

A Motorcycling Crisis How To Handle It

By: Allan R. Kirk
New Zealand Motorcycle Safety Consultants

It was the late 1970s and Graham Hilder was riding home from late duty as a technician at the airport in Wellington, New Zealand's capital city. At one intersection a car did something silly and Graham made an angry gesture at the driver. It wasn't a wise idea. As Graham rode away from the intersection the car, full of irate gang members, came after him. Graham was riding an older bike and he knew that, while he might be able to outrun the car, he risked crashing and being attacked. So he headed for a side street he knew.

Once in it, with the gang members' car hot on his heels he accelerated to the end ... around some barriers and into a pedestrian subway that goes underneath the Wellington airport. The car full of gang members screeched to a halt at the barriers and the gang members could only sit and watch the receding tail light of Graham's motorcycle.

When Graham told me this story I was impressed by the coolness and cunning he exhibited in this situation. But, after talking to other experienced riders and the Police, and having spent many years studying motorcycle riding crisis and their causes, I've learned, just as Graham knew, that there are certain basic rules that must be obeyed if one wishes to emerge triumphant in times of trouble on a motorcycle.

Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst.

According to recent research by the Heidleburg University Hospital in Germany, riders who pre-plan their crashes are less likely to be seriously injured in a crash. It's the same in any safety field. If you are prepared for a crisis, you're more likely to survive that crisis than those who aren't. Graham Hilder was prepared for his crisis. He knew about the subway and had previously considered the possibility of riding a motorcycle through it. Planning for an emergency is not only about how to survive crashes but covers all aspects of motorcycle riding crises including situations like Graham's, and even what to do when a policeman stops you for speeding. Just considering worst-case scenarios puts you mentally on your toes in a crisis, and that can make all the difference between a crisis being a disaster or a disturbance.

Look first, then act.

In a crisis, too many people react before thinking. There are the people who drag injured people out of crashed cars and make their injuries worse that they were before they were moved, or the people who remove the crash helmet from an injured motorcyclist and leave him permanently paralyzed. In a crash situation no one who you can save will die in the minute it takes to survey the crash scene (for things like downed power lines, leaking petrol and other problems), and in quickly forming a plan of attack to deal with the crisis. In a riding crisis, you should not react instantly unless your reactions are thoroughly pre-planned. For example, what would you do when you are riding in the right hand wheeltrack and an oncoming car swerves onto your side of the road and starts heading towards you? How many of you answered that you would immediately brake and move to the left of your lane? The correct answer is to react at the last safe minute. Certainly you should brake and move towards the center of the lane as soon as you see the problem arise, but wait and watch the oncoming car for clues to its future movements

before you react dramatically. And don't forget that if you brake to a stop, you're a sitting target! Remember, look first, then act.

When you do act, act aggressively.

Too often, people who are in a crisis situation do not react vigorously enough. This is often the result of not having practiced emergency riding techniques. You may have pre-planned your counter-steering response to a large rock in the middle of the road, but can you counter-steer aggressively enough to get around it? You may know the situations where your only defense is to brake very hard but can you brake aggressively? When did you last practice really aggressive counter-steering and braking? Incidentally, acting aggressively is no contradiction of the "look first, then act" idea. Confronting a riding crisis is like turning through a gap in oncoming traffic. Once you've decided the opportunity has come to act, do what you have to do without hesitation!

Use every bit of help you can get.

A police officer is trained to call for back-up as soon as he sets off in pursuit of an offender. The real professional uses every bit of help he can get. Ex-World Champion motorcycle racer Kenny Roberts readily admits that, today, many of the motorcycle racers out on the track are better riders than he was. The reason is simple - he's trained them to be as good as he was and they've gone on from there building up their skills. The rider who rides well and often, and who survives with the least scratches is the guy who uses every bit of help he can get to improve his riding skills. As motorcycle technology improves by leaps and bounds, as traffic density increases layer by layer, and as roading hazards get more deadly by the day, the average rider needs every bit of help he or she can get to get painless fun from his or her machine. Read books, talk to mates, attend riding courses and read media crash reports for clues on survival techniques.

Don't get locked on one detail.

The most common open road fatal crash in New Zealand is where the rider fails to make a corner and crashes into a piece of road side furniture, usually a lamppost or a large fencepost. The reason is simple. The rider's attention and eyes focus in fear on the post and the bike goes where the rider looks - into the post! Where you are at risk of crashing into a car, don't look at the car - look for a gap. Get the big picture. Don't focus too tightly.

No matter how bad things get, be truthful.

If you crash and blame everyone else but yourself for the crash, you'll never learn anything from the crash and the next one may be your last. Other drivers may invite you to a crash, but you have to accept the invitation. So, if you crash, sit down and think it through and see what YOU did wrong. (The NZMSC is presently developing a post crash self-analysis system for this purpose. We'll keep you posted.)

Let the crisis go.

Too many riders never go through the self-analysis process we mention above and they ride in fear of the same thing happening again. Riding nervous is completely different from riding warily. Riding warily is watchful but relaxed and smooth. Nervous riding is uncertain, tense, and unsmooth and actually places the rider at more risk of crashing again. If you can't relax on your bike after a crash you either haven't exorcised the "at fault" demons or you need to give up riding. Sometime in their riding life everyone has a riding crisis or two. How they handle that crisis decides whether that crisis will turn out to be an unmitigated disaster - or a learning opportunity and the greatest triumph of their life.

<http://www.msgroup.org>



And remember: Drive on the right except to pass...