Maladaptive daydreaming: Symptoms and management

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Daydreaming is a regular part of daily life for most people. However, some individuals experience frequent and intrusive daydreams that can disrupt everyday tasks and their quality of life.

This article will discuss what maladaptive daydreaming is, how to recognize it, and how it can be managed.

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What is maladaptive daydreaming?

Daydreaming is the sensation of a wakeful indulgence in thoughts that are not related to a person's immediate surroundings or activity. They are often pleasant experiences, as an individual might imagine or fantasize about engaging in a desired activity or achieving a goal.
Daydreaming may be a pleasant experience and may sometimes be used as a coping strategy.

Daydreaming is believed to be the product of a collection of brain regions known as the default mode network.

The default mode network is in a part of brain's cortex that demonstrates consistent activity patterns when the brain is otherwise in a state of rest.

In other words, brain activity in this network is at its highest when the brain is not attending to a task. Activity levels in the default mode network fall if the brain is required to pay attention to an external task or object.

The default mode network is important in producing conscious experiences and has been shown to increase in activity when someone is daydreaming.

While it has been linked to creativity and introspection, excessive daydreaming can interfere with an individual's normal functioning at work or in relationships. In 2002, Professor Eli Somer first defined the phenomenon of maladaptive daydreaming.

He believed that maladaptive daydreaming could develop as a result of trauma or abuse, and act as a coping strategy to escape reality.

Maladaptive daydreaming is not recognized as a diagnosable condition under the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5 (DSM-V). A stronger evidence base is required before maladaptive daydreaming can be understood and treated as a medical condition.

However, incidences of maladaptive daydreaming have been reported, and the condition can have an adverse impact on an individual's daily life.

Symptoms

As maladaptive daydreaming is not officially recognized as a medical condition, determining a defining list of symptoms is challenging. However, common symptoms may include one or several of the following:

- highly vivid and immersive daydreams
Common symptoms of maladaptive daydreaming may include abnormally long daydreams, vivid and immersive daydreams, and unconscious movement.

- abnormally long daydreams that are hard to escape
- an inability to carry out daily tasks
- daydreams triggered by external events or stimuli, such as watching a film or listening to music
- sleep disruption and insomnia
- repetitive and unconscious movements when daydreaming, such as rocking back and forth or twitching

It is also possible for individuals to express some symptoms seen in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), such as a short attention span.

Diagnosis

It is currently not possible to formally diagnose maladaptive daydreaming.

A 14-point Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale was developed to help a person determine whether they are experiencing symptoms of the condition. However, the scale should only be used as an indication and is not designed to provide a formal diagnosis.

There is insufficient evidence to suggest maladaptive daydreaming can be classed as a psychiatric condition, but it does have some similarities. For example, individuals with dissociative personality disorder or a split personality disorder can enter states of detachment from reality, becoming engrossed in a fantasy or disillusion.

However, in cases of a personality disorder, the person is unable to distinguish between reality and fantasy. People experiencing maladaptive daydreaming are aware that their daydreams are not reality.

Treatment and management

There is no standard treatment for maladaptive dreaming. However, there are some techniques derived from anecdotal evidence that may help manage the symptoms.
**Reducing fatigue:** This can either be through increasing the amount or quality of sleep. It may also be helpful to use stimulants such as caffeine to combat tiredness in the daytime.

**Being aware of symptoms:** Keeping others informed about the symptoms may provide an opportunity to notice and interrupt the maladaptive daydreaming.

**Identifying and avoiding triggers:** Keeping a diary of when incidences of maladaptive daydreaming occur can help to identify activities or stimuli that trigger their onset.

**Therapy:** This can help identify the triggers and underlying causes of maladaptive daydreaming. Therapeutic techniques such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) may help expose underlying issues. A therapist might also suggest useful coping techniques.

**Medication:** It is unlikely that someone's maladaptive daydreaming would be severe enough to require medication. However, a drug known as fluvoxamine can help manage the symptoms.

A case study of one individual with maladaptive daydreaming showed that fluvoxamine was helpful in managing daydreaming. However, there is currently little research to support the use of drug treatments.

**Outlook**

Without a formal system of diagnosis, it can be difficult to determine the presence of maladaptive daydreaming or find treatments for the condition.

However, if symptoms are disrupting daily life, then a person should seek medical help.

Identifying and avoiding triggers can also help someone focus on tasks outside of their daydreams.

Although no formal treatment structures are in place, several online communities exist where individuals can share their experiences and seek guidance about the condition.
References


Additional information

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