

Why Drivers Fail to “See” What’s in Plain View – Part Two

Last month I discussed the issue of “inattention blindness,” which is a physiological phenomenon we all experience causing us not to “see” or become “aware of” something in plain view. We learned that as our eyes scan ahead, we only “see” those objects we actually focus upon. All the rest is subconsciously filtered out by our brain as it processes the flood of visual stimuli entering our visual field.

There are four factors that affect this phenomenon of inattention blindness. The first is **conspicuity**, or the ability to capture attention. This is broken down into *sensory conspicuity*, which describes the physical properties of what we are viewing. Contrast against the background helps us “see” something, like a cyclist. Bright colors, movement and flashing lights are part of this. *Cognitive conspicuity* is equally or more important in drawing attention. We “see” what is relevant to us at that instant. This is also referred to as *task relevance*. Some people call this “what you see is what you need.” This is why drivers often fail to see a cyclist because oncoming traffic is more task relevant to them as they decide to execute a turn, for instance. This means there is only so much that we, as road cyclists, can do on our own to create conspicuity.

The second factor is *mental workload and task interference*, which you and I would understand as distraction. Focusing on a cell phone, adjusting the radio or carrying on a conversation dilutes our ability to “see” an otherwise readily observable object in our path. We have only so much available attention. A driver who is otherwise distracted may still have enough attentional capacity to successfully observe a cyclist on a sparsely traveled country road as opposed to the same driver in

dense city traffic. Associated with this is *too little mental workload*. This would be represented by a driver on a lonely monotonous straight road. Ironically, drivers can become bored and pay less close attention.

The third is *expectation*. This simply means that our past experience preconditions as to what is relevant, which has a powerful influence on our ability to see and to notice. Turning into a driveway every night for a thousand nights having never seen a cyclist on the sidewalk conditions the driver not to look for one. Harm occurs when a driver faces a new or unusual circumstance in a highly familiar setting.

The final factor is one's *capacity*. The likelihood of lapsing into inattentive blindness varies from person to person and from circumstance to circumstance and is widely variable. It is aggravated by the usual suspects of drugs, alcohol, fatigue, and (unfortunately) age.

As cyclists, we need to understand this issue. Rarely is a crash caused by simply one thing, but rather by a combination of low contrast clothing, distraction and capacity, for example. We need to ride with the assumption that drivers do not see us, even when they appear to be looking directly at us.

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