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ISSUES

I Was Hit by a Car While on a Long-Distance Cycling Tour, And I Wish People Would Stop Telling Me How Lucky I Am

Getting hit by a car and walking away from the accident mostly unscathed has made me feel lucky, but also incredibly alone.

NICOLE ORTIZ · MAY 7, 2015

About three weeks ago a car hit me, and yes, I'm incredibly lucky as well as grateful to be alive. I just wish people would stop telling me I should feel this way.

I do a lot of long distance cycling (much to the confusion of my friends, family, and boyfriend), and this happened during an organized ride. I was riding with my friend that I do all my tours with, Shannon, and an old coworker of ours, Annie. Shannon was down the road waiting for Annie and me at the rest stop.

We were entering a park on a straight road with no stop signs, red lights, or even curves in the road when it happened. The car got too close to me and I hit the passenger side three times before crashing to the ground. Excuse my cliché, but it all happened so fast.

The instant I hit the ground, I burst into tears and lost control of my emotional stability. Luckily my instincts kicked in as soon as I fell off my bike, and I covered my face and head from hitting the ground then dragged my body and bike off the road in case other drivers didn't see what happened. I'm shocked by my mental clarity in the moment, but so appreciative for it.

I was overwhelmed from the second it happened and didn't totally come down from my adrenaline rush until two or three days after the crash. Other drivers and joggers surrounded me, poking and prodding my limbs while asking if I was okay. Between sobs I managed to tell Annie to find Shannon, my shaking hands redialing her number again and again. I was hyperventilating, and as an already anxious person, was on the verge of a panic attack. My witnesses stayed until the ambulance arrived and tried to keep me calm.

That afternoon I limped away from the emergency room with a sprained wrist and a souvenir from my incredibly nice EMTs to remember my first ambulance ride. The woman who hit me left the scene, and a few days later I found out that my bike was completely totaled. The mechanic who looked at it told me it would be immoral for him to let me ride the bike again.

From the time I started cycling in a city setting, I always knew that the possibility of being hit by a car was high. I'd heard plenty of horror stories from other cyclists and coworkers to understand the odds. Plus I didn't always play by the rules; I rode with headphones in, and sped through my fair share of red lights. When I imagined myself getting hit, though, I always pictured that I'd run after the person if I had to. It'd be on a city street surrounded by helpful pedestrians that would happily be my witnesses. And in the end, I would walk away as a shining example of what to do when involved in a cycling accident.

I'm sure anyone who's survived some sort of traumatic experience can attest to how it never quite goes as planned. I actually thought the driver was going to stay—she stopped and got out of her car after all. Unfortunately the next thing I knew, she was gone, and I hadn't even noticed her leave. I've gotten my fair share of guilt tripping for not memorizing her license plate number beforehand, too.

I don't use the word "traumatic" lightly either. While others that have been involved in cycling accidents are able to brush off the side effects and hop back on the saddle right away, this situation has been particularly hard for me to deal with. This is mostly due to my ever-present anxiety and ability to harp on things until I feel some sort of resolution.

One of the most frustrating things I've dealt with so far is not the pain or the emotional anguish, but the people who keep parroting how lucky I am. Whenever I complain to a friend about my devastation over my totaled bike or I confide about the flashbacks that usually end with me dissolving into tears, they come back with a "Well, thank goodness you're all right" and an "It could have been so much worse."

So much worse. I hate that phrase. As if we should be comparing our horrible experiences to see whom walks away feeling the worst.

Now I don't want to seem like some ungrateful, spoiled brat or anything. The concept of dying and the uncertainty of death have kept me awake more hours than I can count and are a constant source of my anxiety. I can't find the words to express how relieved I am that my accident wasn't as bad as it could have been. A car hit me three times and I was able to get up immediately after and return home later that day. I understand what that means. It still gives me a bit of a head rush and makes my hands shake when I think about it. However, I don't need to be told that my other thoughts and feelings over the incident aren't justified because I didn't die or get seriously injured.

I've found myself seeking out comfort in relatively obscure places, looking for someone who can relate. I've reached out to strangers on Facebook and Reddit as well as divulged to coworkers I barely know. For awhile, finding some sort of confidant was a huge priority, and through these networks, I spoke briefly with some others who have been hit by cars that said they suffered similarly.

Flashbacks of the crash, an aversion and fear to being around traffic, and seemingly random breakdowns that feel unprovoked have plagued me for the last three weeks. The first time I biked to work since getting hit, I dissolved into tears after a truck whizzed past me on the street. I don't cry much, but if you had just met me in the time since the accident you may not be convinced.

When my boyfriend who doesn't bike asks how I am, I can barely find the words to answer him. His intentions are pure and he only wants to make sure I'm improving, but I find myself feeling alone with few feasible outlets to utilize. It feels like he only wants to make sure I'm okay and keep the conversation moving while I feel like I need to endlessly talk about this.

When I reach out to family and close friends for comfort, too, I feel ignored or disregarded. I let my guard down to tell them my vulnerable, scared, honest thoughts, and rather than hear the empathy that I'm so desperately craving, I hear the repetitions of being lucky and reminders that it could have been so much worse.

The worst part is that I've probably been this person before. When talking to a friend who survived something horrible, I'm sure I've chirped along with the other optimists about how it could have been worse. The gut reaction to hearing about a horrific circumstance is to reassure the person who suffered. But if we put ourselves in that place, sometimes simply agreeing that the whole thing sucks and offering a hug is the best solution. Sometimes an affirmation that our unhappiness is justified is all it takes to put a bad memory permanently in the past.

On the three-week anniversary of my accident I'll actually be returning to the area of the crash in another organized tour on my new bike. This one is on a closed course without any cars thankfully. I still have moments where the slightest things set me off and where I feel despairing loneliness. And in the weeks to come, I'm sure many a speeding car will have me pulling off to the shoulder to take some deep breaths and choke back tears.

Mostly as I move forward, I'm trying to not let this incident define so much of life like it has in the last three weeks. As always I'm working to keep my anxiety at bay as well. So rather than try and seek out empathy, I'm attempting to truly appreciate just how lucky I was and find some positivity in my situation.