
COMMENTARY

Navigating the Chaos on Two Wheels: An Autistic Perspective on Cycling

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Cycling offers freedom and sustainability, yet for autistic individuals it can become overwhelming due to sensory overload and complex traffic environments. Intersections and rapid decision-making often pose major challenges. Inclusive urban design – for example, clearer signage, safer crossings, and quieter routes – can make cycling more accessible, supporting both autistic riders and broader communities.

Keywords: autism; cycling; neurodivergence; urban environments

Article

Cycling is often seen as a simple, accessible mode of transportation. Especially where I live, in the Netherlands, cycling is a common way of getting around, offering freedom and exercise in an environmentally friendly way. On quiet streets or bike paths with minimal distractions, it can be a calming activity. The rhythmic motion of pedalling and the sense of control over my journey are moments of peace in an often chaotic world. However, for those of us on the autism spectrum, cycling can be far more complex, shaped by sensory overload, unpredictability, and challenges in navigating through busy urban environments.

As an autistic person myself, I have found that cycling can quickly shift from an enjoyable activity to an overwhelming nightmare, depending on the environment. Busy traffic, unclear intersections, and the urge to make rapid decisions while being in the middle of chaos can create a sensory hurricane in which my attention is torn apart between the demand of sights, sounds, and motion in too many directions. For me, it is not just about riding my bike, it is about processing and responding to the flood of information that overruns me, often faster than my brain can comfortably handle.

Intersections are my personal enemy. When approaching a crossing that is not clearly signposted or where multiple lanes converge, I feel almost paralysed by the quantity of things that require my attention. Who has the right of way? Are there cyclists behind me? What are pedestrians doing? Where does the car go? How do I pay attention to what happens to my right while not neglecting what happens on my left? Decisions I have to make in a split second while navigating through what feels like an impossible puzzle. I even avoid certain routes altogether to not get into a situation that asks too much from me.

These experiences are not unique to me. This duality – cycling as both liberating and overwhelming – captures the complexity of the autistic experience. Many autistic individuals face

similar challenges when cycling, but these difficulties are rarely acknowledged in conversations about urban planning or active travel. Much of the focus on cycling accessibility centres around physical disabilities, leaving out the sensory and cognitive experiences of neurodivergent individuals. While physical access is undoubtedly crucial, we also need to consider how public spaces and transportation systems can better accommodate those of us who process the world differently than the majority of people.

By addressing my story, I hope to bring attention to this often overlooked perspective. Addressing the sensory and cognitive barriers to cycling is not just about supporting autistic individuals – it is about creating cities and systems that work for everyone. With thoughtful design, such as better signage, clearer intersections, and quieter cycling routes, we can make active travel more inclusive and enjoyable for all.

Cycling is more than a mode of transportation. It is a gateway to independence, well-being, and connection. But for that gateway to remain open, we need to ensure it is indeed accessible to everyone, including those of us whose needs are not always visible. Together, we can pedal towards a more inclusive future.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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