

There Are Only TWO Aspects to Motorcycle Safety

~Stacey "Ax" Axmaker, MRFA&E Recording Secretary

In my years in the motorcycle safety and rider training business, I have come to conclusions that there are 2 aspects (and 2 aspects ONLY) to motorcycle safety:

1. Prevent the crash
2. Survive the crash

...and the rider is responsible for both. You can make the argument that other drivers are also responsible for preventing crashes, and while there may be some truth to that - there is precious little you can do to make someone ELSE take responsibility (just ask anyone who has ever been married or had kids!) So, since it is the rider who stands to lose, it is the rider who is responsible for both preventing and surviving crashes. And to put this in perspective, if WE don't succeed in reducing the crashes, injuries, and fatalities involving motorcycles, more government regulation of our sport is very likely.

This month's article will address the first aspect - PREVENT THE CRASH. Next issue, we'll talk about surviving the crash.

There are a number of skills that we know contribute to preventing crashes. A few notes: ONE - None of this is rocket science, but at the same time, almost none of it comes naturally. TWO - None of these items are guaranteed 'crash-preventers,' but they sure stack the odds in your favor!

- **Visual Scanning** - This means head and eyes up at horizon level and looking well ahead (if you don't see it and know it's a hazard, the other skills don't matter). There are two elements here; one is *seeing* and the other is *perceiving*. Get your eyes up so you can see 20 seconds ahead (look ahead to a point it will take you 20 seconds to reach - for example, at freeway speeds, that will likely be over 1/3 of a mile). This includes corners - to see the hazards as soon as possible, you need to actually turn your head and point your nose in the direction of the turn. This is part of proper cornering technique, but also part of good general visual scanning habits.
- **Following Distance** (time = distance) - Americans tailgate...you know it...I know it. Every state I know of recommends a 2, 3, or 4 second following distance. Take a stopwatch and stand on the side of the road and measure what drivers (and riders) are actually doing. You'll find that it is closer to a half a second...maybe 1 second. Unfortunately, this is very common and it's really asking for trouble. Have a passenger take a stopwatch and measure your following distance and just see what it is. Once you know what it is, you are free to choose to adjust it. Knowledge is power.
- **Maximum Braking** (Quick Stops) Motorcycles have the ability stop very quickly. Unfortunately, the crash reports tell us that many riders don't. Even after all

these years, there are STILL riders who say '*stay away from the front brake.*' Your front brake has MOST of your stopping power - learn it, live it, love it. What we see in the crash reports is riders locking up the rear brake (skidding), often ending up in a low side crash (laying it down), and using very little (if any) front brake. If you want to have the skill of stopping quickly you HAVE to practice it - there is no other way. Since you use your right foot to stop every time in your car, that is what your 'emergency response' will likely be - UNLESS you spend time practicing using with both brakes on your bike. The more often you stop with both brakes on your bike, the more likely your 'emergency response' will be the right one.

- **Cornering** (running off the road or low-siding in a corner) - This is becoming a more and more common crash scenario. Proper cornering technique (and the ability to respond to 'mid-corner surprises) is one of those skills that simply does not come naturally (even with lots of miles). There are books, courses, videos, magazine article etc. that can provide this information. Knowing in your head is a good start, but there is no replacement for practice. If you can master countersteering, head turns (see 'Visual Scanning' above), and relaxation, you can avoid many of these cornering crashes.
- **Group Riding** - I have often talked with riders who are proud of how tight their group rides. This isn't just one kind of group either - I hear this among police officers, HOG groups, and Outlaw groups. One phrase I hear is "That's how we ride!" I encourage you to give this some thought. The two main issues we see in group riding are riding with a very short following distance within the group, and poor visual scanning. The result is predictable; we are seeing quite a bit of 'bike-on-bike' crashing. Here is the advice:
 - Spread out. Give 1.5 -2 seconds between each rider in staggered formation (not the 1 second recommended in many rider training courses). If a car gets in the middle of your group, LET IT. Believe me, they don't want to be in the middle of a group a bikers any more than you want them there - they will leave soon. Having a car in the middle of your group temporarily is much less of a risk than riding in a tight pack and 'fighting' against a car who may need to get over to take the next exit.
 - Avoid target fixation. Many riders in groups end up focusing on the rider directly in front of them (only about 1 second ahead) rather than 20 seconds ahead (see 'Visual Scanning' above). Yes, you need to know if the rider ahead of you changes speed, BUT if you are looking well beyond the rider (20 seconds ahead), your peripheral vision will give you the information you need. Just because the rider ahead of you rides into trouble, that doesn't mean you have to follow them there.
 - Break it up. Many of us ride in rallies and parades where there are hundreds of bikes in a single group. While this is impressive looking and makes for great media coverage, it's not what we recommend for most group rides. Break up your group into sub-groups of 4-8 riders (and each

sub-group has a lead rider and a sweep rider). This makes it much easier to flow with traffic, and the riders can spend less of their attention on 'keeping the group together,' and more of their attention on visual scanning and hazard detection.

As I said before - none of this is complicated, but it does take deliberate practice. But, if we really want to be active in crash prevention, it starts with ourselves, our riding buddies, and our groups and clubs. By working on crash prevention, we accomplish several things:

1. Save ourselves and our friends from injury (or worse)
2. Save the families of those folks from having to watch their loved ones suffer
3. Improve the public perception of bikers (you know...'the public'...the ones who vote)
4. Reduce the likelihood of more government regulation in the sport of motorcycling

Ride well, ride lots.