

Cable Maintenance 101

Maintaining your motorcycle is an important job. Not only so that your bike will live a long life, but also so that it works at its optimum. Everyone knows the basic, really important tasks, like changing your oil, making sure your tires are in good condition, cleaning and oiling your chain, etc.

There is one very important maintenance task that a lot of people overlook. That's the process of maintaining your throttle, clutch and other control cables. Most people don't give much thought to the controls of their bike, but it is one of the most important parts of your bike, and well-maintained controls can make riding a lot more fun. On the other side, neglected controls can be downright dangerous, or leave you stranded with a broken cable.

Doing the work to maintain your controls and cables is pretty simple work; it just takes a small investment in time, and a little familiarity with some easy procedures. The frequency of maintenance will vary depending on the type of riding you do, what kind of bike you have, and what sort of conditions you ride in. A dirt bike that gets ridden hard in dirty or muddy conditions will need much more maintenance than a street bike that just gets ridden on sunny weekend days. A good rule of thumb is to at least start the riding season with a good maintenance overhaul. Start with the cables, and then go from there. A street bike may only need this work once a season, a dirt bike may need it every other ride, or maybe every ride!

These procedures also apply to new replacement cables. Most replacement cables are sold without any lubrication, it is critical for their proper function and long service life that cables are properly lubricated.

Remove the Cables

First thing you have to do is remove the cables from your bike. Always refer to the factory service manual for your model motorcycle for these procedures. Getting any part of the disassembly or assembly wrong could result in a stuck throttle or a non-functioning clutch, both of which are extremely dangerous. Your service manual will also have detailed specifications about cable adjustment and in some cases, proper cable slack, which is also critical to the proper and safe function of your motorcycle.

For all cables, the first thing to do is to clean up the housing, and inspect the cable for any wear. If the housing is worn to the coil winding, or one of the fittings is damaged or worn, this is a good time to think about some new cables. If they look good, the next step is to relubricate the inner wire.

Lubricating the Cable

Lubricating the wire inside the housing will make it slide more smoothly, and will also extend the life of the cable by reducing friction. Motion Pro makes an excellent Cable Lube, and also a Cable Luber to make this job as easy as possible. The Cable Luber installs over the end of the housing, and clamps over the inner wire. There is a port in the side of the tool where you can insert the tube from the spray can of lube, and then short bursts of the aerosol will force lubricant into the cable housing and down along the inner wire. The lubricating process will also clean the inner wire and housing of debris. Continue to inject cable lube into the cable after the lube begins to drip out of the bottom of the housing. At first the discharge will be dirty, but when you see clean lubricant coming out you are done. Make sure to have some extra shop rags around though, because it is a somewhat messy process.

That is the main job to be done with the cables removed, and if you want to short cut this process

some, you can just remove the cables from the controls, and then lubricate them while they are still in place on the bike, but this will keep you from doing a thorough inspection of the cables, and may result in cable lube getting on your bike, meaning more clean up.

Re-install the cables

When reinstalling the cables, there are a couple of very important things to do. One of the most important is to properly clean and lubricate any pivot points, like the clutch cable barrel in the clutch lever on the handlebar, and the throttle cable barrels in the throttle tube. If these points are not clean and lubricated with high quality grease, they can bind, which will cause the cable to flex and prematurely wear and fail. Lubricating these points will also result in finer feel and control, making your interface with the bike more sensitive. While you are at it, remove the clutch lever, and regrease the pivot there also, so it is working at its smoothest. This also applies to the brake lever, so that it works as smoothly as possible.

When adjusting the cables, refer to your service manual for the proper free play adjustments, as a throttle cable that is too tight can cause engine revs to rise when the bars are turned, causing an unsafe condition. If a clutch cable is too tight, it can cause the clutch to slip, and if too loose, shifting can be difficult. A note on the adjusters on a cable: Don't over tighten the adjuster fitting. They are hollow, so that the wire can pass through, and only need about 8 ft-lbs of torque to properly secure them. Over tightening the adjusters can cause them to crack and fail.

On most bikes, all of these jobs should only add about a half an hour of work to your garage time. It's time well spent to make sure your bike is performing at it's best. It will also make your riding time safer and more enjoyable.