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This Scientist Can't Stop Thinking About Cycling

RIDING A BIKE ISN'T EXACTLY RATIONAL, SAYS BICYCLING MEMBER STEVEN PINKER. SO WHY IS HE OBSESSED WITH IT?

BY [THEO KAHLER](#) Apr 1, 2022



Cayce Clifford

Is it rational to ride a bike? This question came to mind as Steven Pinker, a cognitive psychologist at Harvard University, published his latest book, [*Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters*](#).

“Given the value you put on your life and the fact that there’s even a very small probability of getting killed,” Pinker asks, “does it outweigh the pleasure and health benefits from continuing to ride?”

Pinker has been thinking deeply about bikes for as long as he’s been riding them. When he was a kid, for example, he couldn’t comprehend how people remained upright while cycling. Credit your brain’s relationship with Newton’s first law of motion: “With the right feedback loop involving the brain and the bike, any tendency to fall over can be compensated by steering the bike in the same direction as the bike is falling,” he says.

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As Pinker began building a decorated academic career—in 2004 *TIME* magazine named him one of the [100 most influential people in the world](#)—his love for cycling grew along with his reputation in psycholinguistics and social relations. While teaching at M.I.T. in the 1990s, Pinker arrived everyday “clip-clopping in my bicycle shoes with my helmet on,” he says. “In the winter months, when the sun would set at 4:30 p.m., I would take a break from work [during the day] and wheel my bike out of the building.”

In 1997, Pinker picked the bicycle as one of his “[seven wonders of the world](#)” for a BBC television series, in which he marveled at its elegance and efficiency. He appreciates how such a simple design—the diamond frame, spoked wheels, and pneumatic tires—still makes for the most efficient method of transport among machines and animals. “You couldn’t get away with less,” he says.



Cayce Clifford

Pinker typically rides around his second home on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, often with his wife, the novelist and philosopher [Rebecca Goldstein](#). They've completed multiple tandem [century rides](#) on the local rail trail, where they immerse themselves in the coastal scenery. "There's the promise that you'll get to the top of the climb, you'll go around the curve, and you'll see something new," he says. "The faster you go, the more quickly new sights come into view."

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Above all else, Pinker rides to keep his heart pumping and his mind sharp. Growing up, he frequently heard news of men dying prematurely from heart attacks, including three uncles and several of his father's friends. "I didn't want that to happen to me, so I resolved when I was young to be in good [cardiovascular health](#)," he says. "And as someone in cognitive neuroscience, we've realized that physical exercise is one of the best ways to extend brain health."

Still, the scientist weighs all of the reasons he loves cycling against the inherent dangers of the activity. He'll often use a [bike helmet](#) during his lectures to remind students how easily a forward crash can severely damage the brain, which is the consistency of cottage cheese, he says. But "some of the risk that I incur, at least in part, is mitigated by greater heart attack and stroke protection."

Pinker still wonders whether cycling is rational. "We do take risks that are perhaps beyond those that a thoroughly rational entity would take. But I try to split the difference by making it as safe as possible, and therefore as rational as possible."

[THEO KAHLER](#)

Theo Kahler is the membership editor for Runner's World, Bicycling, and Popular Mechanics.

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Holbrookej · 12 minutes ago ⋮

Just scratched the surface, wonderful subject and topic. Longer article, please, or direct me to where these thoughts are further explored.

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nikdow · 17 hours ago ⋮

"some of the risk that I incur, at least in part, is mitigated by greater heart attack and stroke protection"

This is incorrect, according to lots of published data.

It's far riskier to not cycle, because the health benefits of cycling outweigh all the risks by a large factor, including when not wearing a helmet.

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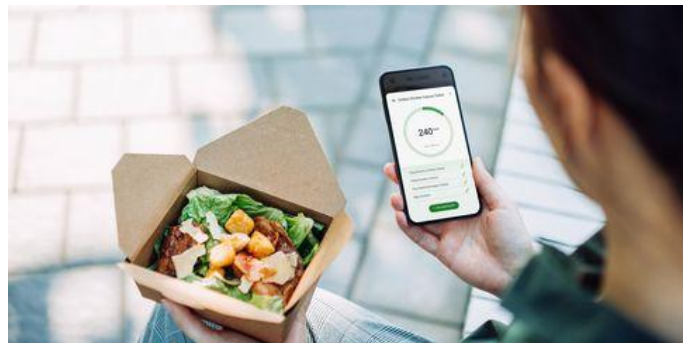
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