



PRO RIDER

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# PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

Words: Mark Jones/Pro Rider



## Are you anxious when you ride or do you sail along without a care in the world? It turns out both are likely to lead to a crash unless you can manage to find a healthy balance.

**B**ack in the day when my survival on a bike was more by luck than judgement, now and again I got terrified that something disastrous would happen like the front tyre blow out or the wheel simply come off due to a cracked axle or whatever. I know right, crazy as. I guess a tyre going pop was more likely than my doom-laden image of a disappearing wheel, but I have to admit that on occasion these thoughts had me pulling up at the roadside and taking a breather to calm myself down. I didn't need to resort to therapy and got over it in the end.

But what was the cause of my irrational fear? Basically, I was riding at a speed and in a way that was beyond my limits. At the back of my mind, I knew this and rather than go off and get some decent training I panicked myself to a literal standstill and kind of went on like that for a quite some time. Until I crashed – my fault, not the bike's.

Then I learnt not only how to handle my bike properly, but also how to check it out for damage, keep the chain at the right tension, monitor tyre tread wear (I DID know how to check the pressures), and generally be sure my bike was in good nick and not about to fall apart under me anytime soon. Up until that crash and subsequent learning, it was likely my anxiety, or fear actually, that kept me alive. But bike riding paranoia can make a trip miserable at best and potentially lethal.

A little over a hundred years ago a couple of psychologists by the names of Robert M

Yerkes and John Dillingham Dodson (yes, they were Americans) came up with a theory linking arousal with performance. Don't get too excited – 'arousal' here simply means being switched on to take on a task and 'performance' the ability to do it well.

The so-called 'Yerkes – Dodson Law' holds that the more positive anxiety (being switched on to a challenge) we have the better we actually do; whereas too much anxiety is not a good thing and tends to lead to us messing up. In my example, I was teetering on the brink between the two states, and it was only by scaring myself that I stayed within my limits until the day I flopped over the edge.

Imagine an upside-down U or a bell-shaped curve. The height of the bell represents the level of anxiety thinking about our ride (arousal) and its challenges. The slope up and down the sides of the bell represents our performance. Setting off concerned about being on a new bike or having to ride in the rain or on a challenging road should have us taking it easy and performing within our limits. That is until we get to the top of the bell where we are riding the best we can in the circumstances, drawing on whatever experience and insights we have – our performance is at its maximum. But if we start to exceed our ability – ride beyond our limits – anxiety increases and our performance decreases, sliding down the other side of the bell as quickly as the bike does down the road when we stuffed up the corner.

In real world bike riding, as opposed to lying on the psychologist's couch, it is important to

**"As you get ready for your trip, put your brain into gear along with the bike, be positively anxious as this will improve your performance and keep you safe."**

understand this relationship between anxiety and performance. Not knowing our limits (how bad a rider we are) perversely lessens our anxiety and we don't climb up the performance curve. But freaking out about everything equally stuffs us as we fall down the other side of the curve into oblivion having psyched ourselves out thinking our commute is going to end in doom!

A recent Auckland Transport campaign reminded us that 48% of urban motorcycle crashes are with turning vehicles and we really should 'ride like they can't see you'. That is a catchy slogan and worthwhile heeding, but try not to ride as if every hazard you see is unavoidable as panic will set in and your journey is miserable or you'll do something stupid. The skill is to recognise the threats and be sufficiently anxious / in a state of arousal to draw on all your training and experience to take evasive action if needs be, not scare yourself onto or under a bus.

So, as you get ready for your trip, put your brain into gear along with the bike, be positively anxious as this will improve your performance and keep you safe. Take everything in and plan your ride, but don't get wound up by doubt or exceeding your ability and causing your level of anxiety to mount and push you into dangerous territory. Of course, using the Yerkes-Dodson Law to good effect to have the best possible riding experience only works when you have the insight and commonsense to know your limits. Ignorance is said to be bliss, but when it eliminates any anxiety, peak performance falls off the cliff with likely you and the bike with it! ■■■