



Mental Distraction Activity Guide

Mental distraction (also called cognitive distraction) is dangerous for drivers because humans cannot do two thinking tasks at the same time. Unfortunately, drivers do not recognize this type of distraction while it is happening. The following exercises can help employees understand mental distraction and realize why it is not possible to drive safely, with full attention on driving, while talking on a cell phone.

These activities ask employees to do two thinking tasks at once, and see how they perform on both tasks. Also ask if employees noticed whether the phone call or conversation became the priority, when it became difficult to do both tasks at the same time.

Activity #1: Watch TV and Talk

Try to watch your favorite TV show for 15 minutes while talking on your cell phone. If you have a DVR, record the program while you are on the phone. If not, ask someone to sit in the room with you during the exercise.

When you are finished with the conversation, describe the plot of the TV show to the other person watching and tell them about your cell phone call. You will realize you weren't able to pay attention to everything in both activities

Activity #2: Talk While Writing

This activity is great within a department or at staff meetings. Ask for a volunteer. The volunteer will be asked to have a cell phone conversation with another employee. During that conversation, a third employee will read from a prepared script and ask the volunteer to transcribe what is being read while talking on the cell phone. The volunteer cannot ask either person to repeat what was said.

The person having the phone conversation with the volunteer should craft some basic but mentally engaging questions to ask (i.e., where did you grow up? What is your pet's name?). Print the questions for employees to take home and do with their families. The employee dictating what the volunteer is supposed to write should read from a prepared script.

Afterward, ask the volunteer what the cell phone conversation was about and compare their answer to the other cell phone user's. Compare what was written to what was read. The volunteer will not be able to show he or she accurately captured the cell phone conversation or the dictated directions.

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Activity #3: Talk Through Disruptions

Ask for a volunteer from the audience. You and that individual will have a conversation about the dangers of cell phone use. You could ask questions such as:

- Do you think using a cell phone while driving is a safe behavior?
- What do you think when you see people using their cell phones while driving?
- What are your thoughts on texting while driving?

The goal is to ask questions that are not yes/no questions and that will stimulate thought by the person you are speaking with. Try your hardest to maintain eye contact with the volunteer who is answering the questions.

Shortly after that conversation starts, have two interrupters of the same gender who are dressed similarly. This scenario will be staged so that one interrupter will approach the people having a conversation and say 'excuse me' and walk through the group. That person goes out of sight. From that same direction the other interrupter will walk back through the group without saying anything, but walk through the group the exact same way – not making eye contact with anyone and then going out of sight. The goal is to see if the volunteer who is answering the questions realized it was someone else who cut back through. Another interrupter in the room will cause other distractions – a cough, a ringing cell phone, have a few people get up to use the washroom, etc. The goal is to keep changing the environment.

After a few minutes of conversing with the volunteer, and after the 'interrupters' are done, ask the volunteer the following:

- How many times did someone interrupt us by walking through?
- Who interrupted us while we were talking?
- Were there any other interruptions that happened?
- Explain what the interruptions were?
- How many interruptions were there in all?

Check the volunteer's answers against what was staged.

When National Safety Council staff tested this activity, our participants were so involved in the conversation that they didn't even notice someone walking between them! Try it, and see what happens for you.

