

December 20, 2009

(c. Online)

Madness on the road

By [Yvonne Abraham](#)
Globe Columnist

Pull me over, officer.

Use your flashing lights and your siren, so that I'm humiliated. Take your time, so I'm really late for whatever I'm going to. Write me a ticket so big it hurts. Make me feel every inch the irrational twit that I am.

I text at stop lights and in traffic jams, and steal glances at my inbox while I'm driving. Somebody has to stop me. That's why I was thrilled with Wednesday's news that the [Boston City Council passed a ban](#) on texting while driving. If the Legislature approves it, police could slap fines on people like me.

I know I'm not the only one who does this. Some take even bigger chances, texting while their car is really moving, looking down at those tiny screens for the length of an entire football field. We all [risk killing ourselves, and others](#).

A lot of us are otherwise pretty sensible - even risk-averse - people. So what happens to us when we get behind the wheel?

I put that question to Dan Ariely, a behavioral economist at Duke University, and the author of a book called "Predictably Irrational." Last semester, he asked the 200 students in his class if they ever texted while driving. All but three raised their hands - and one of those three is blind.

And in case you're wondering: Yes, Ariely has done it too, though these days he puts his smart phone on the passenger-side floor so he can't reach it while he's driving. He said a lot of texting-while-moving episodes start at traffic lights. But then red becomes green, and the madness begins.

"We've invested something in the task, we don't want to erase it or risk losing it, so we keep doing it," he said.

We have bizarre relationships with our phones, Ariely says. No kidding. I recently retrieved my Blackberry from the bottom of a toilet bowl with my bare hands (Neither of us has been the same since). We're addicted to them, in the same way a gambler is hooked on instant lottery tickets, scratching away at dud after dud in search of random and unpredictable rewards. Most of the e-

mails we get are worthless, offering to make ladies happy or politicians pay. But once in a while, there's a good one. The thing is, we don't know when an important message is coming, and that unpredictability makes us more enthusiastic about checking for it.

The more often we text without causing an accident, the safer we think it is. Ariely called this a biased perception of probability. Personally, I prefer the more technical term, blockheadedness.

“Behind the wheel, we have this illusion of control,” he said. “Also, people think they are better drivers than everybody else.”

Ariely and his colleagues are pushing for motorists to put pictures of their kids in their cars to remind them to be sensible behind the wheel, and working on a free application that would make it impossible to use cellphones in cars. A Concord-based company called Illume already offers a [not-free one, called iZup](#). Company cofounder Darcy Ahl has it installed on her Blackberry. “I'm really trying to unlearn this behavior,” she said.

So is John Tobin, the city councilor responsible for the Boston ban.

“All these close calls you hear about, I had them,” he says. Tobin's cure came in the form of a [very disturbing, graphic British public service announcement](#) on the topic sent to him by a Beth Israel doctor. He sent the YouTube link along a few days ago. I haven't picked up my phone in the car since.

But I'm afraid the memory of those awful scenes will fade, that I'll start behaving irrationally again. I want the texting ban made law now - not just in Boston, but across the entire country. Because I don't trust myself.