

# Distracted drivers: Your habits are to blame

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(Phys.org) —More than a decade of research has shown that using a handheld or hands-free phone while driving is not safe because the brain does not have enough mental capacity to safely perform both tasks at once.

Researchers have fallen short of explaining why drivers are so easily distracted until now. In two peer-reviewed [academic journals](#), Georgia Tech Assistant Professor Robert Rosenberger explains that, because people talk on the phone on a regular basis, they have developed learned habits that take over their awareness, sometimes entirely.

"By [habit](#), a driver's overall awareness is overtaken by the content of the [phone conversation](#) and not the demands of driving," said Rosenberger, a researcher in Georgia Tech's School of [Public Policy](#). "It doesn't even matter if the person's intent to focus on driving is stronger than the [willingness](#) to talk on the phone. Sooner or later, the phone-associated habits will subtly tug the awareness away from the road."

Rosenberger's alternative interpretation of the scientists' data is built from a philosophical perspective called phenomenology, or the study of [consciousness](#).

"When a person talks or texts on a phone, they go into a zone and everything around them seems to fall into the background of awareness," he adds. "For instance, you no longer hear the TV that you were watching seconds before the phone rang. Walls and adjacent objects seem to disappear. The only thing you concentrate on is the other

person's voice." Because [texting](#) is a two-way conversation, Rosenberger says the same theory applies.

However, having a conversation with a passenger in the car is different. Studies show that [driver distraction](#) isn't as great because passengers are active participants in the [driving experience](#).

"For instance, if two people are talking in a car and an [ambulance](#) approaches, they tend to stop speaking and look for the sirens," he says. "A person on the other end of the phone typically continues to speak because they aren't aware of the changing situation."

With new technology in the car dashboard becoming increasingly popular, Rosenberger is concerned that these features are giving drivers a false sense of security. Voice-controlled texting and dashboard apps are designed to keep a driver's hands and eyes away from a phone, but the greater risk of distraction remains, he says.

"People who see and use these new technologies may think, 'Now I don't have to look at my phone. And the technology is built right into the car, so it must be safe,'" he says. "But, just like state laws that prohibit handheld phone use and mandate hands-free use, they don't actually eliminate the distraction. In fact, one could argue that they encourage continued distractions."

Rosenberger insists that lawmakers should keep pace with regulating the use of this technology and society must be mindful as new legislation is created and implemented in order to address technological advances. He urges computer scientists and engineers to develop more options for drivers to preprogram different automated responses tailored to incoming calls, such as alerting callers that they're behind the wheel and unavailable.

"The smart choice for our own safety, and for the safety of pedestrians and other drivers, is to refrain from using communications technologies – even hands-free alternatives – while behind the wheel," he stated. "My suggestion: Use your drive time to unplug from the digital world."

His theories are outlined in the April issues of [Communications of the ACM](#) and [IEEE Technology & Society Magazine](#).

Provided by Georgia Institute of Technology

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