Know the safe way to avoid—and respond to—situations involving distracted driving

BY THOMAS J. BUKOWSKI

When behind the wheel, many drivers don’t think twice about calling a friend, reaching to pick up a child’s dropped toy, or using a touchscreen GPS. However, distracted driving is a serious problem. In 2011, distraction-related crashes killed 3,331 people and injured 387,000 others, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Cell phones and similar technology increase the temptation to drive distracted. According to NHTSA, about 5 percent of drivers were talking on a handheld cell phone at any given daylight moment in 2011—that’s approximately 660,000 drivers.

Deborah Trombley, senior program manager for transportation initiatives at the National Safety Council, said that although drivers are becoming more aware of the dangers of cell phone use while driving, they tend to believe others are the problem. In April 2012, NHTSA released a survey of more than 6,000 drivers that showed nearly three-quarters supported state bans on handheld cell phone use while driving, and 94 percent supported bans on texting and sending emails. However, when asked about their own driving behaviors, nearly half of respondents admitted to answering calls while driving “at least
1. You’re on a three-lane highway and spot a distracted driver ahead of you. What is the best defensive driving maneuver?

1. Get in front of the driver, in the same lane, so you can keep your eye on the driver through your rear-view mirror.
2. Jot down the license plate number on a piece of paper or in your cell phone while you’re driving to later report the driver to the authorities.
3. Keep one or more lanes between you and the other vehicle and stay out of the driver’s blind spot – preferably not right next to the driver – and stay behind if possible.

2. You’re being tailgated by someone who is talking on a handheld cell phone. What should you do?

1. Maintain a safe and legal speed, and move out of the way if it’s safe to do so. You also may want to exit the road at your first opportunity.
2. Slow down slightly to encourage the tailgater to pass you. If the driver continues to tailgate, move out of the way or exit the road when possible.
3. Either option is an acceptable defensive driving technique.

3. You see a crash on the road and want to call 911. What should you do?

1. Call 911 only after you’ve stopped your car in a safe spot away from the crash site, put the car into park and turn on your emergency flashers.
2. Call 911 while driving past the crash – the quicker you call, the sooner they can make it to the crash site.
3. Nothing. You shouldn’t use your phone while driving for any reason, and you shouldn’t pull off to the side of the road in an emergency to make the call.

How to spot a distracted driver

According to the National Safety Council, a distracted driver may exhibit the following behaviors:

- Driving below the posted speed limit or failing to stop at a stop sign or red light
- Pulling out in front of your vehicle very suddenly or swerving quickly between lanes
- Talking on a cell phone, eating or drinking, grooming or putting on makeup, or adjusting or changing clothes
- Reaching for something in the vehicle, cleaning the inside of the windows or reading a map

some of the time.” Ten percent said they send texts or emails, and 14 percent read messages while driving.

“You can never risk your life, and the lives of people in your vehicle, by believing that other drivers will ‘get it’ about distracted driving,” said James Solomon, director of program development and training for the National Safety Council’s Defensive Driving Courses.

Solomon said motorists need to be aware that driving distracted is one of the most common and dangerous behaviors on the road, and they need to drive defensively to help keep themselves and their passengers safe.

Read through the following situations and select what you believe is the best response to each situation. The correct answers, provided by Solomon and Trombley, are available on p. 10.

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4. You’re running late for work, and you need to contact your boss to tell her you’ll be missing an important meeting. You’re stopped at a red light, and making that call will take only a few seconds. What do you do?
   1. Because your vehicle is completely stopped at the red light, it’s OK to make the call.
   2. Wait until you have the opportunity to pull off the road in a safe place where you can put the car into park, then make the call using your phone or hands-free device.
   3. Either option is an acceptable use of your cell phone or hands-free device.

5. With a group of friends, you jump into one of two cars to search for a place to eat. You’re in the lead car, which is driven by someone more familiar with the area. How do you keep in contact with the other group so they’ll know where to go?
   1. Both cars have dashboard hands-free calling. Connect the two cars so everyone, including the drivers, can communicate.
   2. As a passenger, offer to be the designated texter or caller in the car, and make sure the person you text or call in the other car isn’t the driver. The texters can speak to the drivers to provide real-time information on directions.
   3. Instruct the driver to email GPS directions through the on-board GPS to the driver in the other car. This way, the drivers won’t be distracted by their phones.

6. On a long trip, you find out the road you’re traveling on is under construction and will be closed 5 miles ahead. Unfamiliar with the area, you want to determine the quickest detour. What do you do?
   1. Input the road closure into your GPS while driving to find out the best detour route.
   2. Pull out your map from the back seat while you’re driving and figure out the best detour.
   3. Neither method is a safe way to find a detour around the road closure.

7. You catch your newly licensed teen driver texting while he’s pulling into your driveway. How do you react?
   1. Do nothing – you don’t want to lose your teen’s trust by micromanaging. If your child gets into a serious crash, that’s when it’s time to be strict.
   2. Firmly remind your teen of the consequences of distracted driving – both to his health and safety, but also in regard to cell phone and car privileges.
   3. Casually remind your teen about the safety risks of texting while driving, but then drop the point after that – if you tell your teen he can’t text and drive, your teen will rebel and likely start doing it even more.

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1. **Answer:** 3. You don’t want distracted drivers behind you because they can rear-end you, but you also don’t want to be in their blind spot in case they swerve into your lane. Keep an eye on the driver, but don’t allow yourself to become distracted by focusing all your attention on him or her, Solomon said. Make sure you pay attention to the rest of the road.

2. **Answer:** 3. Preferably, the tailgater will “get the hint” and pass you. However, if the driver is too distracted, you may want to do whatever you can to get out of the way – even if that means finding another road. Also, don’t pump your brake lights to encourage the other driver to pass. This is unsafe because if you do need to suddenly brake, the other driver may think you’re just pumping your brake lights at him or her again, and may not stop.

3. **Answer:** 1. It’s important to assist people after a crash, but you should not use your cell phone while driving. Drive a sufficient distance from the crash site before parking and calling so you’re not injured by any cars traveling past. Be ready to provide information about where the crash occurred, such as the road you’re on, the direction you were heading and, if available, the mile marker.

4. **Answer:** 2. As tempting as it may be to make a call at a red light, you need to be aware of your surroundings at all times when behind the wheel, even when your vehicle is stopped. This especially applies to intersections, which are some of the most common locations for crashes.

5. **Answer:** 2. Texting or calling on behalf of a driver helps keep him or her focused on the road and the task of driving, Trombley said.

6. **Answer:** 3. Always try to prepare for road closures before taking a long trip to avoid panicking about your route. In this scenario, researching directions in your GPS or on a map while driving would take your eyes off the road for too long, increasing your risk of crashing. It’s better to find an appropriate and safe place to park and then research the detour.

7. **Answer:** 2. It’s your responsibility as a parent to ensure your teen is aware of the risks associated with distracted driving. This also may be the time to have a discussion with your teen about expectations and consequences of unsafe driving.

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