



How to Be a More Attentive Driver

by Denise McCluggage

When you are driving a car the "right thing" to pay attention to is driving that car. The intelligent driver is attending to the exterior surroundings (road conditions and traffic flow), the interior situation (controls, instruments, passengers) and to her own mind set (irritated, alert, preoccupied etc.) That is the ideal.

The reality is that the mere physical demands of just driving are limited. Monkeys and teenagers can do that part with ease, even brilliance, but real driving happens in the mind. To do it well requires more than physical skill. It requires the type of intelligence that pays attention to the right thing at the right time, knows what to do in new situations and how to do what is demanded.

The basics of driving — steering and pushing pedals — can soon be emptied of interest. Then, the mind can wander. Why not? It is enticed by a myriad of things both inside the car and out that are more interesting than simply driving.

Inside the car there are A/C or heat controls to fiddle with, music to be listened to, talk radio to yell back at, cell phones to be answered, Big Gulps to be gulped, passenger chatter to exclaim over, maybe even car-seated baby demands to be met.

Outside there's the fender-bender to be gawked at, the "1/3 off" sign in the shoe store window to be noted, the new building going up to be checked out, the parking place to be looked for. Actual driving seems to demand attention only when something dreadful is pending or has already happened: a car jumps the center divide, an SUV runs a stop sign, a truck loses its load of pipe, a sports car scoots from nowhere across your bow for the exit ramp, a dog darts from between parked cars.

Such things all seem to happen with no warning, but truth be told even "suddenly" is part of an evolution. The intelligent driver knows where trouble is likely to lurk and what situations engender; the alert driver can spot problems developing and not be at the epicenter if they materialize.

How can you as a driver cope with the rain of distraction that pounds on you at every moment? How can you be an intelligent driver? "Pay attention!" you are told. Concentrate! But how?

Here are four things that you must recognize that might help you as a driver avoid the pitfalls of distraction.

Recognize the risks of distractions.

The first step is to realize that any distraction carries risk with it. Your world may stop because you dropped the cassette on the floor, but the world you're driving in keeps motoring on.

Recognize your own signs of distraction.

As you drive be self-watchful. Learn to spot the indicators that you are bored or inattentive. Have standard checks. What do you notice in your mirrors? What's on the left of you? The right? If the scene has changed appreciably from the last time you checked you've been woolgathering.

Recognize that a distraction is just an attraction elsewhere.

When you see the lights and congestion of an accident in the opposite lane squelch the urge to gawk. Attend instead to maintaining your distance from the cars near you being aware that their drivers could be rubbernecking.

Recognize the inherent limitations of attention.

Good drivers know how to allot their limited attention to stay on top of any given situation. They also know that concentration often flees from efforts to evoke it. It prefers to be attracted to the task rather than forced and so they find something of interest in the daily-ness of driving that draws interest, that keeps the driver involved in the process of driving.

Once you realize how deadly distractions can be to you as a driver, you'll find new ways to keep your attention focused.

The Six Most Common Distractions

Radio and CD Players:

- Learn your system well enough to use by touch and sound alone. When buying a car, opt for fingertip controls on the steering wheel and head-up displays for tuning, if available.

- CD players require less fiddling. Decide your listening mood before you start and load the machine.
- Take advantage of the push button or scan devices on your sound system. If you are driving alone do your adjustments while stopped.
- If you have passengers, pre-instruct them in the use of the controls and let them be your trained surrogate while you're behind the wheel.

Pets:

- Ideally, transport small pets in carriers.
- •Check out pet restraint systems to limit injuries to them in crashes.

Children:

- Belt children in appropriate car seats. If you are tempted to belt them in other ways be sure you stop first.
- Don't get involved in inter-child arguments or who-started-it polemics. Forget the "Don't make me stop this car!" threats. Stop the car. Get it settled. You cannot be an upset mother and an alert driver at the same time.
- Forbid games that involve tossing a ball or anything else that might get under foot and interfere with the controls.
- Sure, play the alphabet game and the license tag game with them, but don't keep score. (You might get emotionally involved.)

Oral Fixations:

- If you have to eat on the go, prepare simple finger foods before you go.
- Drinks for in-car consumption should be in closed, spill-proof containers to reduce their distraction capability.
- If you must smoke while driving, wear something that getting burn holes in won't upset you.

Cell phones:

- Use a hands-free device for the phone and keep your hands on the wheel.
- Understand that it is the conversation itself, not the phone that is the most serious distraction. Keep it light, terse and short.
- Realize that phone use of any kind slows your reaction time thus lengthening braking time so allow other cars more space.