Daydreaming can become so maladaptive, it looks like a psychiatric disorder

Olivia Goldhill  | August 28, 2016

For some people, daydreaming gets out of control. (Sebastian Wahlhuetter / National Geographic Traveler Photo Contest)

We all daydream. Allowing the mind to wander is a chance to create an inner world and explore our fantasies. And studies suggest that a wandering mind is a sign of strong working memory.
But daydreaming can have a dark side. For some people, daydreaming isn’t just a few hours gazing out the window or listening to David Bowie on repeat. Instead, it can take up huge chunks of life.

Eli Somer, a professor of clinical psychology at Haifa University in Israel, discovered this in 2002, when he found that six of his patients had a richly developed fantasy life—which they found difficult to put on pause. They spent so long inside their minds that their real-life relationships suffered.

He published a paper describing their symptoms and naming the condition “maladaptive daydreaming.” Since then, he told The Wireless, he’s been inundated with hundreds of messages from people who suffer from excessive daydreaming but have been dismissed by their psychologists. Wild Minds Network, a support group for maladaptive daydreamers, now has 5,500 members, reports The Wireless.

Ultimately, Somer would like maladaptive daydreaming to be formally recognized as a psychiatric disorder by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, though the process for formally registering a disorder is slow and subjective.

Somer believes maladaptive daydreaming meets the criteria, however. Sufferers have no trouble distinguishing fantasy from reality—they know when they’re daydreaming, and don’t suffer hallucinations—but they do find daydreaming difficult to control. They often pace, rock, or do a repetitive movement while daydreaming, and their fantasies can involve detailed characters and plots. Daydreaming about an alternative life surrounded by celebrity friends is common, as is some element of tragedy.

Research into maladaptive daydreaming is in its early stages. In some cases, it seems obsessive compulsive disorder can be a precursor to the condition.
In others, it seems daydreaming starts as a defense mechanism after early abuse or neglect.

Ultimately, daydreaming may not sound like a disorder at first. But it becomes one when it starts to interfere in daily life. One sufferer, Natalie Switala, told The Wireless that daydreaming is a hard habit to break when you’re both the addict in the dealer.

“My twisted logic is, ‘Why live life when I can dream it up so much better?’” she said. “I’ve never felt the urge to travel because even climbing the Eiffel Tower is a million times better in my head.”