

Smart phones are distracting, but many users willing to accept the risks

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By Ashley Halsey III

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WASHINGTON - Have you bumped or crashed into something hard enough to cause a bruise or require a trip to the auto body shop? Do you struggle to recall what life was like before receiving the all-in-one communication, entertainment and source-of-knowledge device that fits in the palm of your hand?

Could there be a connection?

If you're like most people, you recognize the haze of distraction that captures other people but you don't think you're a likely victim.

Take distracted walking, the practice of moseying around your habitat or down the street with your eyes transfixed by your smartphone.

More than 75 percent of people surveyed said distracted walking was a "serious" issue, according to a survey by the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, but almost as many said it was "other people" who blundered about in an oblivious state.

A lot of distracted walking incidents fall into the almost-comical "Oops, pardon me" category, but the surgeons group says the number of emergency room visits by injured distracted walkers doubled with the rise in smartphone use between 2004 and 2010.

Distracted driving of all sorts killed at least 3,179 people last year. But all the attention paid to the deadly consequences in recent years hasn't stopped people from whipping out their smartphones.

A recent survey by the insurance company State Farm found that fewer people are talking on their phones while driving than they were in 2009. But the percent who are text-messaging went up five points to 36 percent, and the number using an Internet function more than doubled to 29 percent.

Both surveys reveal the addictive quality or Pavlovian response that comes with devotion to smartphones, almost a damn-the-danger attitude that many people can't escape.

The surgeons' survey found that 90 percent of people say they see people walking around glued to their phones, with 64 percent describing those distracted walkers as totally "zoning out." But only 38 percent of them admit to being zoned out themselves, a percentage that might be challenged by the evidence at almost any downtown street corner in America.

Alan Hilibrand, a surgeon who is a spokesman for the group, cites estimates that 60 percent of pedestrians are preoccupied with their smartphones.

Why do they continue to do it? People said they feel confident with multitasking or are too busy and want to be productive.

"Many of us simply need to force ourselves to set down our devices and focus on what's in front of and around us," Hilibrand said.

The same sort of numbers pop up in the State Farm survey.

Almost everyone says sending text messages while driving is distracting, but 36 percent of people say they do it. While 86 percent of people say dealing with social media is very distracting when behind the wheel, 21 percent say they read it and 16 percent they update their own.

The willingness to embrace distractions despite the perceived risk continues right down the line: reading email (23 percent do); recording video (10 percent); taking photos (19 percent); accessing the Internet on a smartphone (29 percent).

In all four of those instances, more than 80 percent of people told State Farm that the behavior was very distracting, and when those who thought it was "somewhat" distracting were added in, the percentage climbed into the mid 90s.

"It's interesting to observe how the number and types of distractions available on cellphones has grown over the years we have conducted this annual survey," said Chris Mullen, who directs technology research for the insurance company.

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As the variety of things that can be accomplished on a smartphone has increased, so too has the number of people who carry one. Virtually everyone under the age of 50 now has one, and in the age 65 and up age group, the number of people who own one has tripled to 69 percent in the past five years.

If there is good news to be found in the State Farm survey, it is that people are less likely to pay attention to their smart phone when driving if it's icy, snowy, foggy, rainy, dark or they're in a school or construction zone. But 48 percent of people said they are just as likely or more likely to use them on a high-speed highway or interstate.

Forty-six states and the District of Columbia now ban texting while driving; 14 states and D.C. prohibit hand-held use of smartphones; and 38 states have some restrictions on their use.

But unless a driver flashes by with a phone pressed to his or her ear, police are hard-pressed to catch violators. Now that most phones also have real-time location finders, however, police can pinpoint whether a phone was in use at the instant an accident occurred.

State Farm found that 48 percent of texting drivers said they would stop doing it if they ever crashed as a result. Forty-two percent they would stop if they feared legal consequences or fines, and 36 percent they wouldn't do it if they thought police could catch them.

Another apparent calculation of the will to take risks surfaced in response to two other questions posed by State Farm.

Eighty-four percent of those surveyed said they would agree with a law that banned any physical contact with a phone, and 61 percent supported a prohibition against using a smartphone for any activity while driving.

Those laws would require police to catch the offending driver.

But when asked if they would support mandatory use of technology that would block a smartphone from calling or texting, support dropped to 63 percent to stop text messaging and 44 percent to stop phone calling.

There are a number of technological solutions to block smartphone use currently on the market.

Only 23 percent in the State Farm survey said someone who kills a person while distracted by a smartphone should lose his or her driver's license. That number may have been distinctly lower only because 53 percent said the appropriate penalty was a prison sentence.

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