



motosafe

By David L. Hough #18259 and Roger Wiles #32797

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Riding Blind

Would you ride your motorcycle while blindfolded? No way, man! Then why do so many riders ride blindly into risks that they often cannot see until it is too late? This 'riding blind' affliction is not limited to inexperienced riders, but is often practiced by seasoned, high-mileage motorcyclists. MotoSafe asked noted motorcycle journalist and MotoSafe Editorial Board member David L. Hough to comment:

MotoSafe (MS): *MotoSafe calls it 'riding blind,' in reference to those times when we can't see far enough ahead for the distance it would take us to stop or swerve. How far should we be able to see?*

David L. Hough (DLH): Ultimately, you need to be able to control the bike within the situation you can see. "Proper sight distance" refers more to your maneuvering skills than to some theoretical distance.

MS: *Can you give us an example of maneuvering skills?*

DLH: There are really only three maneuvers you can perform on a motorcycle: brake, swerve, or accelerate. There are a few situations where accelerating or swerving is appropriate, but to avoid most hazards, braking is the best and most reliable option.

MS: *Why is a reasonable sight distance so crucial?*

DLH: To avoid smashing into a hazard, you need to be able to bring the bike to a stop within the roadway you can see at the moment.

MS: *What is a reasonable sight distance?*

DLH: That's the big question. Sight distance is really a matter of a rider's ability to control the machine, plus the motorcycle's maneuverability. A rider needs to

be aware of not only the situation ahead, but his or her control skills.

MS: *How does a rider determine how much of the pavement ahead he or she must be able to see?*

DLH: I believe the problem of riding blindly into hazardous situations is a result of riders generally making the assumption that nothing will go wrong ahead, even when they can't see or predict what is happening. It is not just the shape of a corner or the pavement, but traffic patterns and situations that hint of a problem before it appears.

MS: *Speaking of blind curves and corners, how does our approach or entry speed affect our sight distance? What is the cure?*

DLH: Once you are committed to a corner, it is much harder to slow down without sliding out. The "cure" is to slow

to a reasonable cornering speed *before* the turn. It is easy to accelerate at the turn exit if sight distance allows.

MS: *What are the common situations and places where riding blind can be an increased risk factor?*

DLH: Current crash and fatality statistics indicate that about half of crashes are collisions with other vehicles, and the other half are situations where the rider loses control; typically failing to make a curve, or losing traction on surface hazards. I don't think riders intentionally take risks in blind curves, but I think too many riders trick themselves into thinking that the upcoming curve can't be as bad as we "hand-wringers" suggest.

MS: *How should we handle unfamiliar curves? What about blind curves?*

DLH: I continue to preach the gospel of the *delayed apex*. On public roads, we



You approach the turn from the outside of your lane, then imagine a delayed apex a little farther around the turn than the actual road apex.



Riders tend to be over-optimistic about their conspicuity in traffic. Just because you can see over the car ahead doesn't mean an oncoming driver comprehends you are there.

often cannot remember every curve, or perhaps we're riding an unfamiliar road for the first time. The delayed apex line gives you the best view ahead, and points the bike in the best direction to stay in your lane if the roadway doesn't go where you expect. You approach the turn from the outside of your lane, then imagine a delayed apex a little farther around the turn than the actual road apex.

MS: *Can we carelessly ride into blindness traps in urban or suburban traffic?*

DLH: One of the big issues today is inattention blindness, where our eyes see something but the information fails to get to the conscious part of the brain. It is not only auto drivers, but motorcyclists who fail to comprehend what is happening, because they are not focusing on the situation. I'm of the opinion that motorcyclists are too optimistic about traffic.

We don't study traffic well enough to observe problems. It always seems to be a big shock to the rider when he or she gets clobbered by a left-turning driver, even

though left-turners are a huge hazard in urban traffic. The good news is that BMW riders, in general, are better informed than the average motorcyclist. I think we focus almost as much on riding skills as we do on farkles and travel stories. But too many of us are over-optimistic about our conspicuity in traffic.

MS: *Why do so many riders suffer crashes on familiar roads?*

DLH: We tend to become complacent in familiar surroundings, such as the side streets close to home, or that favorite twisty road we know like the back of our glove. Nine times out of ten, nothing happens. It seems reasonable to continue at speed without slowing for potential hazards. A blind alley or driveway in the middle of the block can be just as dangerous as the upcoming busy intersection. The same situation applies to twisty roads. We tend to enjoy the ride and ignore the possibility of an occasional oncoming gawker crossing the centerline, a farm tractor chugging out of a pasture, a spill of diesel oil in a sharp curve, or a wild animal.

Perhaps this is a result of too much

focus on control skills and too little focus on reading the situation. Avoiding crashes is just as much a matter of keeping the situation under control as keeping the bike under control.

MS: Is riding at night a riding blind factor? How about weather?

DLH: We have been fooled a bit by the statistics that show few fatal crashes occur in bad weather. That's not because it's safer to ride in the rain, but because only a minority of riders go out in bad weather, or at night. It should be obvious that darkness, or a fogged face shield make it more difficult to see what's happening. Often,

riding in poor visibility means that we're depending more on dumb luck and less on skill. Let's note that BMW riders do manage to survive riding in low visibility situations. It's a matter of being very clever and actively thinking about what's happening, even when we can't see the details clearly.

When you're riding in bad conditions, you need to be very clever about what's happening. It's very easy for another driver to not see a motorcycle in low visibility conditions.

MS: Are there categories of riders who are more likely to carelessly or unconsciously ride into blindness?

DLH: I think younger and less experienced

riders are more optimistic about the riding situation than those who have experienced a wide variety of hazards over time. But it's not just a matter of being young or brave. I think attitudes have a lot to do with the resulting problems. Motorcycling is serious business, and those who don't take their riding seriously are more likely to bumble into nasty situations.

MS: How should riders behave and think differently to combat the unconscious tendency to ride into blindness?

DLH: One of the primary tactics for avoiding crashes is to aggressively adjust speed to sight distance. By that, I suggest front-wheel braking when sight distance closes up, rather than just rolling off the throttle and waiting to see what happens. Yes, it's more fun to just cruise along "in the groove," controlling speed with the throttle, but rolling off the gas is only applying braking on the rear tire. If I wait to brake until I actually see what's over the hill or around the blind curve, it may be too late to react. These days, I brake much more frequently and aggressively. I'm talking front-brake, even in corners. *(Aggressive braking while leaned over in a curve is an advanced skill; newer and less experienced riders should learn the skill of braking in curves in controlled environments before using this technique on the streets. Improper corner-braking can lead to a painful crash. MS)*

MS: So, you think many riders are simply too optimistic about their skills, and their motorcycles' capabilities?



Do you see the motorcycle in this scene? Would you expect other drivers to comprehend your motorcycle in low visibility conditions?



Approaching a blind turn such as this, I prefer to get my braking done before the turn-in point, but I'll brake any time my sight distance closes up, even while leaned over.



DLH: Part of the reason we fail to manage sight distance is that we have an optimistic or careless attitude about stopping distances. We read about the 60-to-0mph stopping-distances in the magazines, and assume we can perform just as well on that same bike. The reality is that magazine tests don't include reaction time, which eats up a lot of distance at road speed. We just can't believe how much distance it takes to decelerate a motorcycle when a hazard suddenly comes into view.

Total stopping distance actually consists of three components: Perception distance, reaction distance and actual braking distance. Perception distance is the distance the bike travels while the rider's brain is recognizing and processing what the eyes see. Reaction distance is the distance it takes the rider to initiate action, such as reaching for the brake lever and pedal. Braking distance is the space needed for the rider to bring the bike to a complete stop, once the brakes are under application.

The inattention blindness (i) condition that David spoke of earlier can cause an inattentive rider to continue riding into potential disaster, even though a risky situation is developing nearby in plain view! "Riding..." as David observed, "... is serious business." Your brain's ability to recognize and respond to the information

Below: If you wait to brake until a potential left-turner actually swerves in front of you, there won't be enough room to take evasive action.



your eyes are sending is crucial to reducing what MotoSafe believes is the most important component of total stopping distance, the vital perception distance.

Think about what you are seeing, and more importantly, what you may *not* be seeing while riding in environments where sight distance can be suddenly and unexpectedly truncated. Maybe a box-van is pulling up near us in traffic, or we are riding a lovely mountain road with curves and hills that hide what is ahead. Then, think about what *could* be ahead of you. Think about those past events that caught you unaware; those 'one-in-a-million' hazards that popped up when you weren't expecting them. Predict that it may happen to you again!

Get rid of speed you don't really need while it's easy to do. You can regain all that lost speed when your sight distance stretches out again.

It's also important to keep your braking skills sharp. If your bike is equipped with ABS, make sure you have experienced ABS-activation in controlled practice environments. Unexpected ABS-activation can catch an unprepared rider unaware, and valuable real estate can pass by while the rider struggles to understand and cope with unfamiliar sounds and bike-reactions.

Riding blind is like rolling the dice; sooner or later you will roll snake eyes. Are you ready? Are you sure? Expect the unexpected, and continually create the time and space you will need to deal with the unexpected.

MotoSafe is grateful to David L. Hough for his thoughts and insights. Ride safe, and ride often.

(i) Siri Carpenter, Monitor on Psychology, Volume 32, No. 4 April 2001.

David L. Hough is a veteran motorcyclist, sidecar rider, world traveler, instructor and moto-journalist. He is a BMW Friend of the Marque, and a BMW MOA ambassador. Dave has been a contributing editor to Motorcycle Consumer News for many years, and is the author of the best-selling motorcycle book, *Proficient Motorcycling*.

