

▶ HEALTH



Lindsey Harden had just turned 18 and was looking forward to graduation in six months when her world turned upside down. After fighting with her boyfriend one cold January morning, she stormed out on him. The fight continued by text messaging as she drove away. “We were feuding through text,” she recalls.

With her eyes on her phone, Harden didn’t see a patch of ice on the road ahead. She lost control of

the vehicle, and it slammed into a parked car and then a rock wall. She fractured her pelvis, seven ribs, and two disks in her neck. Both legs were badly broken. Sections of muscle, skin, and bone from her lower right leg were lost.

In the hospital, Harden suffered a *stroke*—brain damage caused by the interruption of the blood supply to the brain. It left her unable to control the muscles on the right side of her body. “I didn’t fully understand what happened to me until a month after the accident,” says Harden. As the shattered pieces of memory reassembled,

it became clear to her that her decision to text behind the wheel was a devastating mistake.

OVERWHELMED BRAIN

In 2009, Americans sent more than 1.56 trillion text messages, according to wireless industry statistics. No one knows how many of those messages were typed or read inside cars, says Deborah Trombley, but distracted driving is a huge problem in the United States. Trombley is a transportation program manager at the National Safety Council (NSC).

The NSC estimates that texting plays some part in at least 100,000

DRIVEN TO DISTRACTION

By
Kirsten
Weir

Why is texting while driving so dangerous?



Talking to a passenger is much less distracting than talking on a phone in a car because the passenger acts as a copilot, helping the driver attend to and avoid any dangers on the road.



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crashes per year. Talking on the phone plays an even bigger part. The NSC estimates that 1.2 million crashes a year—about 21 percent of all auto accidents—involve talking on a phone, including hands-free calls, while driving. In 2009, distracted driving led to accidents that injured half a million people and killed another 5,500, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Driving, texting, and talking on the phone are all *cognitively complex* tasks; they require sophisticated brain functions such as memory, attention, problem solving, and decision making. To better understand how the brain handles such tasks, the NSC compiled a report drawn from a number of research studies. The report concluded that the brain can't perform two cognitively complex tasks at the same time. Instead, it switches quickly from one task (such as checking the intersection ahead) to the next (such as glancing at a text). That switch happens so fast, it feels as if you're paying attention to both things at once. In reality, your overtaxed mind is overlooking important chunks of information—such as that red light you just blew through.

“When the brain is overwhelmed, it deals with it by choosing to block off some information. That information never gets into your working

memory,” Trombley says. “People aren't even aware that they're distracted.”

When drivers are distracted, their reaction time slows way down. That's bad because every millisecond counts behind the wheel. *Car and Driver* magazine recently tested a 22-year-old driver's reaction times as he drove under different conditions. In one test, he read a short text message while driving 56 kilometers (35 miles) per hour. He was so distracted that he traveled an extra 6.4 meters (21 feet)—more than one car length—before hitting the brakes. Overall, his reaction times were slower when he was sending and reading text messages than they were when he was legally drunk.

HARD LESSON

Why do so many drivers ignore the risks of distracted driving? “A lot of people are afraid they're going to miss out on something,” Trombley says. Drive carelessly, though, and you might miss out on the rest of your life.

Trombley suggests that drivers have passengers take calls or send texts for them. Or, better yet, get into the habit of tuning out incoming messages until they can be safely answered. “You can always catch up when you're parked,” she says.

Texting while driving is already illegal in 30 states, says Trombley,

and in 28 states teen drivers are banned from any type of cell phone use. More states are expected to pass similar laws.

Although breaking the law is obviously a bad idea, there's an even better reason not to drive distracted: your health. After her crash, Harden spent four months in the hospital and a rehabilitation center. She missed graduating with her class.

Two years later, the accident's effects still linger. Because of her stroke, Harden can't use her right hand. She still has swelling and pain in her legs and ankles and can't be on her feet for long. She has also suffered mental setbacks. “I have extreme problems with my memory, and I have a hard time concentrating,” she says.

Still, Harden knows she's lucky to have survived. No phone call or text is worth what she's been through, she says. “For your mind to fully focus, it has to have one task in front of it,” she says. “I've learned my lesson.” **CS**

Courtesy of Lindsey Harden (2)

Below: The wreckage of the car that Lindsey Harden accidentally drove into a rock wall. She was texting instead of keeping her eyes on the road when the accident happened. Bottom: a leg injury that Lindsey suffered in the accident



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