



Don't Take Your Head Out of the Clouds!

Far from a waste of time, daydreaming might be one of the best things you can do with your free time.



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By **Rebecca Renner**

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Like many people, Namita Kulkarni has felt trapped during the pandemic. When this travel blogger's typically intrepid life suddenly became stuck in place, she sought her next adventure in her imagination.

“As a child, I fancied being lost in a forest,” Ms. Kulkarni said. “Wilderness expands one’s sense of possibilities, so things tend to get pretty fantastical in the forests I imagine.” While her head is in the clouds, her imaginary feet enjoy magical waterfalls, fields of yellow flowers or cozy bathtubs that overlook lush valleys.

She’s not alone. Adults spend as much as 47 percent of their waking lives letting their minds wander, according to one [Harvard study that tracked participants with an app](#). Other studies say [that percentage varies](#) wildly, depending how you classify it.

However, none of these studies paint staring off into space in a positive light. For decades, psychologists have equated daydreaming with a [failure of cognitive control](#), focusing on how it stunts abilities like [task processing](#), [reading comprehension](#) and [memory](#). Yet, Jerome Singer, a former professor at Pennsylvania State University and the father of daydreaming research, hypothesized that [daydreaming can have a positive effect](#). If not, why would our minds be so prone to wander?

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Unlike the psychologists who have portrayed daydreaming as wholly wasteful, Dr. Singer said some daydreaming [was advantageous](#) and some counterproductive. To him, negative daydreams came in two forms: painful, obsessive fantasies, and an undisciplined inability to concentrate.

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But he also proposed some playful, creative reveries, called positive constructive daydreaming, could be beneficial. Whereas the negative daydreams indicate a loss of control, people purposefully jump into the playful kind.

This idea was revolutionary when Dr. Singer proposed it 70 years ago. A few psychologists continued his research in positive daydreaming, but most viewed it as a harmful distraction from typical thought patterns. Even the Harvard app study found daydreamers were less happy.

So most psychologists have used daydreaming over the years as a barometer for a patient’s mental state rather than as a productive tool to change it. Now, a growing body of research and evidence from clinical therapy suggest we can use purposeful, playful daydreaming to improve our overall well-being.

Harder Than It Looks

New research shows that daydreaming can inspire happiness if you purposefully engage with meaningful topics, such as pleasant memories of loved ones or imagined scenes of triumph in the face of all odds.

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In a [recent study](#) published in the journal Emotion, researchers tested how much pleasure people derived from thinking. Participants left to their own devices were more likely to gravitate toward worrying or neutral topics like work or school, and they were left with negative or neutral feelings after the session.

When given a framework that guided them to imagine something positive, like a fantasy of having superpowers or the memory of their first kiss, they were 50 percent more likely to feel positive after the session.

Why couldn’t they do that on their own? Erin Westgate, a psychology professor at the University of Florida and the study’s lead author, said that positive daydreaming is a heavier cognitive lift. So, our brains move toward effortless mind wandering, even when the results are negative.

Using your imagination “seems like it should be easy,” Dr. Westgate said. When you daydream, you’re acting as the “screenwriter, director, audience and performer in a whole mental drama going on in your head. That’s incredibly cognitively demanding.”

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And it’s not always good. Some studies suggest too much daydreaming can be [bad for your mental health](#). Maladaptive daydreaming, when people flee into daydreams to escape events or feelings of distress, can be a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychiatric conditions. The more trauma survivors delve into their waking dream worlds, the [worse their condition can become](#).

But learning how to control your imagination correctly is worth the hassle.

The Healing Imagination

As a trauma therapist, Abigail Nathanson guides her patients in visualization and a storytelling technique called imagery rescripting that can help them understand and cope with traumatic memories.

Dr. Nathanson starts by telling patients that imagining themselves in more tranquil settings, [especially ones of nature](#), can be an effective anxiety intervention.

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Dr. Nathanson often prompts patients to take this symbolism further by [engaging with metaphors](#) and [visual symbolism](#). If her patients feel stuck, they might create a scene where they’re standing behind a brick wall that represents their impasse. She helps them interpret the symbol and can also use it [as a tool](#). “I will say: ‘What are you wearing in front of the brick wall? What is underneath your feet? What is around you? What do you see? What do you smell?’” she said.

When purposefully engaging with your daydreams, the more senses you can call into action, the more real they can make the scene feel in your mind.

Dr. Nathanson then prods them to take action, “actively engaging in their spontaneous metaphor,” as she puts it. They could climb over the wall, knock it down or do whatever suits their imagination.

Although overcoming past trauma isn’t as easy as knocking down an imaginary wall, that action can have real, tangible effects. While [revealing in the moment](#) of success might actually [de-motivate us from reaching future goals](#), visualizing the actions you take along the way can be powerful. Screening this movie in your head will make you [more likely to follow through](#), and because you’ve imagined these scenarios before, you’ll be calm as they play out in real life.

How to Daydream

Athletes like rugby players, golfers and martial artists who deliberately daydream about their techniques, using imagery and narrative, have found it can [improve their performance](#). Studies of [surgeons](#) and [musicians](#) have found similar results. Yet, some have trouble engaging with their imaginative creative sides.

As Dr. Westgate’s study showed, volitional daydreaming is especially hard without inspiration. Cognitive flexibility and creativity peak in childhood and decline with age. That creativity is still there, but it might need prompting. So, when T.M. Robinson-Mosley, a consulting psychologist for the National Basketball Association, counsels players on how to harness the power of their daydreams, she first helps them break down their mental blocks and brainstorm ideas to focus on.

To help players lose their inhibitions, Dr. Robinson-Mosley starts them off by free writing, drawing or using whatever medium suits them. This “allows them to reconnect to some of the kind of creativity that we really enjoy as children,” she said.

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To do this yourself, set aside a few minutes every day for daydreaming. Start each session with brainstorming exercises. Pick the medium that feels most effortless and enjoyable, whether it’s writing, drawing, playing an instrument or something else, and use the task as inspiration to plumb your subconscious for ideas.

Pick one idea to focus on as you daydream. You should also record a goal for the session. Your goal might be to enjoy your thoughts for a few minutes. You could use the time to process something that’s making you anxious, or to envision the steps you’ll take toward achieving a goal. The more details you can use, the better.

Dr. Robinson-Mosley likens meaningful daydreaming to the practice of shadowboxing: “Before you even get in the ring to face an actual opponent, you will spend thousands of hours shadowboxing, a form of visualization that’s designed for you to simulate a boxing match in your mind before you ever glove up.”

Using daydreaming as mental rehearsal can do more than just hone job performance. Research has shown that imagining scenarios as visual scenes can provide a [boost in mood](#) to people suffering from major depression. [Dwelling on personally meaningful](#) but imaginary scenes, like the ones in Dr. Westgate’s study, can increase creativity and spur inspiration.

Your high school English teacher might have called you a space cadet, but in reality, even the briefest mental vacations can restore a sense of well-being. Sometimes it pays off to have your head in the clouds.

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