Texting and Driving: A Recipe for Tragedy

Cell phones and other electronic devices have become so central to our lives that they seem almost like extra limbs. Whether we’re snapping selfies, texting dinner plans, or logging our locations on Facebook, our phones are the magical portals to both our online and offline social lives. But when the cell phone meets the road, the results can be tragic. Ask yourself: how important is that text you’re about to type while you’re pulling out into traffic or coasting along the road home? Is it more important than your life? than someone else’s life?

Savannah Nash was a 16-year-old girl on her first drive alone, less than a week after getting her driver's license. She was on the way to the store to pick up a few items for her family's dinner that night. She had her whole life ahead of her—until she pulled out in front of an oncoming tractor trailer two blocks from her home. The collision killed her instantly. She was wearing her seat belt, but with the truck barreling down on her like a speeding brick wall, it didn't help. How could she have made such a stupid, deadly mistake? She didn't see her death coming because, very simply, she wasn't looking at the road at all. She was looking at her phone and typing a text. Emergency responders found that text still on her phone, unsent, in the smoldering wreckage of her car.

What about when the victim isn't the texter? Sometimes, it's an innocent man, woman, or child, or an entire family. In his documentary From One Second to the Next, director Werner Herzog focuses on four car accidents caused by texting while driving. Herzog, a legendary German filmmaker, interviews both the victims (or their surviving families) and the guilty drivers. He presents their stories in a matter-of-fact, understated way that makes them all the more chilling to watch. Hearing these people's choked-up voices and seeing their stricken faces forces us to realize that they are just ordinary people. What happened to them could happen to us as a result of a moment's inattention on the road. We, too, could become victims—or murderers.

In one story from the film, a young man named Martin tells us about the accident he caused while texting, an accident that he says felt “like a dream” for weeks afterward. He just couldn't believe that he, a regular guy, had done something so terrible. He was driving down a rural road and had just texted to his wife, “I love you” when he came up onto the horse-drawn buggy of an Amish family. Before he could react, his van had smashed into the buggy and killed three people, including two small children. The accident was a real-life nightmare that Martin will have to live in for the rest of his life.

But these accidents are rare, isolated incidents, right? Hardly. In fact, over 100,000 accidents a year involve drivers who are texting at the wheel, and the numbers are climbing quickly as cell phone use becomes even more universal and constant. There are three main types of distraction that increase the odds of a car crash:

- visual (taking your eyes off the road)
- manual (taking your hands off the wheel)
- cognitive (taking your mind off of driving)

Guess what type of activity involves all three?

In response to this growing problem, many people and organizations have been working to educate the public about the dangers of texting while driving. The website stoptextsstopwrecks.com, developed by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, provides some sobering facts and statistics: for
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example, the site tells us that using portable electronic devices while driving increases the risk of getting into a crash by three times. The site also provides tips for avoiding texting while driving, such as designating a texter—getting a passenger in the car to text for you.

Cell phone companies are also among those making an effort to combat the problem. AT&T’s “It Can Wait” campaign invites drivers to take a pledge not to text and drive. (So far, more than six million people have pledged.) The company also offers a “DriveMode” app that silences message alerts and sends auto replies to let your friends and family know that you'll respond later.

So how can you make a difference? First, of course, don't text and drive—ever. Second, speak up when you see others doing it. Friends don't let friends text and drive. Third, whenever you are driving, keep in mind that other drivers' eyes may not be on the road. Stay alert and drive defensively to prevent accidents before they happen. To borrow from the title of a Flannery O'Connor story, the life you save may be your own.