

THE MIND'S Virtual Reality

Heard of a mental disorder named Maladaptive Daydreaming where patients waste productive hours daydreaming excessively, creating alternate lives in their heads?

WORDS: ANCILLAR MANGENA

It's an act so common you probably did it today or have done it many times before. The problem is, when done excessively, it could ruin your life. We are talking daydreaming.

"I found out the man I thought was my dad was not my dad when I was seven years old... my mom made it sound like it was a secret and no one was supposed to know. It was a heavy burden for me. Many times I would wonder who else knew and what my real dad was like," says Bongzi Ncwane (*name changed to protect identity*).

All these questions in her mind set off a world of fantasy and pathological daydreaming.

Ncwane says she would spend a lot of time thinking about what life could have been like with a dad.

"My two older sisters had their dad and my two younger sisters have their dad and then there was me. Although my sisters were great and we could share everything, there was this one thing I couldn't tell anyone."

To cope, Ncwane, says she created another world in her head.

"I started excessive continuous daydreaming. There is a separate life in my head. This world has a mom, a dad and I am the only child," she says.

The continuous daydreaming happened for years before she knew there was a

problem. One day, she realized that she was spending hours daydreaming. It was eating into her productivity.

"I daydream and it feels real. If something is happening in my head and it's emotional, I cry in real life and when happy I would be happy. I realized I couldn't control the daydreaming. I knew the difference between real life and what was in my head but there was always a need to do it," says Ncwane.

She was worried and depressed.

She says she spent time researching mental illnesses, like bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, but her symptoms didn't fit any known conditions.

"I would beat myself about it because everyone daydreams but I couldn't control mine. It was taking away from my productivity and although I was doing very well in my career, I wanted to know why there was another me in my head who was growing, although at a slower rate, as I grew."

In Israel, 10,000kms from Cape Town where she is, was her answer.

For the first time, about 17 years ago, Dr Eli Somer, a Clinical Professor of Psychology at Israel's University of Haifa, noticed an unusual mental activity in his trauma patients. Like Ncwane, they often spent hours daydreaming.

"This condition is mostly caused by childhood trauma. In my work with trauma

patients, I found that some survivors of childhood maltreatment who possess the intense daydreaming trait, are often intensely tempted to dissociate from their uncontrollable mental pain and absorb themselves in a fantasy world, of which they are in full control," says Somer.

Somer has been conducting research in the field since. In a seminal paper, published in 2002, he presented this condition, which he termed Maladaptive Daydreaming (MD). Just as Ncwane describes it, Somer defined it as extensive fantasy that replaces human interaction and/or interferes with academic, interpersonal or vocational functioning.

"I believe that this type of highly absorptive, fanciful and vivid form of daydreaming requires a special ability. The ability to create an inner world, a mental virtual reality. This trait, often discovered accidentally during childhood, is experienced as highly enjoyable," says Somer.

It is dangerous. According to Somer in some extreme cases, MD can replace real life.

"People with MD prefer to spend every waking moment of their lives in their inner worlds. In such severe cases, the sufferers display additional mental disorders and are unable to sustain themselves."

Ncwane and the trauma patients Somer has met are not the only ones talking about this condition. Hundreds of people on social media tell stories of how excessive daydreaming has affected their lives.

"I have lost three jobs in the last 16 months," says Doreen Wales (*name changed*) who says she can spend up to nine hours a day daydreaming.

"I can't seem to be able to snap out of it. I have tried to explain to therapists and I have been on various kinds of medication over the past 10 years but nothing seems to work. Unfortunately, this condition seems too farfetched to get the attention it needs. I am happy there is a Facebook community of people going through this and we help each other cope. I have to always try to be active, play music or continue talking to people because once it's too quiet, I fall into daydreaming," says Wales.

In fact, according to Somer, the rewarding properties of MD also explain why it can develop into a maladaptation. He says people with the condition prefer to daydream whenever they can, and do so at the expense of their daily productivity. It can be triggered by evocative music or repetitive physical movement, such as pacing or rocking.

"To my mind, MD is a dissociative absorption that has evolved into mental addiction," says Somer.

Unlike schizophrenics, according to Somer, people who suffer from MD, differentiate well between fantasy and reality. In a recent study, on the comorbidity of MD, he found no evidence that schizophrenia is even similar to MD.

The problem is, the clinical field of MD is very young. The condition is not yet well recognized, so people like Ncwane and Wales will continue to pay the price until scientific research yields more answers.

For now, the lives in their heads hold more promise than the real world they open their eyes to. **FW**

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