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The Dangerous Five Driving Sins

The Network of Employers for Traffic Safety (NETS) (<http://www.trafficsafety.org>) is a coalition of private employers and government traffic safety experts that focus on reducing the human and economic impact of traffic crashes suffered by workers. The theme of the organization's annual 'Drive Safety Work Week' campaign is what their research indicates to be the top five driving sins:

Being Inattentive While Driving

Following Too Closely

Traveling at Improper Speeds

Ignoring Traffic Signs and Signals

Backing Up Unsafely

Being Inattentive While Driving

First, allow us to consider our own roadway behavior while riding. From the landmark 1981 Hurt Study (use your search engine to look for 'Hurt Study') comes a finding that addresses NETS' number one driving (and riding) error: "Lack of attention to the driving task is a common factor for the motorcyclist in an accident." Experienced riders know that riding a motorcycle is an active experience, not only physically, but especially mentally! Motorcycle crashes caused by inattentive driving often begin well before the rider swings a leg over the bike. Perhaps the rider's domestic scene is not serene; maybe the workplace has its problems; maybe yesterday's letter from the IRS is still in the forefront of the rider's brain.

Rider-fatigue, too, can diminish our capacity to pay full attention to the driving task. So, consider your mental and physical state while riding, and even before mounting. When your bottom is attached to a motorcycle, your mind and brain must be fully devoted to the riding task.

Following Too Closely

Are you guilty of tailgating? Well,

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don't! Total stopping distance, particularly in an emergency, consists of three separate components: perception distance, reaction distance and braking distance. Depending on the motorcycle's speed, some distance will be traveled as the rider both sees, with the eyes, a threat ahead, and also 'sees' or comprehends the threat with the brain. More distance is consumed as the hands and feet react and move toward the controls. Finally, even more pavement passes under the wheels as they are under braking force, slowing the bike or bringing it to a stop. The MSF recommends that riders maintain a two-second following distance under "ideal conditions," and since we rarely ride in ideal conditions, more than two seconds between us and the vehicle ahead is a prudent tactic. Sure, other vehicles will hop in front of us—that's fine. Our job is to continually create the time and space we need.

Traveling at Improper Speeds

Traffic engineers and researchers with the NHTSA have long known that

the safest driving conditions exist when traffic is traveling in the same direction and when at least 85% of motorists are traveling at, or slightly below, the same speed (<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/>). As motorcyclists, we can enhance our riding safety by matching our speeds to that of surrounding traffic, or riding one or two miles an hour faster than surrounding traffic, a mildly assertive riding tactic. Of course, MotoSafe does not encourage lawless speeds, but we often must balance the risks of riding substantially slower than the flow of traffic against the risk of receiving a traffic citation for unlawful speed. Some riders may make the decision to simply avoid the roadways that are known to flow at warp speed, and others accept the risk/reward tradeoff of riding near the same speeds as surrounding traffic. The main issue here is to minimize the speed differences between our bike and that of other traffic.

Ignoring Traffic Signs and Signals

Considering our inherent vulnerability as riders, it is unlikely that many riders consciously ignore these roadway instructions. Rather, we can surmise that those riders who do ignore these do so due to inattention to the riding task; the prescription to "engage brain when aboard two wheels" applies.

Backing Up Unsafely

Other than Honda Goldwing and BMW K1200LT pilots, it would seem that we are likely immune to this driving error. What about the other guy?

Currently, about half of motorcycle crashes are multi-vehicle events—the bike hits another roadway user, or the other guys hit us. So, let's think about the Dangerous Five from the other side of the coin; are there ways to identify and

predict when another driver is sinning in these five manners, causing increased danger to us as riders?

We can look at the rear end of all vehicles in proximity to our travel path as potential threats, and predict, mentally, that one of these will suddenly back into our right-of-way. A very incomplete list of clues would include the appearance of back-up lights, a driver looking backwards over a shoulder, a car-door closing, and much more. Can you think of more unsafe backing predictive clues? Write to MotoSafe and we'll share you insights with others. How about ignoring traffic signals and signs?

Another Perspective

A glance of another driver's posture and body-position may help you predict that the other guy hasn't seen (and mentally recognized) a signal or sign. Perhaps a patently aggressive driver can be expected to consciously disobey a traffic signal; without making a value judgment, it seems that a disproportionately high percentage of these hard-core aggressive roadway users drive clapped-out old beaters, resplendent in rust, gray primer paint, broken windows and the like. Can you and I be a bit more alert around these vehicles, predicting the worst outcomes while we are near them, and taking appropriate preemptive actions to separate ourselves from them? Sure! Do it. Any other clues to help us predict that another motorist will likely ignore traffic instructions? Write to MotoSafe!

Other traffic traveling at an improper speed and causing undue risk to us as riders can be easy to spot—or almost impossible! Once the sinner is ahead of us going in our direction, the sinner is visible to us, but of very little threat. Our risk in this driving error of others occurs when the speeder approaches us from behind, mainly, or is approaching from an oncoming or oblique direction. Proper searching and situational awareness requires that we keep a vigilant eye on our mirrors. Should a vehicle surprise us from the rear, either by passing or appearing suddenly close to our rear fender, we as riders should feel a deep sense of shame! Like the old hotel-chain slogan said, "The best surprise is no surprise!"

Oncoming drivers traveling at inappropriate speeds on straight roadways pose less of a threat to us as compared to those who transit corners, turns and curves too

motosafe

quickly. When we can see these sinners, when it is apparent that they are traveling at a high rate of speed and approaching us in corners and curves, our mission is to adjust our speed and position to create the greatest possible distance between our two vehicles as we approach and pass one another.

How about those blind curves and corners though? Suppose we all simply adopt a universal prediction that each blind turn, curve and corner will present us suddenly with an oncoming driver who is traveling at the wrong speed. The vehicle is likely to encroach into our path and right-of-way. Consider taking preemptive actions automatically as we approach these situations; slow down and move to another lane, or move to another position within your lane so as to create the greatest possible space cushion while in the region of least visibility. Think about upcoming blind hills, too, even on straight roadways. Remember, if you can't see, don't go there! Think about the discipline of setting speeds in these conditions so that you always have a clear view of at least four seconds of pavement ahead of you. Can't see four seconds of asphalt? Slow down!

Finally, other motorists who are visible as they approach us from either side (i.e. intersections) are possibly the easiest to spot. Look for them at intersections and take action to time your transit of the intersections well before or after the speeding vehicle. How about those intersections that hide the view of intersecting drivers from us? Again, let's predict that the blind intersection will contain a speeding, inattentive motorist—think about shedding some speed while it's easy to do so and putting the brain on high alert.

Tailgaters! Don't you just hate them? Consider keeping a greater following distance yourself from vehicles ahead when a tailgater is tormenting you in traffic. Let them pass—legally! Think about protecting your travel lane by riding closer to the center line, forcing a following motorist to make a legal pass, completely in the passing lane, rather than trying to 'share' your lane and possibly forcing you too close to the side of the road.

We are NOT equipped to defend our lane from a tailgating driver, so don't try it! Here's a nearly foolproof technique to fix tailgating drivers: Nearly all who

tailgate do so unconsciously; they do it habitually. Try using the "slow down/stop" hand-signal (left arm out to the left, forearm down, palm facing the rear) for about five seconds. More than 90% of the time, this will wake up the offending tailgater, who suddenly recognizes you as both a motorcyclist and as a flesh-and-blood human who is in a risky situation. Nearly always the newly-aware tailgater will back off and give you the space you are requesting. Then give them a thumbs up. That is likely to keep them on alert and further away from you.

Finally, the winner! Inattentive drivers! How can we identify and predict threats from inattentive drivers? Here's a few: Cell-phone usage, Bluetooth appliances visible on the drivers' ears, kids loose in the backseat, fast-food bags visible in the auto, drivers who are inappropriately multi-tasking—eating, applying war-paint, shaving, reading and so much more. Write to ... well, you know. We'll pass your techniques on spotting inattentive drivers along, so share.

The primary cause of crashes on roadways is usually an interaction and untimely confluence of several unrelated events and factors. If NETS is correct, we can significantly increase our safety-level by both riding properly and responsibly, and by actively and aggressively searching for others on the roadway who are sinning in these areas and then taking appropriate preemptive actions. ●

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