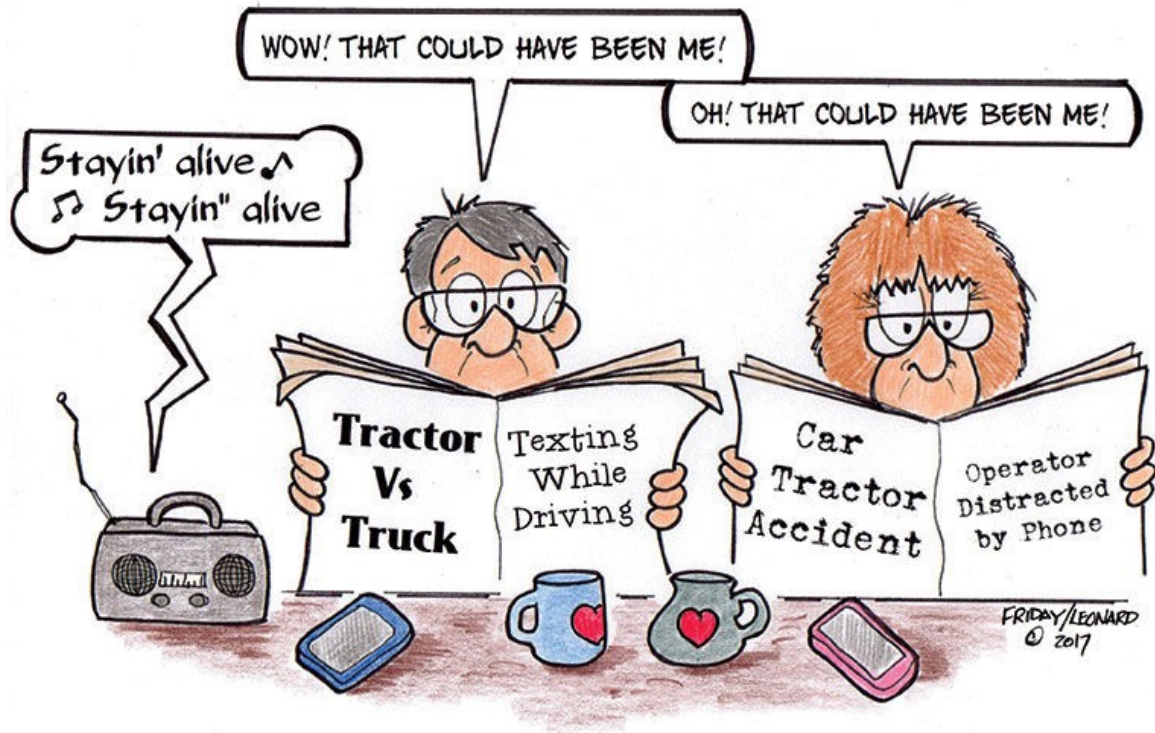


## Safety Watch: Safe travel means busting some myths

by Stephanie Leonard



May 11, 2017

Last month, rural Iowa communities lost two residents in tractor-vs-passenger vehicle crashes. Both were rear-ended while driving tractors on public roadways.

Steve Wilson's tractor overturned on Highway 218 near Donnellson when an SUV struck the mower he was pulling. Wilson's head hit the pavement, he died three days later.

Kenny Mosher's tractor went into the ditch when it was struck by a pickup near Aurora. Mosher was ejected.

Most of us don't personally know the families affected but were touched by their losses. Many of us realize "it could have been me (or someone I care about)" — knowing the vulnerability of family, neighbors and coworkers on tractors and ag equipment driving 30 or 40 mph slower than other traffic.

We should be concerned. More than 2.1 million rear-end crashes occurred in 2015, accounting for one-third of all motor vehicle crashes and one-third of crash injuries. Rear-end collisions are

the most common crashes in the United States, according to the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA).

The National Safety Council (NSC) and NHTSA warn that traffic crashes and traffic fatalities are on the rise. Over 40,000 people died in crash fatalities in 2016, up 14 percent from 2014, the largest increase in 50 years.

Ninety-four percent of crashes are caused by driver errors: distraction, inattention, speed, fatigue, alcohol and others.

### **Safe driving myths**

The largest contributing factor for rear-end collisions is inattention, and cell phones and on-board technology are leading distractions. In light of these facts, we should take a hard look at our own perceptions and driving habits.

A recent NSC survey of drivers found 67 percent of drivers said they felt at risk because another driver was distracted by technology. Yet 25 percent said their own distraction with technology put themselves or others at risk.

So most drivers recognize distracted driving is a hazard, but don't recognize themselves (or I should say, ourselves!) as "that driver" who's part of the problem. Researchers call this "optimistic bias." In other words, "I'm good at multi-tasking; other drivers cause accidents." We need to do better at recognizing it also "could have been me (or someone I care about)" coming up too fast on a slower vehicle, distracted.

NSC identifies several (mis)perceptions about driving:

- Drivers can multi-task. Wrong. Our brains can toggle back and forth between two activities but can't perform two tasks at the same time. Think about carrying on a conversation while watching a TV show. Your attention switches back and forth, but you can't process both in the same instant. Activity in the area of the brain that processes moving images decreases by one-third while listening on the phone. The result while driving is slowed reaction time.
- Talking on a cell phone is the same as talking to a passenger. Not true. Adult passengers help drivers stay alert, and they help monitor road conditions and identify hazards. They recognize when to stop talking in demanding driving situations. The person on your cell conversation doesn't know what's happening on the road.
- Hands-free communication is safe. False. NSC reports hands-free communication — including in-dash communication, speakerphone, earpieces and voice-to-text — is as dangerous as using hand-held phones in terms of visual, hearing and cognitive distraction.

Drivers on a phone miss up to 50 percent of their surroundings because visual focus shrinks to what's just ahead of their vehicle.

### **Rules of the road**

The fact is, the benefits of attentive and defensive driving outweigh convenience of having a phone at the ready. Here are a few things we can do.

**Drivers can:**

- Turn off notifications or phone technology while behind the wheel.
- Practice visual scanning left, right, ahead and behind. Scanning a half mile ahead helps identify intersections, lane changes or traffic and road conditions and anticipate what drivers ahead may slow down for.
- Stay at least 3 seconds behind the vehicle ahead. This allows for the response time and travel distance needed to stop safely. The rule works for all speeds, because as speed increases, the safe distance required to stop also increases.

When the vehicle ahead passes a landmark, start counting. If you reach the landmark in less than 3 seconds, you're too close. Maintaining a safe following distance gives a larger field of vision to scan and keeps you out of the blind zone of the driver ahead.

**Passengers can:**

- Speak up. Tell the driver you're not comfortable with using a phone or technology while driving.
- Be attentive. Help the driver scan the roadway and anticipate other drivers' actions.

**Family members, coworkers, and friends can:**

- Make an agreement that calls and texts won't be made or answered during a driver's travel time. Arrange to check in at the destination or at a break time off the road.

Let's do what it takes to get everyone home safely. #justdrive

To learn more, visit [www.nsc.org](http://www.nsc.org) and [www.nhtsa.gov/risky-driving](http://www.nhtsa.gov/risky-driving)

---

*Steph Leonard is an industrial hygienist at the University of Iowa. Contact her at [stephanie-leonard@uiowa.edu](mailto:stephanie-leonard@uiowa.edu) or 319-335-4432.*