

The Mindful Life

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MINDing theMIND

Ban Cell Phone Use While Driving?

We see it all the time; people talking on their cell phones while driving. It doesn't matter whether it's busy city traffic or cruising on an interstate highway. We like to think we can safely do both, but can we? Some companies apparently are concerned, and therefore require employees who drive fleet vehicles to use a hands-free headset while driving. Some localities have made hands-free headsets a requirement. These rules implies that the risk of simultaneously driving and talking on the telephone comes from having only two hands. The problem is that lab research indicates this is an inaccurate assumption.

For safety reasons research participants performed simulated driving tasks sitting in front of a computer. The participants used a joystick to make the cursor follow a moving target on the screen. At random intervals a green or red light would flash, and participants were instructed to hit a "brake" button on the joy stick each time they saw the red light. After several minutes of practice, participants then continued the task without distraction. This gave the researchers a baseline performance. Participants then continued the task while engaging in a hands-free telephone conversation, or while listening to a radio station of the participant's choosing. What differences do you think the researchers founds between these three conditions?

Compared to no distraction, students using the hands-free telephones had slower reaction times when "braking" and missed twice as many "traffic lights." Listening to the radio did not affect reaction times or detecting traffic signals. What does this mean for actual drivers? We probably aren't as good as we think we are at juggling the mental demands of driving and carrying on a telephone conversation. The important issue isn't having only two hands, but rather having only one attention.

"But wait," you say. "I listen to the radio, and that requires attention. And when someone else is in the car with me I naturally carry on a conversation, and no one has said anything about that being dangerous." True. However, there is an important difference between listening to the radio or having a live conversation versus maintaining a telephone conversation. You can quickly decide to ignore the radio if driving conditions require it. When the conversation partner is in the car he or she is at least somewhat aware of the driving conditions. So, that person automatically adjusts his or her role in the conversation accordingly. If the driving situation suddenly gets harry, the other person automatically stops talking, and may even point out something important to the driver. On a cell phone the other person keeps talking, no matter what suddenly happens in the driver's world. The result is that the driver may be distracted by the conversation, or at least momentarily torn between paying attention to the caller and to the road.

One additional problem is that most of us tend to think that the research or “numbers” don’t apply to us because we have above-average skill, or we are especially careful. This is a very common phenomenon, cutting across many different skills and tasks. People in general think they do an “above-average” job. That kind of self-inflated view can lead us to neglect benefitting from research designed to improve our lives.

Should cell phone use while driving be banned? That seems extreme. Perhaps it does make good sense to limit cell phone use to necessary conversations, and to turn off the cell phone when driving conditions require a heightened degree of attention and concentration, even for us “above-average” drivers. Using hands-free devices may simply give us a false sense of safety during an otherwise dangerous activity.

MIND Morsels

*The sun shines and warms and lights us and
we have no curiosity to why this is so
but we ask the reason of all evil, or pain, and hunger.*

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

Especially in the face of some catastrophic event, we look for reasons, for meaning behind something incomprehensibly horrific. Some religious leaders come forth, proclaiming that the catastrophe was retribution from God, or Allah, or some other higher being. From a psychology standpoint, it’s interesting that we automatically react differently to negative events compared to positive ones. Each day is filled with good things and aspects of our lives that “go right.” Those seem to fade into the background and are taken for granted. That’s the way things are supposed to be. It’s the negative things in life, and the times when things “go wrong,” that leave us wondering why. How much more difficult it is to notice the positive and marvel at why these things should be so good. Give it a try.

Continued

*And when is there time to remember,
to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total?*

— Tillie Olsen

Especially in our culture at this point in history, activity and productivity are the hallmarks of successful living. Knowing that time is limited, we try desperately to cram it all in. Being more efficient, creating more activity in a shorter span of time, is an enviable accomplishment. In contrast, physical inactivity may be (mis)taken as laziness—a character flaw. But, what if the human mind requires reflection and contemplation for optimal performance? What if spending time quieting the mind leads to clearer thought and calmer emotion later? Just as brief silences are necessary between notes in a musical performance, perhaps we need times of “mind silence” to make sense of the noise.

*Some people simply talk because they think
sound is more manageable than silence.*

— Margaret Halsey

One of the most difficult tasks new counselor face is learning to become comfortable with silence. Why are we so uncomfortable with shared silence? Perhaps it's because conversation helps us size up how the other person is reacting. We might also carry the illusion that if we share conversation with another, we have some control over what that person is thinking. Silence, however, invites uncertainty. What is the other person thinking? Feeling? Is the silence an indication of anger, confusion, or boredom? In any case, those are not “good” things in a social interaction. Certainly, in counseling silences can be the result of negative factors, such as anger, resistance, or confusion. Still, silences can also be the most productive periods of counseling as the silences allow each person to think and digest what has been said, and to think about how to best express oneself. How might our conversations with others have the potential to be clearer, more genuine, and more satisfying if we were open to silences as they emerge naturally in the course of our shared lives?