

BMMC Rider Training

“TARGET FIXATION”

What is it?

Have you ever heard, "The bike goes where you're looking", or, "What you see is what you hit". They're both referring to "target fixation". What this means to you is that, subconsciously, you steer toward what you're looking at. That's great if it's a clear patch of road, and less than stellar if it's hazardous to your health.

When confronted with a hazard (e.g.- a car turning in front of you, debris on the road, a stalled truck, a deer jumping into your path, or even just a pothole) the natural reaction is to look at the hazard (thinking you'll avoid it). The problem with this is that it can turn into "target fixation". And, if that happens, most of the time you'll hit the hazard.

What can I do about it?

You can turn "target fixation" to your advantage. When you notice the hazard, immediately look for a clear path, focus on it, and steer toward it. Don't look at the hazard; figure out where you would rather be and fixate on that instead. If the hazard doesn't move (the pothole) you're home free. If it's a moving hazard (the jumping deer), usually you'll still be able to see it in your peripheral vision while focused on the clear path.

Now, it's easy to say, "Drag your eyes away from the object you want to avoid", but actually doing it isn't as simple. After all, your instinct is to keep an eye on a threat to your life. Saying "don't fixate" is all well and good, but once it starts, you need a positive technique to get yourself out in one piece. The solution to this problem is to look for an escape route. Obviously, the best and least dangerous escape route you can look for is along the road you are traveling. So, look where you want to go. Ninety nine percent of the time, this will work. Your bike will prove to have more in reserve than you thought and it will get around a corner that you entered too fast, or avoid the cardboard box lying in the road ahead.

You can practice this during your normal everyday riding. When you notice debris, road kill, or even a tar patch on the road, quickly choose a clear path and steer toward it while forcing yourself to *not* watch the hazard. It's harder than you think, but with practice it'll become second nature. In an emergency situation on a bike, you often have only a second or less to react to avoid an accident. Having developed this technique into a reflex could make the difference between avoiding an accident or being in one.

There is no magic to this phenomenon of "target fixation"; it is purely a product of physics. When you fix your sights on an object, your body instinctively aligns itself with the direction you are looking, even though you may not be aware of it. And, when you're riding a motorcycle, every move of your body makes a difference. Just a little pressure on one hand grip or the other can subtly steer your motorcycle in the direction you are

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looking. The motorcycle then simply obeys the laws of physics to respond. What you want to do is grab control of the situation and be proactive in finding a way out of trouble. You need to deliberately choose to focus and ride on the safe route which allows you to negotiate the hazard with the least possible risk.

If a car does pull out in front of you, look to see if you can pass ahead or behind rather than focusing on the driver's door. If there is a diesel spill in the road, look at the bit of road surface that is clear rather than the slick. If you are running into a twisty a bit too hot, look as far ahead up the road to the turn apex point (remember our cornering discussion?) rather than the guard rail and steer the bike to it.

How can I better prepare myself?

Situation Awareness is the key, here. The more you ride, the more hazards you'll see. The more hazards you see, the less they'll surprise you. You need to be aware of what's around you - road layout, road surface, other motorcycles and vehicles, what you can't see but may be there. Having scanned one area, move onto the next set of hazards.

The earlier you view a potential hazard, the more time you have to plan your escape. Look as far ahead as possible, scan side to side, and don't ignore your mirrors - hazards can come up from behind. Check the road surface while it is still in the distance. You can use your peripheral vision; and use road positioning to your advantage, moving out to the side of hazards if it's safe to do so.

Scanning is useful, but it's only a starting point. There is still a long way to go beyond that. It's too late to think when the car pulls out, because you *will* panic! You have to be planning your riding long before that, running through various "what if" scenarios in your mind, so that you are not taken by surprise should the worst case scenario develop!

The habit of systematically scanning the road (the opposite of "target fixation") far ahead enables you to anticipate and avoid a serious mishap. That 40 feet in front of your bike is already history.

Always be looking for escape routes and planning ahead.

Learn this "scanning and planning" skill and your chances of avoiding a crash go way up. Mistakes can be fixed by a planned solution to that mistake. This is why experience is so important in motorcycle riding.

In group riding (not the leader) most likely potential hazards will be passed back through hand signals. By all means, watch for them and pass them back, but don't jeopardize your safety by not being diligent in your own hazard avoidance. The planned spacing should allow for such "excursions" from the normal path.