I Spend a Ludicrous Amount of Time in My Head

From the U.S.: I get stuck for hours daydreaming or mentally processing unimportant thoughts. It feels like the world through my perspective is more or less a screensaver for my mind. I typically don’t notice when my fingers or arms get cold or when blisters start to form on my feet. I walk from place to place during a normal day staring at the floor, thinking of untold numbers of inane thoughts or ideas.

If I see a certain picture, I daydream about it. I see a certain concept in a game – that’s a daydream. If I like a certain song enough – surprise! I’m daydreaming about it. Some of these dreams are self-insert dreams. A smaller number of those dreams are romantic in nature, or power fantasies, and never the prior two together.

It doesn’t stop at daydreams, though. I tend to overthink without any discernible reason as well. A mental health quiz asked me if I thought about suicide. My natural answer is: of course I do. I’ve thought about reasons for suicide, methods for suicide, the statistical likelihood for an at-risk patient to commit suicide, famous literature with thematic use of suicide, like I’ve done with pedophilia, schizophrenia, the price of tea in China and Nebuchadnezzar II. I think about pretty much everything, all the time, for no reason. However, this ends up muddling my mental health quiz results (as well as sabotaging my school career). If thinking about these things indicates that particular problem, I have a list of concerns longer than my states’ perimeter.

I’ve been diagnosed with ADHD long enough for it to act as a second middle name. I’ve also been diagnosed with depression, which considering the comorbidity of the two is not very surprising. I’ve learned a thing here and there to cope with both, ADHD being the only real challenge of the two.

I’d really like to know if I’m dealing with something else that’s causing these thoughts. Is there a tangible term for this condition? What’s the level of normality in this condition? What’s a good idea for moving these thoughts towards achieving goals in life (given that they totally don’t as they are now)?

A: Daydreaming is perfectly normal. In fact, it is often the locus of creativity and can be an important way to take time out from stress. But daydreaming to this extent is not normal or useful. It is interfering with your life in a very big way. The problem is therefore not the daydreaming. The problem is that you are not able to control it. It makes sense to me that you have been diagnosed with ADHD since you are so easily distracted.

From your description, I’d want to also look at Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). You remind me of people who report that they can’t stop playing video games or can’t stop thinking about something they wish they had done differently. OCD is often characterized by the inability to stop a thought or behavior. It’s as if the “off” switch in the brain doesn’t work reliably. In your case, you can’t shut off the daydreams.

Dr. Eli Somer, a psychology professor from the University of Haifa in Israel coined the term “Maladaptive Daydreaming” (MD for short) in 2002 to name your kind of obsessive daydreaming. He and other researchers are trying to get it recognized as a psychiatric disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM). In one article I read, Dr. Somers says that people with MD frequently have Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and/or Depression. You might find it helpful to search the internet for more information about MD.

As far as I can tell, there is as yet no certain treatment for MD. However, some people have been helped by treating the OCD and depression with a combination of medicine and talk therapy.