

Women are often stereotyped as bad drivers. And as good multitaskers. There's a link – and understanding it could save your life.  
By Andrea Todd

# DEADLY DRIVING MISTAKES WOMEN MAKE

**B**ailey Goodman and her friends had a lot to be happy about last June when they piled into two cars for a trip to Bailey's parents' holiday house, 80km from their hometown of Fairport in the US. Among the things they were celebrating: high-school graduation, a cheerleading championship, college acceptances ... and the summer holidays.

Bailey was at the wheel of her parents' Chevy TrailBlazer, leading the

way. Half an hour into the drive, something went terribly wrong. Bailey overtook a van on the two-lane road, successfully turned back into her lane and then inexplicably veered out again into the oncoming lane – straight into a truck. The four friends in the second car watched in horror as both vehicles slammed through a fence and into a shallow ditch, flames shooting into the air. The Chevy was crushed beneath the truck, incinerated. Bailey and the four girls with her had died on impact.

A toxicology report showed that neither drugs nor alcohol had been a factor. But a troubling fact emerged when police investigators pulled cellphone records: an SMS had been sent from Bailey's phone at 10.05pm, just moments before the first 911 call reporting the collision. It's possible that someone else in the car typed the message. But it's also true that if Bailey herself typed it, she was only doing what many of us do – unaware of the terrible risk.



**MORE IS NOT MERRIER**  
With every additional passenger a young driver carries, the risk of a fatal crash increases.  
—THE JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

Although alcohol is still a leading cause of car accidents, being distracted – by cellphones or any other form of ‘multitasking’, such as eating, arguing or putting on lipstick while driving – is increasingly putting our lives in danger.

A survey in the US by Nationwide Insurance showed that 37% of drivers between the ages of 18 and 27 and 17% of those between 28 and 44 send SMSs while driving. This helps explain a 2006 US report that almost 80% of crashes and 65% of near-crashes involve ‘driver

inattention’ within three seconds of the collision.

Perhaps the fact that women tend to multitask partly explains research that shows the number of women drivers having accidents is going up.

According to one US survey, the number of female drivers having fatal accidents rose by 60% between 1975 and 1998. The study, by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), also shows that the rate among men dropped 10% in that time.

## GRIM STATS

In South Africa, car accidents are the second leading cause of death of people aged between five and 29.

Abuse of alcohol and drugs is still one of the top factors involved. The blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of almost 51% of the 570 drivers killed in accidents in South Africa and tested after their death by the Medical Research Council during 2004 exceeded the legal blood alcohol limit (0,05g/ml), while in 2005 46,5% of all drivers tested had a BAC exceeding the limit. Just under 10% had more than five times the legal limit.

But other risks – such as rage, frustration and fatigue as well as multitasking – are increasingly to blame.

The first comprehensive statistical analysis of road accidents in South Africa, published by the Road Traffic Management Corporation in 2005, found that almost 80% of crashes in South Africa in 2004 could be attributed to ‘human factors’, such as disobeying traffic rules, driving too fast, or being distracted, aggressive, reckless or negligent.

## DISTRACTED DRIVING

Eating, talking intently to a passenger or arguing, tuning a radio, operating a CD player, smoking, sending SMSs, talking on a cellphone, reading (even if it’s a map) and putting on makeup seriously affect a driver’s ability to drive well, says SA forensic motor investigator Stan Bezuidenhout.

‘There’s an almost irresistible temptation to multitask while we’re

driving, especially on long drives or in traffic,’ says Russ Rader, spokesperson for the IIHS.

Hands-free kits make little difference, says Bezuidenhout. Whether you’re physically holding a cellphone or not, talking on it means that less of your brain’s processing capability is allocated to driving.

## CAR SMARTS

- ★ Adjust all systems – climate control, seats, the CD player – before driving off.
- ★ If you absolutely have to use a cellphone, ask a passenger to dial the number, or pull off the road and stop the car.
- ★ Don’t read maps while driving; pull over. If you have a GPS device, set it before starting out.

## TIRED DRIVING

Driving when we’re too tired to think straight is scarily common. There’s the toll of our busy lives – from the long hours we often work to the late nights we often enjoy – as well as the mind-numbing boredom of commuting along the same route. ▶

## CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

THESE ARE THE PENALTIES IN SOUTH AFRICA FOR DISOBEYING SOME OF THE RULES OF THE ROAD:

- ★ FOR DRIVING ‘UNDER THE INFLUENCE’ or with a blood-alcohol concentration of 0,05g per 100ml or more, a person may be fined up to R24 000 or imprisoned for up to six years, or both. The court can order that the person’s driver’s licence be endorsed, suspended or cancelled entirely. An unlicensed driver may be disqualified from obtaining a driver’s licence.
- ★ The fine FOR TALKING ON A CELLPHONE while driving is R500.
- ★ The fine FOR NOT WEARING A SEAT BELT is R200.

## SA REPORT

If you've been drinking – even if you haven't overdone it – you can get sleepy, because alcohol depresses the nervous system. Medications, such as certain antihistamines and antidepressants, can have the same effect.

### CAR SMARTS

- ★ Stop driving immediately if you start to doze off.
- ★ Consume caffeine (the equivalent of two cups of coffee) if you're weary. Even keeping a box of chocolate-covered beans in the car can help.

### EMOTIONAL DRIVING

It's tempting to hop into your car for a solo drive as a form of therapy or to cool off after a shouting match with your boyfriend, a showdown with a co-worker or a nasty comment from your mom. But driving while under emotional stress is an underestimated driving risk.

You can tell you shouldn't be on the road if the drive seems much shorter than usual, you haven't noticed the kilometres go by or you go right past your turn-off. It's a similar risk to talking on a cellphone – thinking about, or reliving, an upsetting incident or conversation taxes your brain's capacity for focusing on the road.

### CAR SMARTS

- ★ Do not leap into your car and drive off after an emotionally upsetting event. Go for a walk.
- ★ Don't drive aimlessly around with no destination in mind.
- ★ Don't let a friend drive emotionally either. Treat it like drunken driving: take away her keys or offer to drive her.
- ★ Don't fight or discuss emotionally charged topics.

### DUMB DRIVING

These are the you-really-know-better scenarios. Just using your common sense and obeying traffic laws will help save your life – so use signals; wear your seat belt; wear flaties (keep the stilettos for the party); make sure any pets are

leashed or caged; and keep to the speed limit. (For every 16km an hour over 80km you drive, your chances of death or serious injury double.)

Even simply being new to driving is a risk factor for accidents. Some 35% of road-accident casualties are in the 20-to-29 age group. But Caroline da Silva, portfolio manager at Santam, says that with the influx of new drivers on to South African roads there are many older drivers who have little or no driving experience. 'Today, a 30-year-old driver may have a lot less driving experience than a 24-year-old,' she says.

### CAR SMARTS

- ★ Wear your seat belt and insist that everyone else in the car do the same. It is the law!
- ★ Be wary of riding with a newly licensed driver – whatever his or her age.

### DRUNK DRIVING

According to US statistics (there are none currently available for SA), a person is 11 times more likely to be in a fatal accident when drunk. For a 55kg woman, it takes about three drinks in an hour on an empty stomach. (Drugs have a similar effect to alcohol on the brain's functioning.)

### CAR SMARTS

- ★ Arrange for a designated driver or a cab if you're going drinking.
- ★ If you're very tired, having one drink can feel like having four ... and could have the same effect on your driving abilities.
- ★ Tell your inebriated friend that you've heard a road block has been set up on the route home.
- ★ If your party got too boozy, offer a 'hangover brunch' for anyone who wants to stay the night.

## WHEN THE PARTY'S OVER...

**HAD A BIG NIGHT AT FRIENDS AND STAYED OVER TILL MORNING TO AVOID DRIVING ILLEGALLY?** It may not be wise to head off first thing either – you could still be intoxicated! It takes approximately one

## TOO CLOSE TO HOME

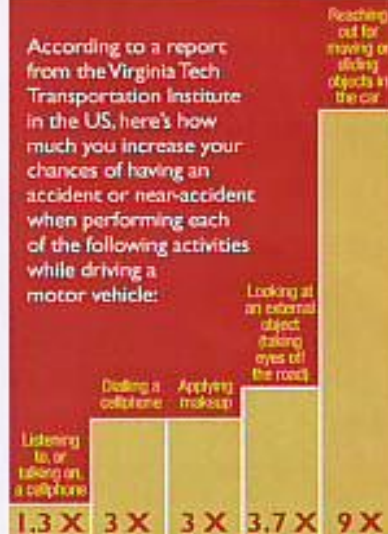
### DRIVING AN UNKNOWN ROUTE CAN PRESENT DANGERS BUT SO, PERHAPS SURPRISINGLY, CAN DRIVING A REGULAR ROUTE.

Studies have shown that when we're driving near home, we tend to become complacent. A 2005 UK report revealed that 32% of car accidents happen within 2km of the driver's home and 60% within 8km.

Drivers experience a 'switching off' syndrome on familiar roads, letting their minds wander over work, family or that evening's date. We often prepare for longer journeys by having an early night and making sure the car is safe – but we get complacent about shorter trips, working a 50-hour week and then tackling an hour's drive home in Friday rush-hour traffic without a second thought.

## PLAYING THE ODDS

According to a report from the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute in the US, here's how much you increase your chances of having an accident or near-accident when performing each of the following activities while driving a motor vehicle:



hour for the liver to process the alcohol in one drink. So, if you've downed two beers and three glasses of wine followed by five shooters by Saturday midnight, you're not safe to drive until well after 10am on Sunday morning. □