

It's all a matter of perspective

By Carol Godwin, Cycle Mania

We often take new people out with us on trail or gravel rides, and I usually notice that when we introduce somebody new to an experience we've had many times before, it becomes new to us too. You try to encourage them by saying "It's easy, you can do it" and the phrase "It's all downhill from here" takes on a new meaning when you notice that small rise you forgot about or that next "little climb" that really doesn't seem so little now. We don't mean to mislead people and our intentions are good when we encourage them with the "it's easy, you can do it", and "It's all downhill..." phrases, but what does that do to that new person's confidence when your well-intentioned encouragement is proven false over and over?

When you repeatedly follow the same path, your mind smooths it out for you, anticipating the end or anticipating the next major feature. There is no way that even if you know an area "like the back of your hand", you can remember every small feature. Do you really know the back of your hand? How many lines are on each knuckle? What direction do the veins go? Taking someone new on an old adventure gives you a chance to look for those amazing details that your mind has learned to tune out with repetition. Take the chance to go a little slower on those familiar trails and look around. In the Secret trails, there are little hidden gems around every corner. A set of bones here, a small strange toy in the crook of a tree over there, amazing painted rocks peeking out of logs, and topping natural rock piles. Appreciate this chance to see old trails through new eyes and focus on the journey without needing to accomplish some end checkmark.

"It's easy, you can do it" is a phrase that people use in many life situations which is really not helpful at all. It may be easy for you, but when it's not easy for that other person, how does it make them feel? If it's not easy for them right now, they must be a failure, probably shouldn't try to do whatever task is before them and makes them feel less, not more, confident. Keep in perspective that things that are easy for you now once were hard, and for this new person, this thing you are saying is easy, is actually really daunting.

When I first started riding a mountain bike, we had a big adventure route behind our house. We packed snacks, we packed water, we made sure we had plenty of time and we set off. There was a big climb right off the bat and I walked part of the way up it to get to the trail ("Just keep peddling, you can do it). Soon after the big climb there was a terrifying dip in the trail, seemingly straight down and filled with small slippery gravel rocks that wanted to send me careening off into the trees lying in wait. ("It's easy, you can do it!") Tires skidding and a death grip in the bars got me to the bottom of the slope and then a steep incline back up towards the top of the rise. What in the world? My husband is trying to kill me... The trail crossed a road with a yawning cavern of a drainage ditch — no way am I getting across that! (It's easy, just let the bike roll...) Four grueling miles later we reached a cattle tank and took a well-deserved break. Snacks, sitting on logs, talking, and enjoying. This is actually fun! But now we need to get home...(It's all downhill from here). Now on a two-track road covered in vicious sharp rocks waiting to grab a tire and send me to my death, back towards home and past a beautiful old cabin, following a barely visible rocky path through the junipers (where are we going now!?) and...wait!...you said it was all downhill...up the side of the hill we started out on. Narrow trail, barely cut into the hillside, sloping downward, slippery gravel, knuckle-biting adrenalin-inducing terror, I think I will walk this now ("It's easy, just look ahead and relax"). Almost there, but wait, the trail heads down another impossibly steep slippery slope with a 90-degree turn at the bottom, right where there is a huge pine tree just waiting for me to make a mistake and go careening into its rough bark. Made it home. Time for a nap! And that was "easy?". Obviously, mountain biking is way too hard for the likes of me.

No and no. It was not easy, it was hard, it was scary, and it induced more than a few tears, but a few years later, that 7-mile loop is an easy after-work, before-dinner zip-around dog run. I don't even wear my chamois shorts, rarely take snacks, and don't even bother to take a pack. I grind up that hill, down the not-so-slippery slope, over the drainage ditch, and around the side of the next hill. Rocks? What rocks? Those are just little bumps in the trail. Climbs? What climbs? Those are just chances to put down some power and feel like a champion at the top of each rise. Slippery slopes? Those are just chances to test your skills and fly for a minute. 7 miles is nothing, oh I wish there was more time before the sun sets. And look! There is something new...stop and take a photo, enjoy the ride and keep on keeping on.

So, yes, you can do it, whatever “it” is, but when somebody tells you it’s easy, remember that it may be easy for them now, but it’s all a matter of perspective. When you are tempted to tell others how easy it is, think again and find a better way to encourage them with specific advice. This hill looks steep, break it up into chunks and focus on getting just a bit further each time. Those rocks look scary, let’s roll the bike over them walking first so that you can see how the bike moves. Instead of taking a new rider on a long ride over a complex single track the first time out, take a simple roll down a dirt road and stop to admire the flowers with them.

It's all downhill and easy from the top but getting there is the trick, and what fun would life be if you just got to the top and stayed there? We all have new things to tackle, new challenges to take on, and new experiences to explore. Remember this when you are introducing someone new to what you love. Realistic coaching and encouragement help, but keep in mind what the starting point is for that person and remember how it was for you when you were there. Keep on keeping on and enjoy the ride... it's easy!