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Maladaptive Daydreaming

The disorder you've never heard of

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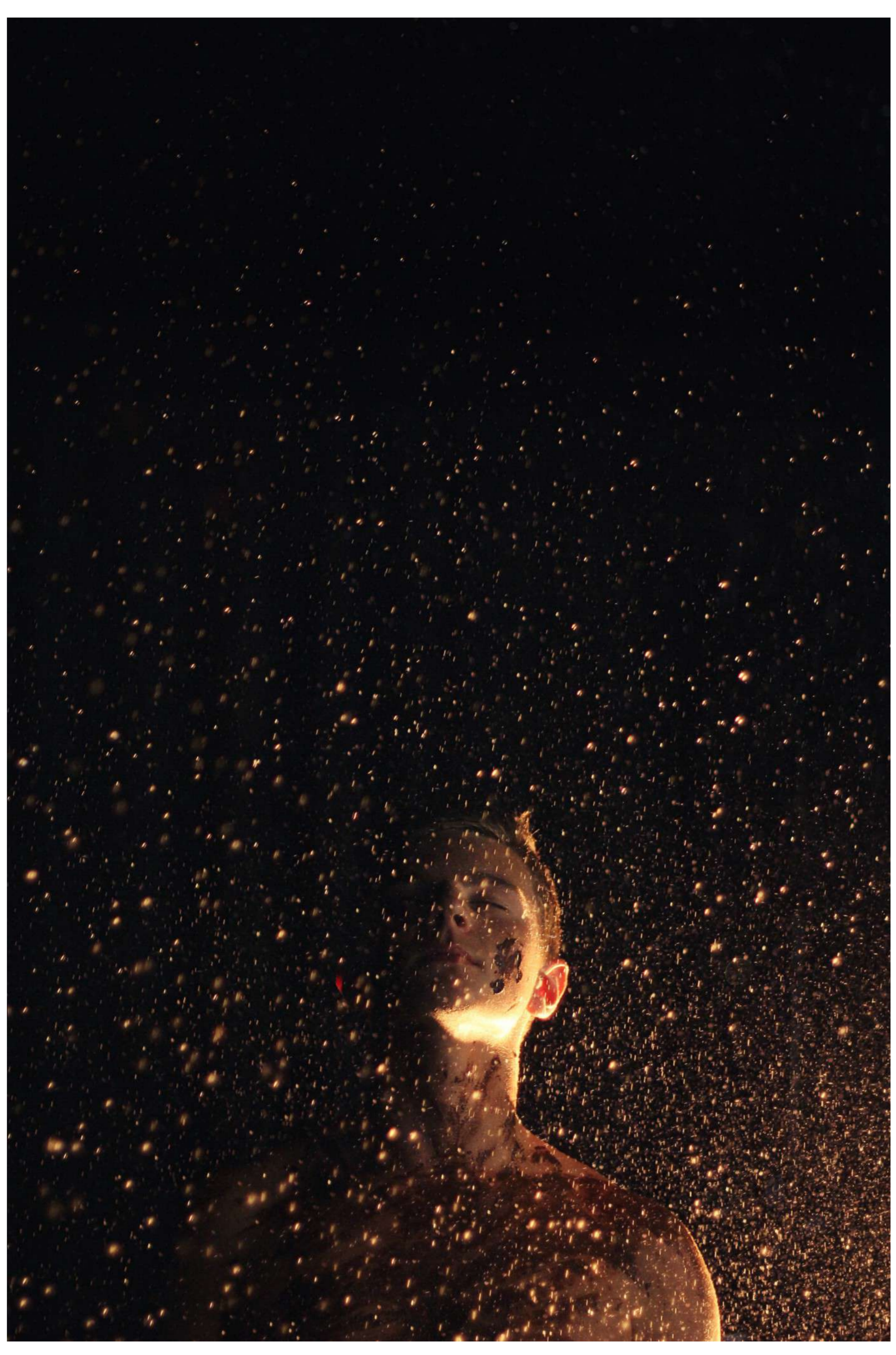


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It started off as a place to escape. I couldn't deal with reality. I couldn't deal with the sexual assault I had suffered, and so I disappeared into an imaginary world. It was a play-pretend, but I wasn't a child; I was a teenager. I imagined I was somewhere entirely different because I couldn't bear to be in my own body. So I pretended I was in someone else's body.

Then, the imaginary playground became a haunted house I couldn't leave. It was a phantom haunting me, pulling me back in. I couldn't focus without losing myself in my faraway world for a few minutes in the morning. Life became too painful. Instead of living in reality, I lived in purgatory, in-between asleep and awake. There were whole afternoons I couldn't remember, lost in my head, pacing back and forth over the floorboards.

For years I thought it was just a really shameful, strange thing that I did. I thought it was some symptom of my anxiety or my depression that other people didn't experience. Then, I discovered that it was an entire (prospective) disorder of its own. I found that what I was experiencing had a name, *maladaptive daydreaming*, which had been coined by Professor Eliezer Somer of the University of Haifa, in 2002.

It hasn't been entered into the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V), and so it doesn't have any official treatment. It's in murky water, having been recognized only by some experts. It's important to note that not every person who deals with maladaptive daydreaming has suffered some kind of trauma.

But it does seem to be an unhealthy coping mechanism for some people, and many of those people will have experienced some kind of trauma. I did, and I think that might be why what I experienced came about. Sometimes maladaptive daydreamers have been diagnosed with schizophrenia. But maladaptive daydreaming isn't a psychosis; maladaptive daydreamers know that their daydreams aren't real. Searching further, I found a Reddit community full of people just like me.

At this point, I was starting to lose my life to daydreaming. I struggled to do anything else. At first, I had to plan the daydreaming around my social calendar; then, I had to plan my social calendar around the daydreaming. It became whole afternoons, whole evenings, whole days. It would sometimes happen when I became too distressed or upset, without me having any choice in the matter. It felt almost like an emotional tic coming on, dragging me under the water.

When someone first thinks of the word 'daydreaming', they might think of Thurber's Walter Mitty. Mitty is a chronic daydreamer, and his vivid fantasies highly differ from his humdrum life. The novel is both humorous and tragic; at once both lamenting and uplifting the protagonist. While my experience of maladaptive daydreaming incorporates some of the experience of Thurber's character, the key is *maladaptive*. MaDD, as it's sometimes known, starts to become your life. You *feel* mad, you can't get a hold on it. It starts to feel inevitable, and then it becomes inevitable.

A significant breakthrough was forced upon me when I ended up in a psychiatric institution. I had spent so long trying to run from those thoughts; trying to deal with the trauma by evading it, that I just felt so exhausted. I couldn't daydream anymore; I was being constantly watched. I lay down next to the shower in the wet room and just cried. The emotions were so vivid, so bright and painful, and I forced myself to experience them all. I wouldn't hide away.

I spoke about the sexual assault I suffered. I read about #MeToo and found that I didn't need to be ashamed, and it wasn't my fault. I let myself fully experience the shame I felt towards myself, and the anger I felt towards him, and I let it go. Escaping into my pretend world had never really helped me. I hadn't ever dealt with the trauma. It was just a way to cope; an unhealthy way to cope, which I then began to usurp by using healthier coping mechanisms. I tried to tackle it in the same way that I had overcame bouts of paralyzing anxiety and perfectionism.

When I was overwhelmingly anxious about something; worried that my friends didn't like me anymore, that I was a boring, rubbish person, I would slowly decrease the time I would spend worrying about it. So, if I was worrying for five hours about something, then I would tell myself I was going to worry for only four hours. It seems silly, but it really worked.

When I started to feel myself slipping into anxious thoughts, I would tell myself that I had spent my allotted time worrying, and that I could fit it into the worries I would tackle tomorrow. If I really couldn't stop thinking about those worries, I would write them down. The time I spent anxiously worrying went from four hours to three. It became two, then one, then a half-hour. It became fifteen minutes, and then ten.

I tried to tackle maladaptive daydreaming in the same way. I told myself I could have only four hours daydreaming a day, which I slowly reduced until it became ten minutes. Then, it became nothing. Sometimes I would still feel myself succumbing, so I would force myself back in the present as I felt myself start to drift off into daydreams; I would snap a rubber band gently against my wrist, or try and ground myself by listing five things I could see, touch or taste.

MaDD is still relatively stigmatized, and so it's not talked about very much. I only spoke about it for the first time a few months ago, with my boyfriend. We live together a year now, and we live together. I would tell him I needed some 'alone time', which would sometimes make him feel a little sad. He didn't understand why I needed this time away from him, and I couldn't really give him a clear answer. He was really supportive and understanding when I finally explained to him about maladaptive daydreaming.

I wouldn't class myself as a sufferer anymore, but I don't think I've fully recovered. I will have occasional relapses; often when I become distressed or something reminds me of the sexual assault I suffered. I'm starting Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) next week, and I'm hoping I will be able to tackle what has, for me, been underpinning the maladaptive daydreaming — the trauma — and finally feel able to move on with my life.

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