

Dissociation Disorders

What You Should Know About Maladaptive Daydreaming

Megan Griffith · Follow
Yesterday

Editor's Note

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Have you ever had a daydream that felt more real or more important than real life? Have you ever been daydreaming and found you couldn't really stop? You might be experiencing something called maladaptive daydreaming. And I would know, since I **spent over a decade stuck** in maladaptive daydreams.

What Is Maladaptive Daydreaming?

OK, so what exactly is maladaptive daydreaming? According to Dr. Eli Somer, the psychologist who identified maladaptive daydreaming, it is "**an excessive and vivid fantasy activity that interferes with individual's normal functioning and can result in severe distress.**" Basically, there are two types of daydreaming: healthy daydreaming and maladaptive daydreaming. Maladaptive daydreaming is when your daydreams go beyond an occasional distraction from boredom and turn into something that disrupts your life. Some common symptoms include:

- Daydreams that are incredibly detailed and/or immersive
- Very long daydreams (the average total time spent daydreaming for maladaptive daydreamers is **four hours per day**)
- Daydreams that are difficult to stop or escape
- Inability to complete daily tasks because you're stuck in a daydream
- **Insomnia** due to daydreaming
- Daydreams triggered by external stimuli, like music or movies

What Are Maladaptive Daydream Stories?

Once you are aware of your maladaptive daydreams, or if you take the time to analyze what kind of daydreams you're having, you will sometimes realize that your daydreams likely follow certain classic "stories." In your daydreams, you may take on the caretaker role, the savior role or other roles, and people in your life may take on the villain role, the love interest role, and so on. While the actual content of the daydream may change from day to day (although many maladaptive daydreamers repeat daydreams over and over) the underlying archetypes and storylines often remain the same.

For me, **my maladaptive daydream** stories typically cast me as the savior and victim simultaneously. I would be mortally wounded, but still saving others. I would be tragically betrayed, but still try to make others feel better. We often take on roles in our daydreams that we feel unable to fill in the real world, so it makes sense that I was drawn to both the hero and the victim. I never felt good enough to help anyone else, but also like nothing was bad enough for me to be the one being helped. I felt very in the middle, kind of nothing, so in my daydreams, I became everything.

What Causes Maladaptive Daydreaming?

Research on maladaptive daydreaming is all fairly recent and psychologists really don't understand it fully yet. Right now, it is not a diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition (DSM-V) but there are several ways it may feature in the next edition.

Currently, there are many different theories about what causes maladaptive daydreaming. **One theory** is that it is a type of behavioral addiction. Another idea is that it may be a symptom of disorders like ADHD, depression, OCD and trauma disorders. Another idea is that it may be its own disorder entirely. But the theory I relate to best is the idea of dissociative absorption.

Basically, the theory is that some people (consciously or subconsciously) use daydreams to dissociate from their surroundings or their regular inner life. Instead of being a symptom of another disorder, it may be actually be a coping mechanism gone wrong. Maladaptive daydreaming dissociation is generally (though not always) more pleasant than **regular dissociation** because instead of turning off all of your emotions and becoming numb, you get to create and explore another world, one that is distinctly different from the real world that is causing you distress.

What's the Problem Here?

If this doesn't sound so bad to you, that might be my fault. My personal experience with maladaptive daydreaming was actually relatively pleasant. I enjoyed my daydreams and I really missed them when they went away. But that's the thing: they went away. On their own. I had very little control over my daydreams, and that's where the trouble starts.

People who get stuck in maladaptive daydreaming often feel compelled to keep daydreaming, sometimes to the point where it interferes with their real life, or to the point where they feel like their daydream world is more "real" than real life. To be clear, maladaptive daydreamers are not psychotic; they maintain a clear understanding of what is daydream and what is real, but they may start to prefer their daydreams over reality and become more invested in that world than they are in the real one.

This is obviously a problem. Daydreams can be excellent distractions and they can help us cope when the real world is letting us down sometimes, but as my favorite old wizard once said, "It does not do to dwell on dreams, and forget to live."

My Experience With Maladaptive Daydreaming

That was the problem with my daydreams, even though I didn't see the problem at the time. I vividly remember the feeling of "coming out" of a daydream. It was like suction, like I was being physically pulled away from a different mental state. When I was pulled out, I would often try desperately to get back in as soon as possible. I would be in class or doing homework, daydreaming, get sucked out to answer a question, and then I would try to sit exactly the same way I was before, look at exactly the same spot and try to get back into the daydream.

I was a maladaptive daydreamer from as young as I can remember until I went to college. A few months in, the daydreams just... stopped. I didn't realize it at the time, but the daydreams went away because I no longer needed them as a coping mechanism.

Maladaptive daydreaming may be its own disorder for some, but for me, it was absolutely a case of dissociative absorption. Whether it was a **coping mechanism** for an illness like OCD or depression, I'm not sure, but I do know it was a way to disappear into an imaginary world where everything could be as big and dramatic as my feelings were, and those feelings would make sense. In the real world, my emotions always felt wrong, but in my maladaptive daydream stories, I could make the world dramatic to match my inner world, and I felt much more comfortable.

Am I a Maladaptive Daydreamer?

Maybe! If you're wondering about your own daydreaming and whether it's "normal," try not to fret. First, it isn't about being normal. It's about being healthy. If you daydream when you're bored, but you can easily leave your daydreams behind and you feel comfortable engaging in your real life, then your daydreams probably aren't maladaptive.

If some of this sounds a little too familiar though, and you want to learn more, there is a lot of fascinating research out there from Dr. Somer. If research isn't really your jam, you can also check out the **maladaptive daydreaming Reddit** or the **Wild Minds Network**, which is a site created by and for maladaptive daydreamers. Just remember though, some social networks get so caught up in learning about the problem that they forget to also discuss solutions and hope. If you find that these resources actually make your daydreaming worse, it may be better to reach out to a therapist. Check out my blog to learn **everything you need to know about therapy**.

A version of this article was previously published on the author's blog, **Megan Writes Everything**.

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Megan Griffith · Follow

Megan is a writer, poet, and hair dye enthusiast. She writes about her struggles with mental illness in the hopes that others will feel less alone, and, if she's being honest, in the hopes that she'll feel a little less alone too.

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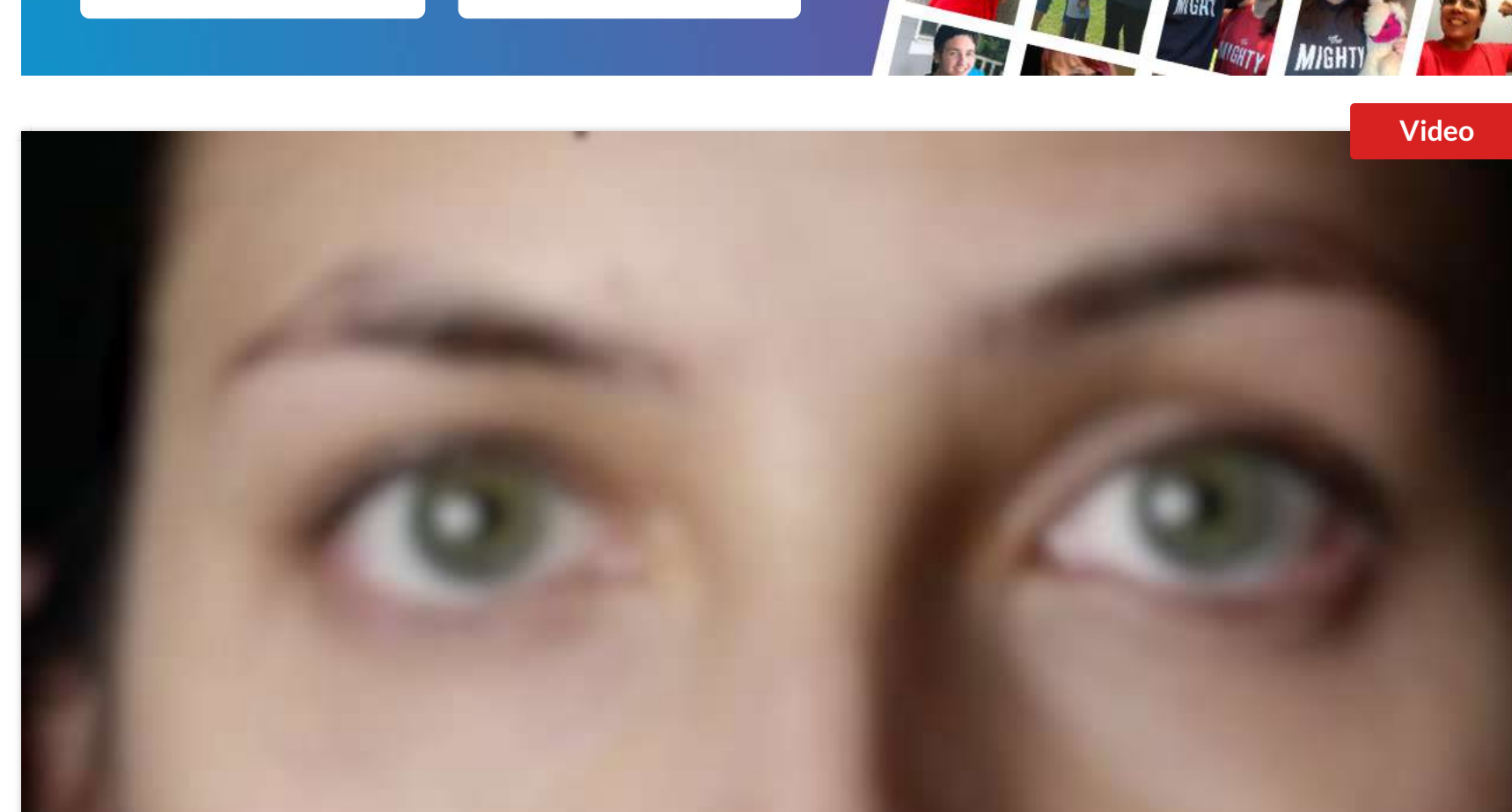
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The Mighty mental health community makes a list of things they did because they experienced dissociation as a child.

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Don't have anyone

I have been having a hard time with my illness. What happens is I have really vivid, horrible dreams that feel real and I barely get rest. This happens almost every day. It also happens that I will confuse what happened in a dream with reality. I won't be able to tell the difference between reality and the dream. That also happens quite a lot. I talked to my therapists about it, they told me it's depersonalization.

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@tamhagg
April 11, 2020

Does anyone else here struggle with dissociative states rather than alters? I don't have multiple personalities. I black out. Anyone? Thanks! 🙏

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