

# Is Your Excessive Daydreaming a Sign of a More Serious Problem?

Some say so-called maladaptive daydreaming can interfere with life, school, work and relationships.

By Michael O. Schroeder, Staff Writer

<https://health.usnews.com/wellness/mind/articles/2018-07-12/is-your-excessive-daydreaming-a-sign-of-a-more-serious-problem>



**ALMOST ALL OF US** daydream. [One Harvard study](#) found that our minds wander nearly half (about 47 percent) of the time. While definitions for what constitutes daydreaming differ – and are commonly narrower than simply not thinking about the world in front of us – experts say what's clear is that we spend a fair amount of time with our thoughts somewhere else rather than engaged in the present moment.

Having your head in the clouds isn't all bad – or all good. The Harvard researchers found how often a person drifted off was a predictor of unhappiness. Conversely, the modern [focus on mindfulness](#) – rooted in ancient religious and philosophical traditions – connects a greater sense of awareness in the current moment with improved life satisfaction and an enhanced ability to make meaningful change.

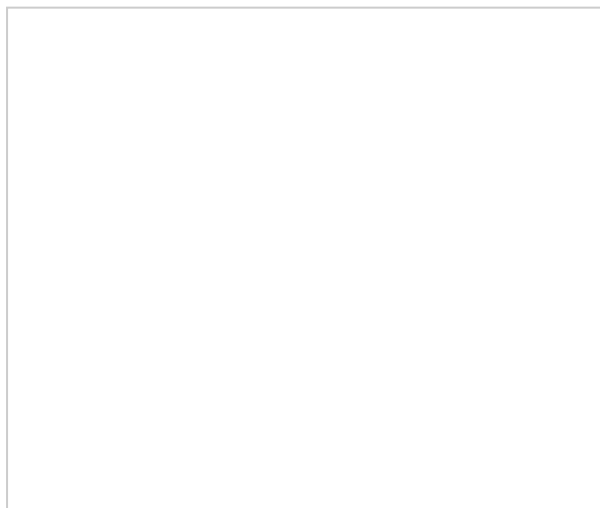
However, daydreaming can be a pleasant pastime (the content of a daydream can affect this for better or worse), and there's a utility to the ubiquitous human exercise. "Daydreaming allows you to often develop problem-solving strategies for your personal activities or personal issues," says Dr. Madhukar Trivedi, a professor of psychiatry at [UT Southwestern Medical Center](#) in Dallas. Some people, through daydreaming, come up with innovative ideas, make breakthroughs.

Research shows when [daydreaming](#) is focused (even though to some that may seem contrary or oxymoronic) it can be useful to achieve goals. David B. Feldman, chair of the department of counseling psychology at Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, California, found that to be the case in research he did on hopeful daydreaming – also known as structured daydreaming. Individuals spent time not only thinking about a goal, but imagining steps they'd take to achieve it, how they'd motivate themselves to take those steps and obstacles and ways to get around those. "What we found was when we followed up a month later that the people who went

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through this workshop [involving structured daydreaming] were more likely to report having accomplished those goals," he says, compared with a control group.

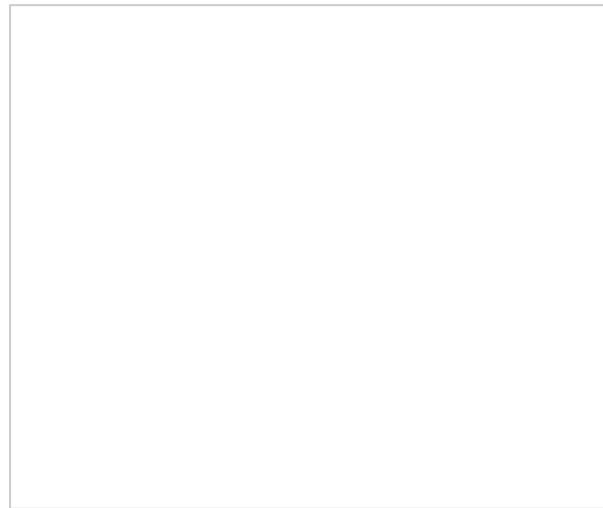


**[See: [8 Ways to Stick to Your Meditation Routine.](#)]**

But, on the other hand, excessive and intense daydreaming has been shown to be not only frustrating – when a person "snaps out of it," and falls back into a stark reality – but, in some instances, linked to more significant mental health issues like [depression](#). "The problem arises when that overtakes your day-to-day functioning so that you're unable to then focus or concentrate on things that are in the present that you are supposed to be doing," Trivedi says. If it distracts from your ability to perform day-to-day functions – from school to work to being [plugged into relationships](#), then it becomes a problem. And obsessive rumination – or obsessively coming back again and again to the same negative thoughts – may affect a person

emotionally in their capacity to interact with others, Trivedi says. Taken together, distractibility and the obsessive rumination really have an effect on your mood, he says.

Still, most mental health professionals view excessive daydreaming, at its worst, as a sometimes symptom of a mental health concern, not a core issue that needs to be treated. Even so, thousands of people have joined forums online like [Wild Minds Network](#) to discuss what they do see as a condition, which is not recognized by the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: maladaptive daydreaming.

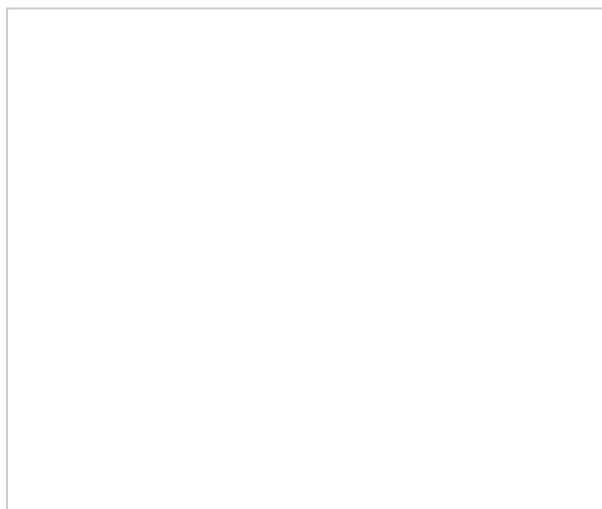


Stepping in where scant research exists, Israeli researchers Nirit Soffer-Dudek and Eli Somer recently sought to better understand factors that may accompany MD and symptoms associated with it. "Maladaptive Daydreaming (MD) characterizes individuals who engage in vivid, fanciful daydreaming for hours on end, neglecting real-life relationships and responsibilities, resulting in clinical distress and functional impairment," they wrote in a [study](#) of 77 people from around the world who were self-diagnosed with MD. "Sufferers have embraced the term MD in cyber-communities devoted to this problem because it seemed to uniquely fit their experience and since existing diagnostic labels and their therapies seemed inadequate."

Of those who volunteered to participate in the research published in the *Frontiers of Psychiatry* in May, more than half reported they'd been diagnosed with mental health conditions – such as depression, anxiety disorders, [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) or complex trauma (thought to result from exposure to repetitive, prolonged trauma), [attention-deficit disorder](#) and [obsessive-compulsive disorder](#).

**[See: [Is It OK to Talk to Yourself?](#)]**

The study, by design, couldn't determine cause and effect, between MD and mental health symptoms – or worsening of symptoms – or how people felt emotionally. But during a two-week period when subjects were surveyed, "on days in which MD was more intense and time-consuming, individuals reported higher levels of dissociation, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, depression, and negative emotion, and lower levels of positive emotion. They also experienced more anxiety and social anxiety on days in which MD was more intense," the researchers wrote. And self-diagnosed MDers spent a great amount of time daydreaming: "On average, as a group, on their first assessment participants reported spending 4.5 [hours] actively engaging in daydreaming on that single day, suggesting that their MD was indeed time-consuming and excessive, taking up over a quarter of their waking time."



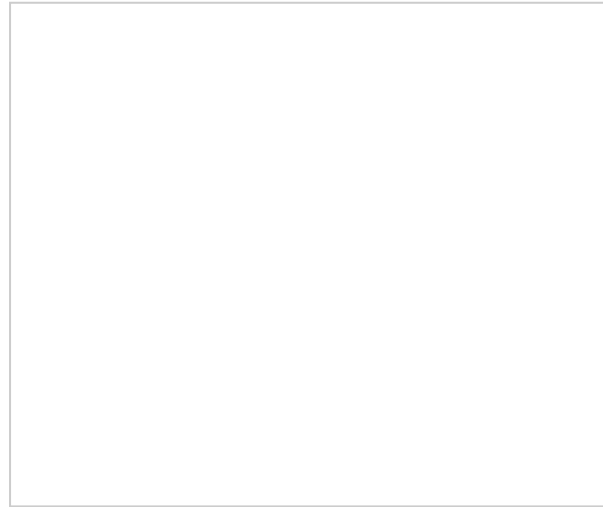


Of course, more studies are needed, as the researchers note, to better understand the potential relationship between MD, how individuals feel before and after daydreaming and any mental health issues, or worsening of symptoms. "These findings will need to be independently replicated and corroborated by objective assessments," adds Trivedi, who wasn't involved in the research.

Experts say it's important to treat underlying issues, like depression – and routinely disagree with characterizing maladaptive daydreaming as a disorder. "This is an interesting way to conceptualize a common mental phenomenon," Trivedi says. "It may be premature to call it a symptom of a new disorder."

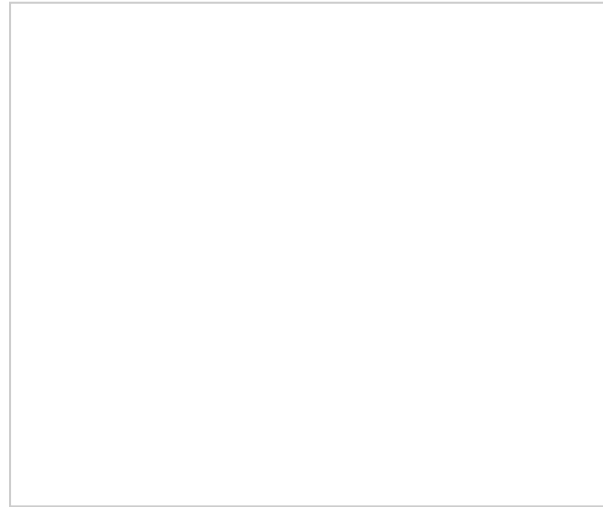
But Jayne Bigelsen, maladaptive daydreaming researcher based in New York City who formerly experienced MD as a child, teen and into her 20s, thinks it deserves recognition of some kind in the DSM. "Is it a part of OCD? Is it a symptom of a lot of other diseases? Is it a symptom of depression, OCD? A lot of the people I have talked with have had coexisting diagnoses, social anxiety, which I don't have. But OCD runs in my family," Bigelsen says. "So I don't know if it's just a symptom of many, many other disorders, or if it's its own entity. But I think it needs to be mentioned somehow in the DSM."

MDers commonly report having rich, involved daydreams that are plot- or character-driven. "So my personal experiences were very common in that I took TV shows that I liked when I was a kid, and I would create new versions – new episodes of them – changing the plot, adding new characters, sometimes putting myself as a character in it," Bigelsen says. Motion or movement seem to help many slide into a daydream and stay there; while music is often a facilitator or trigger for drifting off as well. "When I was young, I would spin in circles with a string and daydream – which just looked pretty odd," Bigelsen says.



As she got older, though, she could daydream without movement – and hide it. That's what many MDers report doing – concealing it from friends, family and even, sometimes, [mental health professionals](#). "I would start doing it when I was out with my friends – and I'd be half listening to my friends, and half in a daydream world," Bigelsen says. Around the time she was in high school, she started to realize when she went out with friends, "I didn't really care as much about what they were saying, and just a lot of the things in the world that were really important to them," she says. "I would just prefer to be in my head." Although she drifted off a lot in school as well, she was able to keep up her grades. "I was highly confident in compensating," she says. "I wouldn't listen in class for a month. But then I would study for hours and hours and hours before the test. But I am seeing other people who are failing out of school, or getting divorced, because their spouses say they're not present. So for some people ... there are some overt consequences; and for others they just feel like it's taking away their ability to fully be present."





Although a hallmark of MD, it's not the vivid nature of daydreaming – which some people enjoy without any negative consequences – but when it interferes with life that makes it maladaptive, say those who study MD. Now 47, Bigelsen says taking [antidepressants](#), selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors that were prescribed to treat OCD, helped her. But others have told her SSRIs weren't helpful. "If someone is still very young or it seems mild, I'd just encourage them to try to just engage in the real world as much as possible," she says – such as, for students – joining clubs and activities at school. "Because as you start to get engaged in real life, you're going to be daydreaming less."

**[See: [8 Medications That Treat Multiple Conditions.](#)]**

The fact that MD seems to be closely linked to obsessive compulsive tendencies and addictive behaviors may mean that talk therapy used for those purposes could help as well. MD research has also evaluated mindfulness training as a way to combat it. But Soffer-Dudek and Somer note that randomized, controlled clinical trials are still needed to determine the usefulness of those kinds of approaches.