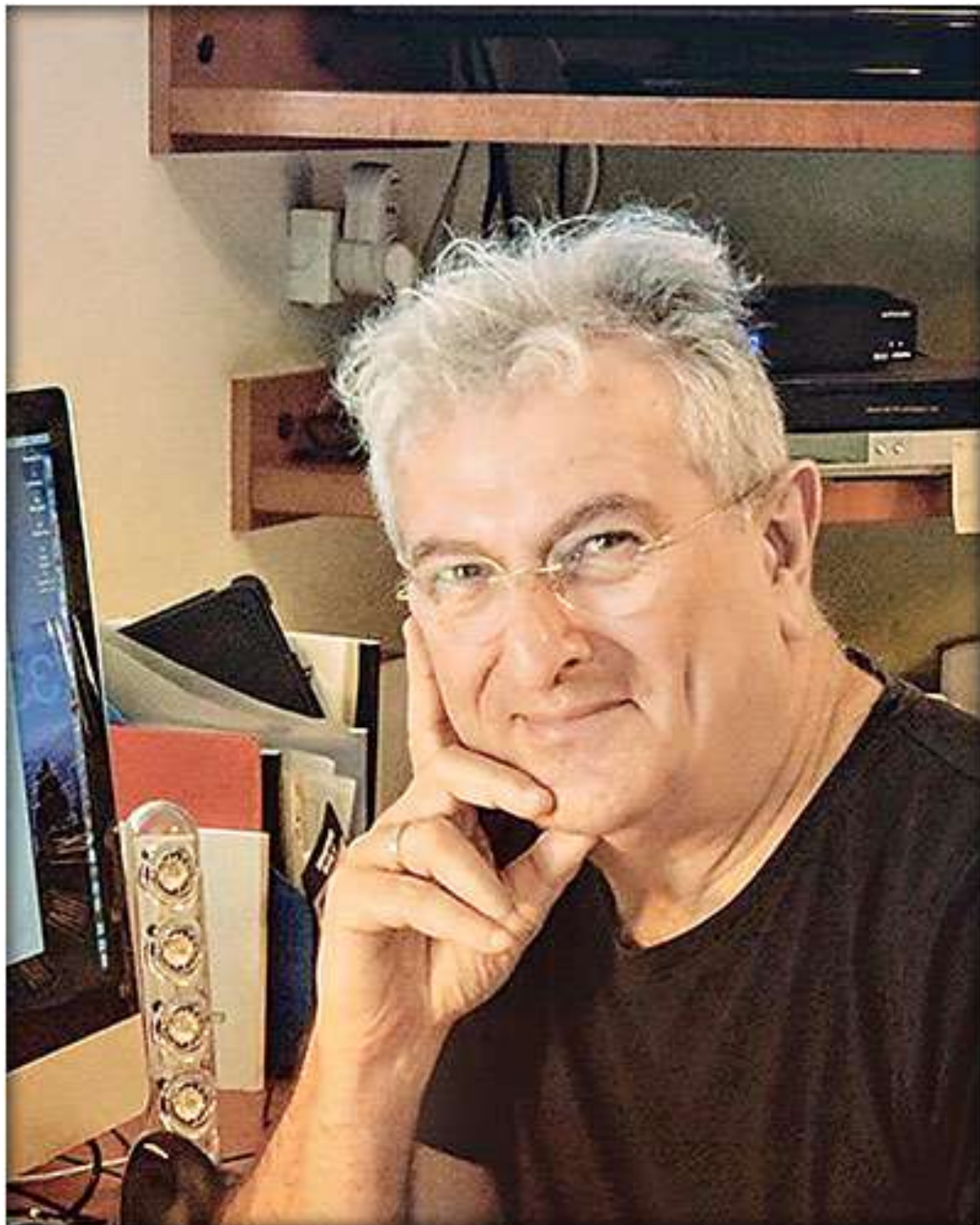


Decades in a Daydream

In conversation with a renowned clinical psychologist, Eli Somer, from University of Haifa, we uncover how obsessive daydreaming can become a mental illness

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I sit in front of my psychiatrist, in the middle of the legions of sessions we had together. As I begin, yet again, to explain the intricacies of my condition; she tries to summon the right words to help my case. All futile, I think, as I internally shake my head. Over a span of two years, I have been to a number of psychiatrists who have given me different diagnosis. But never, the right one. Am I the only one imprisoned in my own daydreams?

What happens when your daydreams spur out of control, and become an exhausting obsession and addiction? What if the intense, engrossing visuals that are mere figments of your imagination begin to take over your life? What if, your life becomes a whirlwind of imagination which shies away from actual reality? What happens, when the characters from films you watch and books you read, begin to star in your heightened abnormal daydreaming? Or worse, you begin to lose hours creating scenarios in your mental theatre, about the real people around you, possibilities that are poles apart from reality? What happens when obsessive daydreaming becomes a mental illness?

Sarah* delves in her daydreams, for four hours every day, as she paces the floor of the university library, where she works. She spends these hours immeasurably conjuring up scenarios that give her a dose of exhilaration. Students visiting the library find the librarian very odd; as they often see her whispering, glassy-eyed, to herself as she sporadically paces the aisles.

Marlin* refers to her daydreaming getaways as 'episodes' which can last up to eight hours. She finds herself running aimlessly in the corridor, which connects her room to her flatmates', listening to the same playlist on repeat, as she imagines marrying her classmate and whole spectrum of a white picket fence life. Often, when her flatmate walks in on her mid-running and gasping, she lies to them saying that she was 'just exercising'.

The 42-year-old widow, Tamanna* could never learn to drive, despite attending two driving schools and constant training by her sons. She says her excessive daydreaming curbs her from concentrating on her drives.

These 'daydreamers' lost decades to what is a highly delusional and visually-rich daydreaming state-of mind. They had lost hope; hope that a mental condition of such exists. Many of them thought that, they were the only ones. Many who sought medical help, found the exercise futile, because they "still couldn't stop daydreaming".

But hope did come. It came in the shape and amalgamation of an Israeli clinical psychologist's research, and discovery of the mental condition, what is now widely known as Maladaptive Daydreaming.

It was Eli Somer, a Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Haifa, School of Social Work, who gave the mental condition recognition and a name. Somer was born in 1951, in Haifa to parents that were refugees and survivors of the Nazi persecution in Europe. His entire career as clinical psychologist is dedicated to the treatment of survivors of various forms of trauma: war, terrorism and childhood abuse and neglect.

It was in the years preceding 2002, that the clinical psychologist noticed something exceptionally odd about his trauma patients. "I had noticed that some of my trauma patients were describing extensive daydreaming that could last for hours every day," Somer reveals. "Because of the nature of my practice, they were all survivors of some sort of childhood adversities. I found out that extensive daydreaming is another form of dissociation: distancing from painful memories through absorptive fantasy." shares Somer, describing the inception of his research on the mental condition.

"I proceeded to write my observations up in an extended case report that was published in 2002. It was in this paper that the term 'maladaptive daydreaming' (MD) was coined." says Somer.

When the paper and the term Maladaptive Daydreaming and MD went viral, many people from around the world struggling with the condition adopted the term, and proceeded to form online forums aimed primarily to provide peer-support for countless individuals who were stuck with the mental condition. This ensued a very interesting process, with scores of people from many countries started writing to Somer, describing their concerns about their compulsive daydreaming, imploring the professor to continue with his research in the hope that MD will gain acknowledgment by the scientific and professional worlds.

Somer talks at length about some of the common symptoms associated with maladaptive daydreaming and how it impacts the life of the individuals going through it.

"MD is an immersive form of vivid and fanciful daydreaming that can last for hours everyday, impairing daily functioning and creating distress. Many maladaptive daydreamers (MDers) state that repetitive movement and listening to music are important features associated of their fantasy activity," reveals Somer, explaining why some individuals resort to repetitive playlists as triggers to their daydream.

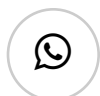
Maladaptive daydreamers find their daydreams to be extremely absorbing and serve as a behavioural addiction to them. They feel lured to immerse themselves in their inner worlds, rather than attend to their daily obligations and routines.

The condition, is not officially recognised as a psychiatric disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Why is that so? I ask Somer urging the psychologist to share his efforts to bring this disorder to the forefront.

"More research needs to be done, replicated and extended in diverse populations. We also need to conduct brain imaging studies to better understand the brain mechanisms involved in this unique form of vivid daydreaming and why it can be so addictive for many."

One might argue that bathing in subtle fantasies and staying in the bubble of one's imagination is an interesting getaway. But, for some, daydreaming ceases to become a choice and borders on absolute submission to imagination. How far can human daydreaming stretch its wings, if it remains unrestrained and unchecked? •

Names are asterisked* to provide confidentiality to the individuals who shared their story with the scribe.



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