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If you spend hours in your head every day, you might have something called 'maladaptive daydreaming'

Lindsay Dodgson Jun. 28, 2018, 6:13 AM



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- **Some people daydream more than others.**
 - **But people with maladaptive daydreaming take it to the extreme and can daydream for four hours a day.**
 - **New research has shown this kind of daydreaming may be linked with obsessive compulsions.**
 - **Cognitive behavioural therapy could help people take control over their daydreaming.**
 - **Although some daydreamers may not want to give up their imaginary tales.**
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Some people love to daydream. They find it comforting to imagine how their lives might pan out, or they like escaping to worlds

they've crafted in their heads where anything is possible. Others see it as a waste of time and spend no time in their imagination whatsoever.

Research has shown how daydreaming can be good for us, **by improving focus**, and potentially **aiding us in being more successful**. But according to a new study, **published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychiatry***, too much daydreaming can be a sign of a condition called "maladaptive daydreaming," also known as daydreaming disorder.

It's a term which was first coined by clinical psychologist Eli Somer, who worked closely with survivors of child abuse. He noticed a pattern of dissociative daydreaming among several patients, where they would often be

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obsessed with their vivid imaginary tales.

Dissociation has been closely linked to early childhood abuse and trauma, sometimes to the extent of them creating entirely different personalities to escape psychologically damaging situations.

In the new study, Somer explored some of the mental health conditions that could be associated with maladaptive daydreaming by recruiting 77 people who self-diagnosed themselves as having it.

"I have been lost in daydreams for as long as I can remember," one woman said. "Some daydreams involve people I know... Others don't include me at all... These daydreams

tend to be stories for which I feel real emotion, usually happiness or sadness, which have the ability to make me laugh and cry.

"They're as important a part of my life as anything else; I can spend hours alone with my daydreams... I often feel as if I just cannot turn off my mind, whether because I need to concentrate in class, go to sleep, or just find some peace in the world outside my head."

She's constantly lost in her daydreams, the woman said, and she often neglects her relationships with friends and family in favour of replaying or elaborating on stories inside her head.

"I am torn between the love of my daydreams and the desire to be normal," she

said.

Somer and coauthor Nirit Soffer-Dudek found people from 26 different countries, ranging from 18 to 60 years old. About 80% of participants were women, and they said this could be because women tend to be more affected by maladaptive daydreaming than men.

The condition isn't listed in the standard mental health diagnostic manuals, but Somer and Soffer-Dudek write in the paper that it has "gradually become evident that daydreaming can evolve into an extreme and maladaptive behaviour, up to the point

where it turns into a clinically significant condition."

Of the 77 daydreamers, 21 had depression, 14 had anxiety disorders, and five had **obsessive compulsive disorder** (OCD). They were asked to complete a questionnaire about their experiences to assess their levels of dissociation, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, mental health, emotions, and level of daydreaming.

There was a link found between maladaptive daydreaming and obsessive compulsive symptoms, suggesting there may be some common mechanisms. But that doesn't make it a sub-type of OCD, just that it may sometimes follow, as it could have done for the five people who were diagnosed with OCD. Overall, the

participants reported spending four hours a day in their daydreams.

For those who find their daydreaming is affecting their real world lives, cognitive behavioural therapy could help address their compulsive need to slip into their imagination. Somer and Soffer-Dudek note in the paper that a lot of maladaptive daydreaming was then followed by increased negative emotions.

Although they cannot say the bad feelings were necessarily caused by the daydreaming, it does strengthen the idea that maladaptive daydreaming "does not promote pleasurable sensations," they said.

The study had limitations, because the results were self-reported. But as an original look into the disorder, the authors believe it is an important step for the research field.

"We hope that our findings will aid future attempts to develop therapy guidelines for individuals battling MD, so that they will be able to take control over their compulsion to daydream," the authors concluded. If people want to gain control over it, that is.

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