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Maladaptive daydreaming: When fantasies become a nightmare

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Story highlights

Maladaptive daydreaming is an addiction to fantasizing

(CNN) — Although many of us enjoy a daydream or two, 28-year-old Sara Waite wishes hers would stop.

"The intensity of my daydreams and how they've affected my life is not normal," said Waite, who lives in California.

helps her become immersed in make-believe worlds. She fills her mind with fictional people she meets as she moves.

Waite describes her daydreams as a painful addiction, just like a drug, that make it hard for her to keep a job or a relationship.

Waite's longest job -- as a grocery clerk -- lasted one year. Employers keep letting her go, as she's often distracted, nervous or late because of her dreams.

She now knows that her daydreams aren't real, but it does not make life any easier.



Sara Waite drew her struggle. For her, reality feels like a huge glass box that she cannot enter.

"It makes me get attached to people in an unrealistic way. It's awkward when real people, who are also characters in my daydreams, treat me different than they do in my dream world," Waite said.

She's scared of asking for professional help, because no medical books list her symptoms or offer a diagnosable condition.

It was only through an anonymous internet question that she finally discovered that there were other people like her.

Online, her condition is called maladaptive daydreaming.

What is maladaptive daydreaming?

Maladaptive daydreaming is a psychological concept in which excessive fantasy activity can replace human interaction and interfere with vital everyday tasks, according to [a 2016 study by an international team](#) of researchers.

Their objective is to share evidence about this under-reported condition so it can be entered the latest edition of the renowned [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders](#) (DSM).

According to the study, there is "a large and growing number of online international forums and websites on which individuals profess to have been secretly suffering from maladaptive daydreaming for years."

Common elements of maladaptive daydreaming

Yearning

Intense craving to daydream

- Urge to daydream after waking
- Annoyance at being interrupted
- Inability to ignore urge

Kinesthesia

Tendency for movement during daydreams

- Pacing
- Rocking back and forth
- Noises and facial expressions

Impairment

The condition interferes with daily activities

- Interferes with vital activities such as eating
- Interferes with social activities
- Interferes with academic or professional success

The lead researcher, [Eli Somer of the University of Haifa in Israel](#), was the first to [name the condition in 2002](#).

"This is not like rehearsing a conversation that you might have with a boss," he said. "This is fanciful, weaving of stories. It produces an intense sense of presence."

Somer knew that global research was needed after people worldwide began to email him about a small paper he had written on a unique daydreaming phenomenon he saw in some of his patients. He is working to develop [a scale for use in maladaptive daydreaming research to advance knowledge](#) of the condition.

The scale identifies three main factors typical of maladaptive daydreaming: yearning, kinesthesia (a sense of movement) and impairment.

"Research conducted shows that we have a valid disorder that is measurable, that is stable and is unique and can be differentiated very clearly from normal daydreaming," Somer said.

But raising awareness has been a very slow process.



People addicted to vivid daydreams are often ashamed of talking to professionals, so they share their stories online.

Spreading the word

One of the most prominent maladaptive daydreamers online is Cordellia Rose, 36, of Portland, Oregon.

Since learning that her lifelong condition has a name, she's been participating in research while managing a web forum and increasing awareness about the condition, including through regular [tweets](#).

Cordellia Rose wants to tell people who may have this condition that they are not alone.

"This needs to be public, because there are people suffering, and badly," Rose said. "The mind is the most powerful drug there is, because you cannot stop taking this one."

Growing up, she struggled to get psychological help.

"They would tell me, 'It's depression; it's this; it's that,' but I knew it was something deeper -- not the symptom of something but something in itself," she said, adding that her vivid imagination is not a "fantasy la la land."

"Once, my character got stabbed 18 times by a serial killer who stalked her for several years. My characters have lived real lives, though a bit extraordinary," Rose said.

She had to give up driving lessons because while her eyes were on the road, her mind was usually elsewhere.

"You get hooked on it, because it can be like an action movie in your head that's so gripping that you cannot turn off," she said.

But talking openly about maladaptive daydreaming has helped her learn to manage her condition, she said.

Rose was able to control her daydreaming and discover other passions, such as exercise.

"Now, I just check on the characters every once in a while. After I let it out, I was able to get distracted by other things and figure out what else there is to me," Rose said.

"But for some, it is a problem," she said, adding that people experiencing these dreams need a listener to accept what they're describing and point them to treatment.

I tend to stick out. People notice me, so let me be noticed for doing something good.

[#MaladaptiveDaydreaming](#) [#ShedTheShame](#)

— Cordellia Rose (@FrostyPixie) [December 20, 2014](#)

Critical voices

Jayne Bigelsen, 45, [a maladaptive daydreaming investigator and nonprofit lawyer from New York](#), said journal editors often frown at research done exclusively online.

"They say websites are not the most scientific methods of recruiting subjects. But we pushed back. Since there is no official diagnosis yet for MD, there is no other way to find them but through websites," Bigelsen said.

Jayne Bigelsen used to struggle with the condition; now, her research helps raise awareness.

She says she used to struggle with the condition herself, and although she has had it under control since her 20s, her experiences help her understand how maladaptive daydreaming differs from normative daydreams, both in style and in content.

"Regular daydreamers normally daydream about wish fulfilment or real-life scenarios, while those with maladaptive daydreaming focus on fantasy worlds with fictional characters," Bigelsen said.

She said she continues to hear from sufferers begging for more research.

Her [latest study](#) notes that "there is likely to be an untold number of others, including those who are not accessing the Internet or who do not speak English."

But some experts don't believe daydreaming of this kind needs to be a recognized condition or listed in the DSM, including [clinical psychologist Peter Kinderman](#) of the University of Liverpool.

"MD is a good example about wanting to apply the medical disease model to elements of the human experience," he said. "To me, daydreaming is a pretty common phenomenon, which sometimes can cause people problems."

Kinderman said people need to steer away from the "disease model" that is predominant in mental care and instead realize that they do not always need a specific diagnosis to get help.

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"The best way to tackle these problems is to talk with a professional such as a psychologist. They can help people deal with the intrusive thoughts. I would not create a new category of mental disorder for daydreams," Kinderman said.

Creative benefits

While the debate continues on whether maladaptive daydreaming needs more attention, both Bigelsen and Somer want to highlight that the ability to engage in vivid daydreams is not the problem; it's the extent to which it affects people.

"We're only talking about significant impairment if daydreaming means staying in your room isolated, engaging in your fantasy life, and that is your life," Somer said.

For him, maladaptive daydreaming should be defined as a disorder: "The most correct definition term would be 'daydreaming disorder.' Like a sleep disorder: Sleep can be normal, but it can also be a disordered," he said.

For others, however, maladaptive daydreaming can help boost creativity.

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Flavio Menezes, 25, a Brazilian engineering student who moderates a Facebook forum about maladaptive daydreaming, uses [SketchUp software to create 3-D models](#) of his many imaginary worlds.



Brazilian Flavio Menezes moderates a maladaptive daydreaming forum in Portuguese.

Menezes hopes that sharing art about the multiple universes he experiences will inspire others to look at the condition's benefits.

"Not everyone can do this. I use my MD as a basis to create some settings and characters, but then I filter and refine the ideas," he said. His daydreams inspired a fantasy book series, "The Ontojics," which recounts the adventures of a tribe of enchanter who live in the desert.

"This imaginary world feels real to me, and I write this book as a tribute to it," Menezes said. "For a long time, I was sure I was going to take this fantasy land to the grave. But now, I feel the urge to write down everything."



Menezes uses SketchUp software to re-create his daydreaming world.

He thinks some struggle with maladaptive daydreaming because they try to hide their behavior.

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"Maladaptive daydreaming is real."

"My MD allows me to solve everyday problems, because I can easily imagine different scenarios and situations," Menezes said.

Meanwhile, Rose believes it is only a matter of time before maladaptive daydreaming enters everyday health conversations.

"Over time, (it) will be normalized, like everything else that was once hidden and is now open," she said.