Walking While Distracted

Much has been said and published about “Driving While Distracted.” This Safety Tailgate is about “Walking While Distracted.” Distractions while driving can lead to motor vehicle crashes and severe injuries to others. Distractions while walking mainly lead only to the distracted person’s injury. Most of these injuries are related to slips, trips and falls but they can also result in injuries resulting from striking or being struck by things such as furniture, doors, motor vehicles and other hazards.

Multitasking: A Brain Drain
Multitasking is a myth. Human brains do not perform two tasks at the same time. Instead, the brain handles tasks sequentially, switching between one task and another. Brains can juggle tasks very rapidly, which leads us to erroneously believe we are doing two tasks at the same time. In reality, the brain is switching attention between tasks – performing only one task at a time.

In addition to “attention switching,” the brain engages in constant processing to deal with the information it receives:
1. **Select** the information the brain will attend to.
2. **Process** the information.
3. **Encode**, a stage that creates memory.
4. **Store** the information.

Depending on the type of information, different neural pathways and different areas of the brain are engaged. Therefore, the brain must communicate across pathways.

Furthermore, the brain must go through two more cognitive functions before it can act on saved information. It must:
1. **Retrieve** stored information.
2. **Execute** or act on the information.

When the brain is overloaded, all of these steps are affected. People may not realize this challenge within their brains.

**Brains may Face a “Bottleneck”**
Different regions of the brain must pull from a shared and limited resource for seemingly unrelated tasks, constraining the mental resources available for the tasks. Research has identified that even when different cognitive tasks draw on two different regions of the brain, we still can have performance problems when trying to do dual tasks at the same time. This may help explain why talking on cell phones can affect what a driver sees: two usually unrelated activities become interrelated. These tasks compete for our brain’s information processing resources. There are limits to our mental workloads.
Inattention Blindness
Distractions contribute to a withdrawal of attention from the visual scene, where all of the information someone sees is not processed. This may be due to how our brains make-up for receiving or processing too much information by not sending some visual information to the working memory. When this happens, people are not aware of the filtered information and cannot act on it. The danger of “inattention blindness” is that when someone fails to notice events in the environment, either at all or too late, it is impossible to execute a safe response to a hazard.

Attention Control
By controlling and appropriately focusing our attention we avoid slips, trips and falls and other hazards associated with walking. When it comes to avoiding almost all types of injuries, awareness of our present environment is critical. Many slip, trip and fall incidents are due to a person being pre-occupied or deep in thought that distracts their attention from the task of walking. Here are some examples of injuries caused by “inattention blindness.”

A person pre-occupied with thoughts about a work project may not notice the edge of the sidewalk, causing them to misstep and roll their ankle.

A person leaving a building may not notice an overhang and strike their head against the overhang, resulting in a head injury.

Another example might be someone talking on a cell phone and not realizing they are stepping off a curb, resulting in a fall.

Without proper attention control, these types of incidents can happen to anyone of us at anytime. We all can think of personal examples where we might have had a close call and could have been injured because our attention missed a hazard. Had our attention been appropriately focused, we would have safely negotiated that hazard. We safely negotiate potential hazards all the time when our attention is properly focused. It is important to remember to clear our minds, put down the cell phone, watch our step and appropriately address other distractions when we are in motion.

How Do We Focus Our Attention Appropriately
Here are some examples of things that can be done.

1. Taking care of first things first. Be decisive and determine what is an immediate need and what can wait until more time is available.
2. Completing one task before moving on to another.
3. Slowing down and not letting ourselves get hurried.
4. Get things done ahead of time instead of waiting for the last minute.
5. Staying organized and managing time effectively.
6. Writing things down instead of trying to remember things. This will free up some short-term memory.
7. Do any deep thinking while stationary or in an environment without a lot of distractions (such as a designated walking trail)
8. Managing competing interests for our time, such as children, co-workers and deadlines.
9. Don’t be afraid to ask for help, it is often available.

Keeping our attention focused does require personal discipline but the rewards are worth it!

References
www.distracteddriving.nsc.org