



Did You See the Clown?

You've probably heard reports about the dangers of multitasking while driving. And your parents have probably told you not to talk on your cell phone while driving too...perhaps once, or twice, or maybe 10,891 times. (Just count this as 10,892.) Yet even if we know we shouldn't do it, too many of us still do. The danger can seem abstract, and it's hard to grasp just how dangerous it is in concrete terms. So one study set out to really drive home the point about how dangerous these distractions can be, and it did so by asking a simple question: Did you see the clown?

Researchers decided to test people's attention and awareness in public spaces, by having a clown ride past them on a unicycle. It's the type of thing you think you'd notice, right? Yet surprisingly, a large number of people surveyed afterwards were completely unaware. If people were walking with someone else and carrying on a conversation or otherwise attuned to their environment, they did pretty well. But those who were distracted by other tasks were often completely oblivious to the circus side show strolling by them.

The worst performers were those who were talking on cell phones as the clown went by. Among this group, when stopped and questioned about it afterwards, only 25% of them said they noticed the clown. The scientists concluded that cell-phone conversations demand a different neurological engagement, causing us to create mental imagery that drowns out "the processing of real images." In other words, while we're thinking about a conversation that is taking place in the netherworld, our brains work harder creating mental images for our discussion, which means less power is focused towards processing what is in our immediate environment. Thus we miss seemingly obvious things, a process known as inattention blindness.

Driving is not a time you want to be missing clowns on unicycles that stroll right past you, or anything else for that matter. Sure, we might get away with it from time to time, merely because the roads can be rather monotonous, just like the routine task of walking down the street.

But it's those unexpected things that arise out of the blue which are the most dangerous, and these are precisely the type of things we're most likely to miss when talking on a cell phone: A green light that turns red between the glance we took 300 yards away and the time we reach it; a car that suddenly slams on their brakes unexpectedly; a child on her bicycle that swerved right in front of you. So stay off the phone while driving, and avoid other distractions as well. Because the things that you don't see while talking on your cell-phone and driving can be so much more menacing than a clown.

