotional situation while driving.

- **Take 10**: If you feel that your emotions are getting the best of you, whether because your mind is racing replaying an interaction you had earlier in the day, or because of a close-call you've had while driving, pull over at a gas station or in a well-lit, safe area on the side of the road. Spend a few minutes trying to calm down by closing your eyes, taking deep, measured breaths, and slowly relaxing your mind. If your emotions are especially strong or difficult to push from your mind, consider taking a short walk if it is safe to do so. Some people may also find it helpful to call a friend or loved one to talk out the emotions (while parked, of course).
- **Plan Ahead**: If you know that you are going to be especially full of emotion during certain times, such as the anniversary of the death of a loved one, or after an important and challenging meeting at work, it may be in the best interest of yourself and everyone else on the road if you simply avoid getting behind the wheel. Try to plan ahead by finding substitute arrangements like a ride from a friend, or using public or alternative transportation, if available. The roads can be full of potential emotional triggers around every corner, especially when you are already upset. It may also be helpful to plan ahead if you easily feel rushed or hurried. As feeling rushed or late often results in anxiety and can escalate to road rage, plan ahead by looking at the traffic and construction areas online prior to leaving, or give yourself extra time in case there are unknown obstructions along the way.
- **Gently Jam Out**: If feeling sad, anxious, or depressed, or if you are unable to get a recurring emotional thought out of your head, it may be helpful to listen to calming music to put yourself in a better mood, and provide a bit of a relief from your thoughts. To be extra safe, make sure to put the tunes on before starting your drive in order to avoid even more distraction risk. Music can provide a different kind of energy, and provide welcome relief from the more difficult aspects of your day.
- **Always be Mindful**: Even as a passenger, you are in a position to ensure that your driver and driving environment is as safe as possible. Try to be aware of your driver's mental state, and encourage him or her to take a break from driving or consider alternatives when distracted or if s/he is clearly in the wrong mindset to drive. If your driver seems to be emotionally detached from the road or unable to concentrate on what is going on in the environment, suggest pulling over until the driver feels prepared to continue driving or until someone else can take the wheel.

Put Down Siri

With the advancement of technology and the increased ownership of smartphones during the past several years, many staff take pride in being connected at all times. While 24/7 access to staff may be viewed as a benefit to nonprofit employers, it may significantly increase or exacerbate distracted driving risks. Though most people know of at least some of these risks—thanks to awareness campaigns carried out by the Department of Transportation and other advocacy groups, as well as recent laws designed to prevent negative consequences of distracted driving—the nationwide epidemic of driving while distracted continues to worsen.

Did You Know?

- At any given time, the drivers of 660,000 vehicles (or 5% of all drivers) are using handheld cell phones while driving in the United States—and approximately 9% of drivers are using some type of phone (handheld or hands-free). Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Driver Electronic Device Use in 2011.
- According to the CDC, the average time people take their eyes off of the road when texting and driving is five seconds. This number may seem small, but when traveling at a speed of 55 mph, this is enough time to drive the length of a football field essentially blindfolded!
- Recent research by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety evaluated in-vehicle voice command systems to determine whether voice command text messages, phone calls, or technology used to change the radio station resulted in less dangerous distraction than handheld devices. The research showed that the cognitive distraction of using these systems was surprisingly high, and driver impairment could linger for as long as 27 seconds after terminating a call or interacting with in-vehicle systems.

RESOURCES:

- Cellular Phone Use and Texting While Driving Laws, March 2016, National Conference of State Legislatures, www.ncsl.org
- Blueprint for Ending Distracted Driving, www.distraction.gov
- Injury Prevention & Control: Motor Vehicle Safety, www.cdc.gov/ Motorvehiclesafety/index.html
- Measuring Cognitive Distraction in the Automobile III: A Comparison of Ten 2015 In-Vehicle Information Systems, AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, http:// newsroom.aaa.com/wp-content/ uploads/2015/10/Phase-IIIAAAFTS- Fact-Sheet.pdf
- Hands-free is not Risk-free, National Safety Council, www.nsc. org/learn/NSC-Initiatives/Pages/ distracted-driving-hands-free-isnot- risk-free-infographic.aspx
- Adopt a Total Ban on PED Use While Driving, www.https://nonprofitrisk.org//library/enews/2016/enews012616.html