

If You Can Fantasize For Hours, There's a Name For That: Maladaptive Daydreaming

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What Is Maladaptive Daydreaming?

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Daydreaming, zoning out, getting lost in your thoughts — we've all done it from time to time, whether we're bored, distracted, or need a break from the real world. But have you ever had a daydream that felt more real than reality, as vivid as a movie, with a plot and cast of characters to rival a fantasy novel? Have you ever wanted to daydream for hours without stop?

This type of vivid, excessive daydreaming is called maladaptive daydreaming, a term [coined in 2002](#) by psychology professor Eli Somer, PhD, and which has recently started to attract mainstream attention. Characterized by extraordinarily vivid and lengthy daydreams, maladaptive daydreaming is sometimes associated with mental health conditions like depression, anxiety, and ADHD, and is often related to trauma; it can act as an escape valve, a coping mechanism, a way to retreat into your own head for as long as necessary.

"It's very vivid and very fanciful and very, very enjoyable," said Nirit Soffer-Dudek, PhD, director of the Consciousness of Psychopathology Lab at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel and a researcher at the [International Consortium of Maladaptive Daydreaming Research](#) (ICMDR). These epic daydreams can be entertaining to the point of becoming addictive, with some daydreamers preferring them to real life.

What Is Maladaptive Daydreaming?

Maladaptive daydreaming is defined as daydreaming that is both very excessive and extremely immersive. It's "the ability to daydream in a very unique way, which is more immersive, fanciful, vivid, emotional, than most people," Dr. Soffer-Dudek explained, coupled with the compulsion to do it "excessively, to the point where it harms your life or impairs different domains of functioning."

Dr. Soffer-Dudek compared it to watching a soap opera or a movie, "but you're in the movie, so it's even more exciting." People with maladaptive daydreaming can spend hours in the daydream without wanting to stop; the behavior tends to become addictive. In her research, Dr. Soffer-Dudek has observed that maladaptive daydreaming also appears to be more

prevalent among young people, though people of any age can experience it.

How Do You Know If You Have Maladaptive Daydreaming?

If you're wondering whether your daydreams qualify, know that Dr. Soffer-Dudek described maladaptive daydreaming as a spectrum, with varying experiences between people. If you're experiencing maladaptive daydreaming, though, two things will always be true:

- **Your daydreams are extremely vivid and fanciful.** Maladaptive daydreams often feature plots and characters that provoke intense emotions. People may even cry or laugh while daydreaming, and the daydreamer is often a character within the storyline. "It's tragic, and then it's funny," Dr. Soffer-Dudek said. "It sucks you in."
- **Your daydreams interfere with your daily life.** People with maladaptive daydreaming typically prefer the daydream to real life. "You just want to daydream all day," Dr. Soffer-Dudek explained. "People with maladaptive daydreaming sometimes say, 'I can just sit for five hours if you just give me the time . . . It's so much fun. It's so much easier than other things in life.'"

Dr. Somer created a [16-item questionnaire](#) to help doctors assess whether their patients have maladaptive daydreaming, which goes into more detail about what the daydream experience is like.

Is Maladaptive Daydreaming a Symptom of a Mental Condition?

Maladaptive daydreaming is not a direct symptom of a mental condition, nor is it considered an official diagnosis or disorder. However, Dr. Soffer-Dudek noted that [maladaptive daydreaming is often related](#) to [depression](#), [anxiety](#), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), as well as other disorders on the compulsive spectrum.

Maladaptive daydreaming is often a result of trauma or stress, she added. It can develop as a coping mechanism following a traumatic experience, or as a way regulate your emotions and escape from negative stressors and feelings, such as anxiety. Dr. Soffer-Dudek gave social anxiety as an example: it might be very stressful for you to be around people or in certain social situations, and it's easier and more enjoyable to slip into a daydream instead.

Is Maladaptive Daydreaming Bad?

Some people feel shame or guilt over maladaptive daydreaming, Dr. Soffer-Dudek said. "They feel that it impairs whatever they do or want to accomplish with their lives," either by making it hard to concentrate on tasks and relationships, or by taking up large amounts of time that could be spent elsewhere.

That being said, maladaptive daydreaming is not inherently "bad." It's possible to have long, vivid daydreams, but not see the habit as an issue. "If you never thought it was a problem, then it's not a problem," Dr. Soffer-Dudek said.

On the other hand, you might feel that maladaptive daydreaming is restricting your life or getting in the way of things you want to do. If you feel like maladaptive daydreaming isn't good for you, then you can take steps to address it.

How Do You Treat Maladaptive Daydreaming?

Maladaptive daydreaming is treatable, Dr. Soffer-Dudek said, noting that certain types of therapy may be helpful for controlling your maladaptive daydreaming. She recommended [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) and mindfulness to help you identify triggers and monitor the behavior. [Psychodynamic therapy](#), which focuses on self-reflection and self-examination, could also be helpful.

However, many people have difficulty [finding a therapist](#) who is familiar

with maladaptive daydreaming. In that case, Dr. Soffer-Dudek recommended looking for therapists with experience in habit reversal and behavioral addictions. If your therapist is open-minded, you can also send them some of the research done on maladaptive daydreaming, which they could use in your treatment. (The ICMDR website has an [archive of research on maladaptive daydreaming](#).) "Good therapists could probably treat it even if they're just learning of the concept," Dr. Soffer-Dudek said.

You can also find support groups online and learn how others have overcome their maladaptive daydreaming. With a condition like maladaptive daydreaming, which is still gaining widespread recognition, it can be comforting to just know that there's a word for what you're experiencing and a community outside of yourself that can relate to you. "It is really good to see that you're not alone in this," Dr. Soffer-Dudek said.