

WE'RE MULTITASKING WHILE WALKING OUR DOGS ANIMAL EXPERTS SAY THIS IS A PROBLEM

BY BRANDON GRIGGS, CNN
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A DOG WALKER CHECKS HIS PHONE WHILE GUIDING DOGS ON FEBRUARY 21, 2023, AT WASHINGTON PARK IN DENVER.

WE'VE ALL SEEN IT. MANY OF US HAVE DONE IT.

WE TREAT DOG WALKS AS A CHANCE TO ACCOMPLISH TWO (OR THREE) THINGS AT ONCE, LEADING OUR POOCHES AROUND THE NEIGHBORHOOD WHILE GAZING AT OUR PHONES, CHATTING WITH A FRIEND, LISTENING TO A PODCAST OR PUSHING A STROLLER.

THE MORE AMBITIOUS AMONG US EVEN INCORPORATE DOGS INTO OUR EXERCISE REGIMENS, JOGGING OR BIKING WHILE OUR PETS TROT ALONGSIDE. IT'S UNDERSTANDABLE. IN TODAY'S OVERSCHEDULED WORLD, THIS KIND OF MULTITASKING CAN FEEL EXTRA PRODUCTIVE. AND WALKING A DOG TWICE A DAY AROUND THE SAME STREETS CAN GET BORING.

BUT ANIMAL BEHAVIORISTS SAY THAT AT BEST, DOG WALKERS WHO AREN'T PAYING FULL ATTENTION CAN CONFUSE DOGS OR FRUSTRATE BY GIVING THEM CONFLICTING SIGNALS. AND AT WORST, THEY CAN ENDANGER THE DOG'S SAFETY — AND THEIR OWN AS WELL.

"IT'S KIND OF LIKE THE DOG-WALKING EQUIVALENT OF DISTRACTED DRIVING," SAYS [LESLIE SINN](#), A BOARD-CERTIFIED VETERINARY BEHAVIORIST IN ASHBURN, VIRGINIA.

“YOU’RE NOT PAYING ATTENTION TO THE SIGNS THAT YOUR DOG IS UNCOMFORTABLE ... AND IF YOU’RE MISSING ALL THOSE CLUES BECAUSE YOUR HEAD IS ELSEWHERE, THAT’S A PROBLEM.”

DOGS CAN GOBBLE SOMETHING HARMFUL WHEN YOU’RE NOT LOOKING

MATT SEMRAD IS AN AVID READER AND DEVOURS AUDIOBOOKS FROM THE LIBRARY — ABOUT ONE A WEEK. HE ALSO SPENDS SEVERAL HOURS EACH DAY WALKING HIS TWO BLACK DOODLES, SIRIUS AND SONNY.

SO TO MAXIMIZE HIS READING TIME, THE SUBURBAN ATLANTA RESIDENT LISTENS TO BOOKS ON HIS DOG WALKS.

“I WOULD BE BORED JUST WALKING THE DOGS,” HE SAYS.

SEMRAD SAYS HE DOESN’T WORRY MUCH ABOUT HIS DOGS’ WELL-BEING ON WALKS BECAUSE THEY’RE WELL-BEHAVED AND HE WATCHES THEM CLOSELY WHEN THEY PASS OTHER DOGS ON THE STREET.

OTHER DOG WALKERS MAY NOT BE AS VIGILANT. CNN SPOKE TO A HANDFUL OF ANIMAL BEHAVIORISTS WHO SAY THEY ROUTINELY SEE PEOPLE WALKING DOGS IN THEIR NEIGHBORHOODS WHO ARE ON THEIR PHONES OR PUSHING STROLLERS AND APPEAR TO BE LARGELY IGNORING THEIR PETS. THIS CAN POSE A SAFETY PROBLEM FOR SEVERAL REASONS, DOG EXPERTS SAY.

[RESEARCH HAS SHOWN](#) THAT ONLY A SMALL PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE CAN MULTITASK EFFECTIVELY. DISTRACTED DOG WALKERS MAY NOT NOTICE POTENTIAL THREATS: BICYCLISTS, JOGGERS, CARS OR UNLEASHED DOGS, EXPERTS SAY.

BY THE TIME A PERSON LOOKS UP FROM THEIR PHONE, THEIR PET COULD BE IN AN ALTERCATION WITH ANOTHER DOG — OR WORSE.



A MAN SPEAKS ON A PHONE WHILE PUSHING A CHILD IN A STROLLER AND WALKING A DOG ON APRIL 20, 2020 IN NEW YORK CITY.

“YOU NEED TO BE ALERT AT ALL TIMES,” SAYS JACOB HOLLIER, FOUNDER OF [CRATE ESCAPE](#), A DOG-WALKING AND PET-SITTING SERVICE BASED IN ATLANTA. “IF THERE’S A CAR OUT OF CONTROL OR A SCOOTER COMING ON THE SIDEWALK ... AT ANY GIVEN MOMENT, IT COULD BE DANGEROUS AND POSSIBLY BE FATAL.”

HOLLIER SAYS HE REQUIRES HIS EMPLOYEES TO STAY OFF THEIR PHONES WHILE WALKING DOGS — EXCEPT TO SNAP PHOTOS OF THE DOGS TO SEND TO THEIR OWNERS.

“I WORK WITH AN 180-POUND GREAT DANE, AND I HAVE TO BE WATCHING HIM AT ALL TIMES,” HE SAYS. “HE’S BIGGER THAN ME.”

IT’S NOT JUST THE DOGS THAT ARE AT RISK. EXPERTS SAY THEY HAVE SEEN DISTRACTED DOG WALKERS INJURE THEMSELVES TRIPPING OVER SIDEWALKS OR EVEN THEIR OWN DOGS. [ONE STUDY FOUND](#) THAT HUMANS’ INJURIES WHILE DOG WALKING INCREASED MORE THAN FOURFOLD FROM 2001 TO 2020.

ALSO, DOGS ARE NOTORIOUS FOR EATING STUFF THAT’S BAD FOR THEM, EXPERTS SAY. “IF YOU AREN’T PAYING ATTENTION, DOGS CAN PICK UP AND EAT THINGS QUICKLY — CHICKEN BONES, CIGARETTE BUTTS, DEAD/POISONED RATS, ETC.,” SAYS [AMY L. PIKE](#), A BOARD-CERTIFIED VETERINARY BEHAVIORIST IN FAIRFAX, VIRGINIA.

“IF YOU DIDN’T SEE IT, YOU WON’T KNOW TO TAKE THEM INTO THE VET. OR IF YOU DO TAKE THEM IN BECAUSE THEY ARE SICK, YOU WON’T KNOW WHAT THEY INGESTED, WHICH HELPS YOUR VET TREAT THEM.”

DISTRACTED DOG WALKERS CAN AFFECT PETS’ MENTAL HEALTH, TOO

PHYSICAL SAFETY IS THE MOST URGENT CONCERN, BUT DISTRACTED DOG WALKING ALSO CAN BE DETRIMENTAL TO A DOG’S BEHAVIORAL TRAINING AND EVEN MENTAL HEALTH, EXPERTS SAY.

A MULTITASKING DOG OWNER MAY BE MISSING AN OPPORTUNITY TO REINFORCE BASIC TRAINING — SIT, COME, STAY AND OTHER COMMANDS — IN A PRACTICAL SETTING, SAYS ANIMAL BEHAVIORIST [MARY R. BURCH](#), DIRECTOR OF THE AMERICAN KENNEL CLUB’S FAMILY DOG PROGRAM.

SOMEONE BURIED IN THEIR PHONE ALSO MAY NOT NOTICE WHEN THEIR DOG BECOMES AGITATED OR SHOWS SIGNS OF FATIGUE OR AN INJURY.

“YOUR DOG ‘SPEAKS’ PRIMARILY WITH THEIR NON-VERBAL BODY LANGUAGE,” PIKE SAYS. “IF YOU AREN’T PAYING ENOUGH ATTENTION TO WHAT THEY ARE ‘SAYING,’ YOU WON’T KNOW HOW YOUR DOG FEELS.”

WALKS ARE ABOUT MORE THAN PHYSICAL EXERCISE FOR DOGS — THEY OFFER MENTAL BENEFITS AS WELL, SAYS VALLI PARTHASARATHY, A BOARD-CERTIFIED VETERINARY BEHAVIORIST AT [SYNERGY VETERINARY BEHAVIOR](#) IN PORTLAND, OREGON.

PARTHASARATHY SAYS DOGS LIKE STRUCTURE AND CONSISTENCY ON THEIR WALKS.



A WOMAN WALKS HER DOG WHILE RIDING A BIKE ON SEPTEMBER 19, 2013, NEAR ATOCHA TRAIN STATION IN MADRID, SPAIN.

IF THEIR OWNER IS JUST MARCHING FORWARD OR NOT PAYING FULL ATTENTION, THE DOG COULD BECOME CONFUSED BY CONFLICTING SIGNALS — FOR EXAMPLE, BEING ALLOWED TO SNIFF ONE BUSH BUT JERKED AWAY FROM SNIFFING ANOTHER.

DOGS EXPERIENCE MUCH OF THE WORLD THROUGH THEIR NOSE, AND CAN BECOME FRUSTRATED IF THEY'RE NOT ALLOWED SOME LATITUDE TO EXPLORE, PARTHASARATHY SAYS.

“MY IDEAL WALK FOR A DOG IS ONE WHERE THEY HAVE A LOT OF TIME TO SNIFF AND TAKE IN THEIR ENVIRONMENT,” SHE SAYS. “THEY HAVE THEIR OWN DOGGY PRIORITIES. USING THE NOSE IS THEIR ENRICHMENT ... IT'S LIKE THEY'RE READING THE NEWS.”

PARTHASARATHY SAYS SHE'S EVEN SEEN OBLIVIOUS DOG OWNERS YANK ON THE LEASH WHILE THEIR DOG WAS IN THE MIDDLE OF PEEING.

A DISTRACTED WALKER ALSO MAY BE MISSING AN OPPORTUNITY TO BOND WITH THEIR DOG, SAYS BURCH OF THE AMERICAN KENNEL CLUB. “INTERACTING AND HAVING FUN TOGETHER FORMS A BOND THAT CAN LAST A LIFETIME,” SHE SAYS.

SOME DOG OWNERS TRY TO MULTITASK DURING WALKS WITHOUT SACRIFICING THEIR ANIMAL'S WELLBEING. TEDDY THOMAS OF SUBURBAN ATLANTA LIKES TO LISTEN TO MUSIC OR AUDIOBOOKS ON HIS WALKS WITH STELLA, A TAN-COLORED RESCUE MIX.

“I DON'T FEEL LIKE I LOOK AT MY PHONE ALL THAT MUCH WHILE I'M WALKING HER,” HE SAYS. “I'D SAY SHE HAS MOST OF MY ATTENTION — MAYBE NOT 100% OF IT, BUT ENOUGH TO KEEP US BOTH SAFE.”

PARTHASARATHY SAYS SHE UNDERSTANDS WHY SOME PEOPLE MULTITASK WHILE WALKING THEIR DOGS. SOME OVERWORKED PARENTS CAN'T LEAVE THEIR KIDS BEHIND DURING DOG WALKS, SO THEY BRING THE KIDS ALONG. OTHER PARENTS DON'T HAVE TIME FOR SEPARATE OUTINGS EACH DAY.

“EVERYONE'S TRYING THE BEST THAT THEY CAN,” SHE SAYS. “BUT GOING FOR A WALK WITH YOUR DOG SHOULD BE ABOUT BUILDING THAT RELATIONSHIP AND FOCUSING ON WHAT YOUR DOG NEEDS. THAT MAY BE THE ONLY TIME HE GETS OUT OF THE HOUSE THAT DAY.”