

Stay Safe, Stay Smart: A Teen's Perspective on Distracted Driving

By Sydney Calhoon

I'm a high school senior who's been hooked on driving since the days of those cute battery-operated jeeps. Fast forward through dirt bikes, four-wheelers, and finally, my first real car, a Honda Civic I lovingly named Bruce, and you've got me! I've been behind the wheel since I was a toddler, and I'm the friend trusted to take the wheel on group outings.

Being a two-sport athlete in basketball and softball, plus a musician, keeps me busy and constantly on the road. But there's one non-negotiable thing – my commitment to safety while driving, especially when it comes to texting while driving. When I get in the car, my phone is like Houdini – magically disappears before I start the engine. No incoming texts or snaps are worth risking anyone's safety. It's a conscious effort to resist that buzzing temptation. But it's not just about willpower. I've embraced tech to have my back. "Do Not Disturb While Driving" is my co-pilot – silencing notifications and sending a clear message that I'm off the grid while driving.

Beyond tech and willpower, let's go a bit deeper and look at this topic through my passion for psychology. I plan to major in psychology because I want to study the brain and human behavior. Understanding why people do what they do fascinates me. And guess what? This fascination extends to understanding the psychology behind distracted driving.

Distracted driving isn't just a buzzword; it's a sobering reality. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), around 3,142 people were killed in motor vehicle crashes involving distracted drivers in 2019 alone. Each statistic represents a life cut short or forever changed by a momentary lapse in attention.

So, why bring psychology into the mix? Because knowing the facts isn't enough; understanding the why behind distracted driving is crucial. We should unravel the complexities of why our brains struggle to resist the pull of that incoming text. Is it the fear of missing out (FOMO), the dopamine rush from immediate gratification, or the societal pressure to always be connected? Answering these questions and educating students can open up continued dialogue about distracted driving, and that's something more teens, schools, and families should be discussing.

To combat the epidemic of texting while driving, we need multifaceted efforts that include improved driver education, technology, and enforcement. Mandatory distracted driving training in driver's education programs is crucial, but it should be supplemented with ongoing education and awareness campaigns. These campaigns can utilize social media and influencers to reach teens and emphasize the importance of staying focused behind the wheel.

Additionally, integrating more technology into vehicles can play a role in preventing distracted driving. For example, automakers could develop advanced driver assistance

systems that detect when a driver is texting and provide alerts or intervene to prevent accidents. Smartphone manufacturers could also introduce features that automatically enable "Do Not Disturb While Driving" mode when a vehicle is in motion, reducing the temptation to use phones while driving. Finally, stricter enforcement of existing laws is also essential. Law enforcement agencies should prioritize efforts to identify and penalize drivers who engage in distracted driving behaviors.

As a senior in high school, athlete, musician, and future psychologist, I am committed to advocating for these improvements and ensuring that responsible driving becomes second nature to every teenager so we can avoid future tragedies on our roads.