

COMMENTARY

Transforming Disability Through Cycling: Learning to Ride as an Adult with Cerebral Palsy

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This article details my experience of learning to ride an adapted trike as an adult. Using a bike has transformed my life in so many ways, but perhaps surprisingly, the benefits are more around empowerment and mental wellbeing than improved fitness. Riding a bike is something I never thought I would be able to do. I am sharing my experience to encourage other people with disability to consider cycling.

Note: This paper uses the descriptor “people with disability”, which is person-first language and reflects the social model of disability (Oliver, 1983), as preferred in the Australian context (People with Disability Australia, 2025).

My story has appeared in different forms on my blog *TrikeBoy* (<https://trikeboy.blog>) and on *My CP Guide* (<https://www.mycpguide.org.au/blog/assistive-technology-equipment/cycling-for-fun-and-fitness-with-cerebral-palsy-finns-story>).

Keywords: adaptive; cycling; cerebral palsy; empowerment; mental health; wellbeing

Article

I learnt to ride for the first time at the age of 46 years old—and it changed my life. I was born prematurely with cerebral palsy (CP). My diagnosis is spastic diplegia, which mainly affects my balance and the way I walk.

As a child, balancing on a two-wheeled bike was always a short-lived proposition. I never dreamed that one day cycling would be possible for me. That all changed with the advent of eTrikes, a lot of trial and error, and some simple modifications made with the support of a physiotherapist, an occupational therapist, and a bike mechanic.

Growing up, my disability was seldom discussed outside of clinical settings, and there were certainly no alternatives offered to me as an aspiring rider in hospital or school. Things appear to have changed over the past three decades, with research such as the University of Melbourne's CycLink program and Co-design Study (Carey *et al.*, 2025) exploring cycling opportunities for young people with disability, which I am now involved with as a co-researcher.

When I first met the CycLink researchers at a CP-Achieve conference in Melbourne a few years ago, they were surprised I had not tried adapted cycles (Carey *et al.*, 2023) as a child. But inclusion has come a long way since the 1980s when I was growing up, and adaptive cycling was just not something that people spoke to me about as a kid.

CP has certainly never stopped me from leading an active life, but as I've gotten older, walking and standing is often more painful. My trike gives my body opportunities for incidental rest, and it's a crutch that is fun to use! Cycling has become my number one passion, granting me freedom and independence, while improving my health and wellbeing along the way.

A common assumption is that riding must be great for my cardiovascular fitness. But given I use a throttle to start from stationary and to navigate hills (O'Keefe, 2026), physical fitness is not the primary benefit I see.

The transformative aspects are as much mental as they are physical. Let's call it a form of "catching up". My CP means I'm naturally a bit slower to get around. In primary school, my best friend and I used to joke we were "lagging behind as usual" when travelling anywhere in a group.

While I've undoubtedly always been a confident person, growing up different can still cause subtle damage to self-esteem. At best, this can lead to a nagging sense of inadequacy as an adult (internalised ableism). At worst, physical difference can result in bullying, harassment or violence.

With my newfound ability, the tables are turned in every way. When passing cyclists compliment my ride, I feel a sense of validation. I've always been proud of being different, but fitting in feels good too.

Through the act of cycling, the impact of my disability disappears. When I am on foot, children passing in the street often ask, "Why does that man walk like that?" When I ride past, they just say, "Cool bike!"

When I am riding with friends who are on foot, it is quite the role reversal to remember to slow down so they can catch up. The ability to move through the world in an entirely new way is profound. While I've always been staunchly independent, I never truly understood the meaning of inclusion before I learned to ride.

A key health benefit is simply spending more time outdoors. Whether I'm on my daily commute, or discovering new spots in my neighbourhood or farther afield, every trip is pure joy. The mental health benefits are undeniable. Although I often ride solo, I never feel alone.

Cycling to the beach and exploring nature are some of my favourite pastimes. Before I got my trike, such day trips would typically hinge on the co-ordination of a friend with a car. Now I can cycle to a secluded spot of beauty on a whim. My doctor has happily noted an increase in my vitamin D levels as a result.

My trike also supports a variety of other health and wellbeing goals. Each week, I ride to my local gym for exercise physiology, or go to the pool to swim or relax in the steam or spa—good medicine for my tight muscles and my mind.

I love to cook, but in the past, would only shop for one or two meals at a time, as dictated by what I could easily carry home on foot and public transport. Now I can go to local farmers' markets and buy a week's worth of vegetables, transporting them in my trike's large basket. A nice day out, and I eat better as a result.

Another lifetime passion is music. When I was younger, I'd be up the front dancing, but these days, my knee pain means I can't stand up for long. Instead, I ride to gigs or festivals and park my eTrike right inside the venue, often next to the accessible viewing area. When the show is over, I can leave without a long walk back to transport or relying on anyone else to get home.

My trike has taken on somewhat of a life of its own, gaining exposure in Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parades and the odd appearance in local queer press, cerebral palsy websites, and on social media.

It is not just about transportation; my trike has become a core part of my identity. Somewhat surprisingly, cycling has also helped me to heal some deep seated, largely unconscious, childhood scars.

I would love to see more research into cycling for adults with disability, particularly as we age. I want to share my story to encourage more people like me to experience all the fun, freedom and empowerment that cycling can bring.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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