What It’s Like When Your Daydreams Are Just As Real As Life

By Alexa Tsoulis-Reay

Dreams are strange, misunderstood things. This week, Science of Us will be exploring the latest research that helps explain what they are, what they might mean, and how they affect our waking lives.

In 2002, an Israeli professor named Eli Somer published a paper describing a condition he called “maladaptive daydreaming,” a disorder where people spend about 60 percent of their waking life in a self-designed imaginary world. The qualitative study had its limitations, but the behavior it described was fascinating. Those who suffer from it know this world is fantasy, and still manage to retain contact with the “real world,” but in extreme cases “extensive fantasy activity replaces human interaction and/or interferes with academic, interpersonal or vocational functioning.” (In his paper, Somer drew a connection with trauma, since his six-subject cohort had all been sexually abused as children.) In 2011, a maladaptive daydreamer from New Jersey named Jayne Bigelson came across Somer’s work and convinced her psychiatrist to write an anonymous case study of her; then, with Hunter College researcher Cynthia Schupak, Bigelson co-authored a peer-reviewed paper that examines “90 self-identified non-normative fantasizers.” In the years since, Bigelson has fought to draw the mental-health community’s attention to this underresearched condition. (Bigelson, for her part, disagrees with Somer’s trauma theory.) Here, a 36-year-old from Portland, Oregon, describes just how overwhelming it can be.

How fully would you say your life has been turned over to your daydreaming?

My earliest memories are daydreams. I recall being a toddler lying around fantasizing about climbing a rainbow into a land of princesses. Now I’m 36, and I’ve retreated to the same daydream world I constructed when I was 9.

What do you mean by “daydream world”?

At first, this world was a fictional city in California with no name, but when I turned 20, I moved to France for a few years, so all my characters did too. These days, my world is set in a country that I rule as queen. I was what some researchers call a maladaptive daydreamer.

What is that, exactly?

An addiction to fantasy. It can come in many forms. Some people daydream about celebrities, whereas others, like me, will base their fantasies almost exclusively on characters they create. They may be more visual, auditory, emotional, sensual, intellectual. They can create extensive fantasy worlds or individual daydreams. Some people have many worlds. Some have varying story lines. I think there’s a spectrum of seriousness among those with the addiction. The one thing that seems to unify us all is the skill it takes to try and live in two worlds at the same time.

Two worlds? That sounds like a burden.

We don’t necessarily want to live that way. It can be as crippling as any addiction because we cannot get away from it. But also like any other drug, when controlled, it can be absolutely wonderful. It can enrich and enhance our lives in ways others don’t understand. For example, I can stimulate myself without a partner, and I don’t just mean sexually. I can have a marvelous intellectual debate without having anyone else around to talk to.
But you also see a downside? When I tell some people, they say things like, "Oh, it's just daydreaming. How can that be harmful?" They have no idea that fantasy can devastate your life — like any other addiction. The mind is the most powerful drug, and it's one that you have unlimited access to.

When daydreaming was such a part of your life, could you control it at all? How often would you daydream?

If I could control it, then it wouldn't be maladaptive, would it? I really think it is an addiction. So if we could choose, like an alcoholic could choose, Okay, I'm just going to have one glass of wine today, then they wouldn't be an alcoholic, now would they? Asking me how often I daydreamed is kind of like asking me how many times I breathed in today. I recently read something that said people daydream 2,000 times a day. That's normal people. So imagine us? Any chance I had, I'd go and lie down or I'd just get sucked into it, and it was so hard to turn off. It's like you've always got a tailor-made fantasy, soap opera, action film, whatever you want, playing in your head all the time. An alcoholic can run out of booze and money, but you don't run out of mind. You can't just tell yourself to stop thinking.

What sort of fantasies or "worlds" do you daydream about?

I tried different fantasy worlds involving princesses and fairy tales. I also had some sexual-curiosity dreams. But when I was about 9, I found a daydream that stuck and it's still around to this day. The cast of characters fulfilled what I didn't have in my "outer world." Ironically, I have come full circle because now my characters are royal, but serious royalty, like "We're running the government" kinda royalty.

What exactly is this world like? Who are the characters?

It's a family dynasty. I had mother figures, sister figures, brother figures, and father figures. I was a character, but I was an idealized version of myself. I mean, I had all my outer-world struggles, but I also had other abilities.

So you in "ideal" form?

The problem is my daydreams aren't very visual. The characters, much like people in outer reality, kind of look the same to me. But [my character]’s always been an enhanced version of me — thinner, prettier, and greater at everything. In recent years, she’s taken on more properties that I have: she changed her hairstyle and color when I did, and her face started to resemble mine ... but only to the extent to which I am capable of imagining that.

My character spent her time with characters who loved and nurtured her. They held her when my character and I cried. They soothed our emotional pain, they discoursed us to sing, and ast, and I, or "she," helped them face the pain of their own experiences and make peace with their pasts. They forged strong bonds that have never been broken.

And how does it all unfold?

There are interweaving story lines, like a soap opera. My character grew up in real time, and the world that I created existed in real time. So when I wasn't daydreaming, they would continue to live their life and I would have to catch up. I’d enter the dream thinking: What’s been going on?

Is it like a soap opera after you've missed a few episodes?

More like reality TV, unedited. I used to try and catch up. I’d go, okay: What have they been doing? Did they ever finish this project? How old are the kids now? Did this character move away? One thing I dispute is the notion that the outer world is reality and the inner world is fantasy. When I am daydreaming, I'm living and thinking and feeling. That's reality. I've seen my characters grow, get married, have kids, meet new people.

I imagine this is as hard to put into words as it is to describe a dream, but can you give me a sense of, say, one story line?

I know I bombard you, but everything in my head is long and complicated.

There are no short stories. When I get a good story line going, I just can't stop. Often, the day-to-day stuff involves dealing with government, family issues (which can be dramatic), making movies, little romances, career stuff, creative endeavors of various family members, various creative and intellectual games they play, and such. It's very stimulating, emotionally and intellectually, but it's not always so much like a big fairy tale. Sometimes it's just a higher level of life. I'll try and give you an example. This is the story of the Red Queen:

In the Far East, there is a country ruled by a evil queen. She has no name other than the Red Queen because her brutal actions carry far more weight than any other name could possibly have. They scared to death when they said that her signature red dresses were dyed in the blood of her murder victims, but the gruesome reality was this: the Red Queen had the blood of her enemies. Few knew this gruesome fact, but those who did knew just how much to fear her. The queen has one son who was a strong, ethical, moral, dutiful, and handsome man. He also liked to travel. While he appreciated his duty to the throne, he also yearned for true love and did not want to have a marriage forced upon him. His mother condoned his travels abroad, but she made it very clear, by reminding him of her stained dresses, that he would marry a woman of her choosing and no one else. She told him that if he were to try to arrange an heir to anyone else, that heir would end up as dye on her dress. So trivial was life to her. Her son was her blood. Other lives were just stains on her dress once they were no longer useful to her or once they upset her.

At this rate, I'll be talking all night. I didn't even tell the fun story about the ballet in the water …

How did it all start?

I grew up with a lot of guilt. Every time anybody would say they loved my mother, I would die inside because I didn’t. I was afraid, terrified even, to admit that I didn’t love my mother. So in my daydreams I wouldn’t allow myself to think of her as a mother. And at first I was afraid to love these characters, too, because of all the guilt I felt outside world. I thought I was a horrible person, so we (my character and I) were constantly at battle with our desire to love others (even fictional others) while I didn't love those I thought I had to love in my “outer world.” It was a painful time. In fact, I didn’t think of that woman as my mother until I was in my 20s, when I'd left home. My character’s mother and I only became an actual family when I moved to France (in my outer world). My character and her husband also moved to France in my daydreams. And it was in France that they had their first few children. It was in France that they had their first few children. Their life was glamorous. They traveled to various places filming movies or going on tour. Once I tried to write it down and I only made it to when my character turns 14 — it was nearly ten pages of writing and I hadn’t really even started. You see, it’s an art that’s meant to be internal. It’s my own inner art, and it’s hard for the artist to convey this world to others. I think other daydreamers would agree: I grew up in this world. This world was my main reality for most of my life.

That sounds consuming.

Imagine a drug addict stuck in an alley, unable to do anything but think about the drug, find the drug, do the drug … etc. Their life is the drug. They can’t do anything else. It’s that bad at its worst. It might be hard to imagine that something as common as daydreaming being that bad, but the mind is the most powerful drug, and it’s one that you have unlimited access to.

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Can you control when you enter a daydream? Is there a process?

My brain is chaos, trying to make sense of it is like herding a bunch of rats. I certainly can’t tell myself when to daydream or not. I just kind of, say, find a moment where I drift off and then let it happen. If I try to say, I’m going to try to daydream now, I guess then all of a sudden I won’t be able to work up the story line. It’s such a thoughtful world. Can you just tell yourself when you're going to have a very intellectual conversation or write a great story? So I can just say: Okay, I’m gonna have a really great plotline right now.

Some people are triggered by sound or images, are you?

Downtime. For example, I love walking, but I live in an urban area where it’s kind of dangerous. I would find myself drifting off into traffic. I remember walking across a bridge and someone started yelling at me: “Hey, stop! stop! it’s too late to stop!” I hadn’t even noticed. Anything monotonous can be a trigger. I don’t drive. I couldn’t focus enough to pass the test, and I worried about the danger of losing control of the car if I started to daydream.

The stories take on a life of their own. Some of these story lines, I’ll want them to go in one way, but I just won’t be able to get them to go in that way. The characters won’t fit. For example, there was this character who started out as a friend of my character, but then he just became this dark character, and he was just kind of this, I never could get him to be nice, I could never get them to resolve their issues. He became jealous of her other friends. She developed other relationships where the characters were protective and stimulating and he was always there lurking and he was negative and then she moved away and I couldn’t seem to get rid of him. He would always pop up. So I figured the only way to get rid of him would have to be some huge
So I made up this whole story line — and sometimes I’ll make up retroactive story lines. He was obsessed with her, he wanted to have her as his plaything. Not sexually but just kind of like his Barbie doll. He would hold her at knife point. He would grab her. However, she had a friend who was a black belt in Karate and he would rescue her. I just could never get this guy and he would always show up and she would come back from France and be driving around with her sister in the car and he would show up holding a knife. Even restraining orders didn’t work. He ended up killing his mother, but his sister listened to her and he ran, but then she ran off and tried to find some secluded area because she knew he was following her and he did follow her and tried to warn everyone, “Don’t come after me!” She called 911, but they didn’t believe her. And she ran into this restaurant that hadn’t quite opened yet and chased the owner out saying “Call 911. Go away or he’s gonna kill you.” When he caught her, he held her for hours. He wanted to see her die slowly, she knew this, so she fought her instinct to fight him off and she stabbed her and she was hopping police would come, but they didn’t. As he was leaning down, she grabbed the gun from his pocket and shot him. As she lay there, almost bleeding to death, her mother disobeyed her order and said: Screw it, I’m going after her, and they said and found her. And then his dad showed up, “cause his wife had been killed by his son and he had a mental breakdown. So he went there and her brother was by her bed and he tried to shoot her; her brother tore in front of the bullet and caught it in the shoulder — I don’t approve of guns, by the way. But then he shot the guy in the hand and the father eventually apologized but then died of an aneurysm in the hospital — that was the negative character’s father. And then her sister, who’s a doctor, sewed her back up. There was a long recovery from her 18 stab wounds.

I know this is long-winded, but the point is it took all of that just to get rid of this character. He had stalked her for ten years. For ten years, I couldn’t get this character out of my life. I created him when I was 13! I couldn’t write him out of my world. He kept popping back.

So aside from murder and drama, what else do these characters do? They love to have stimulating conversations. If you have trouble keeping up with me, imagine ten of me in a room!

Do you have sex or relationships in the daydreams?

Yes. My character has a husband figure. And let’s just say I don’t need a porn mag. I actually don’t need to touch myself to get myself off. I can masturbate in my brain. I don’t know if I’ve had a full orgasm, but I’ve come pretty close: the point where I’ve had to stop and go, Wow, this is weird.

Has that sexual element always been a part of your daydream world?

My character became sexually active when she was 15, but I didn’t until I was 18. She’d been with her boyfriend for a year, and they were madly in love. It’s great to be able to masturbate and not touch yourself. And anyway I personally think that the idea of reaching down there is pretty gross. And I don’t have to. To do this, I have to get in the story line, get in the mood, and really “get into it.”

When you are daydreaming and you are in public, do you ever talk to the characters or engage with them?

I don’t like to daydream in public. It’s distracting, but as I said earlier, sometimes you can’t help it. I often found myself making facial expressions. Maybe I’d snicker or react like I’m talking to someone. Now, where I live, there will always be crazy people walking around having full-on conversations with themselves. I’m not like that. I don’t actually think someone’s there. But in my head, my characters have this conversation, so I might react. I don’t usually vocalize, but sometimes I might snicker a bit, and that is embarrassing. But in downtown Portland, you’re as likely to get hugged by a random stranger as yelled at or judged by one.

Tell me more about how your outer and inner worlds contrast.

I grew up on the edge of the Earth (southern Oregon, to be specific), where there’s a beach and absolutely nothing to do and nobody smart to talk to. Everyone is either a racist, homophobe, or on drugs. It’s a horrible place. In my outer life, I was really, extremely depressed. I was fat. Nobody liked me, and when I say that, I really mean it. I went to college, but I had a lot of trouble focusing. It was nearly impossible to pull myself out of my daydreams. Even though I’m smart, I couldn’t study. I just couldn’t get my fill of my dream world. I couldn’t focus enough to read. Of course, when you tell people you can’t read, they say, “Oh, read this sentence,” and I do it, they’re like, “See! You can read!” I’m like, “That’s not what I mean.” I just see a random string of words. I finally quit college.

Do you think you were having the conversations that you craved and weren’t having in your outer world?

The characters definitely filled the emotional void left by feeling unloved by, and not loving, my mother. And I didn’t have friends, so the characters filled that void too. But I knew that it was distancing me from people in real life. The world draws you in so it makes it harder for you to interact with other people.

What did you do after you left college?

I worked as a maid. I worked in an office where I cleaned the men’s changing area and restrooms. They’d pee on the floor as if it were a urinal. I had to see these big old disgusting men and deal with their pee, which was everywhere. I’m mopping that up dressed in this old, blooby uniform. Then, when I was 20, I finally worked up the courage to leave my family. I moved to France and cut all contact. The French have a saying: “Better alone than in poor company.” I stayed for two years and relied on my older sister for emotional support. My sister would do everything mom told her and often threw me under the bus as a survival skill. We’ve since made peace. When I was 7, my biological “mother” found a man to take care of her. She treated him like a saint just because he was willing to take us all in. But he was an awful human being — always angry. He assumed everyone was stupid and talked down to them. He knew from job to job and relied on my older sister for emotional support. My sister would do everything mom told her and often threw me under the bus as an outsider in the only place that had ever felt like home. It was a lonely bliss.

You’ve mentioned feeling unloved and lonely a few times now. What was home like?

A nightmare. The woman who raised me (I don’t call her my mother) has a lot of emotional issues. I felt like a mistake. I didn’t feel wanted. She went from job to job and relied on my older sister for emotional support. My sister would do everything mom told her and often threw me under the bus as a survival skill. We’ve since made peace. When I was 7, my biological “mother” found a man to take care of her. She treated him like a saint just because he was willing to take us all in. But he would yell and scream and tell me that I was stupid or worthless.

Did you stand up to him or did you retreat from the conflict?

I always retreated. I never did anything to combat him. I didn’t fight back. I just couldn’t get my fill of my dream world, I couldn’t focus enough to read. Of course, when you tell people you can’t read, they say, “Oh, read this sentence,” and I do it, they’re like, “See! You can read!” I’m like, “That’s not what I mean.”

So you were the one who was absorbing the entire family’s stress and emotions.

Yes, and they really did blame me for everything. As soon as he came home from work, I would hear yelling and then the words, “And that kid,” and I knew that the rest of the night would be focused on me. I mean screaming, inches from my face, and kicking. These freak-outs happened every single night. I lived in a state of terror. I’m sure the verbal and mental abuse sent me further into a world of daydreams but I didn’t know that at the time.

Did you ever talk to your family about it?

I couldn’t tell them anything. When I say I was scared of the woman who raised me, I really was. It was not just fear but absolute terror. I would hear her footsteps, and I would be shaking because she would come in look around slowly and either she’d be like, Hello! or she’d hear everything off the walls, off the other rooms. She used to smash everything off, “Smoke something!” “Clean it up!” She burned Thanksgiving because I left a sock on the otherwise clean floor. She was so unstable and so very unpredictable. She’d had a rough childhood. I cut ties with my family and legally changed my name. Slowly, over several lonely years, I found myself.

So what did you make of your daydreaming? Did you think it was unique to you? Did you see it as a problem? Did you know that other people experienced this as well?

Wow, this is weird.

Hello!

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So what did you make of your daydreaming? Did you think it was unique to you? Did you see it as a problem? Did you know that other people experienced this as well?

One day, in 2007, I posted about my experience on a mental-health forum. I don’t remember what provoked it, but I do recall I’d been sobbing over my life in a horribly depressed state. I was lonely, with no prospect of anything getting better. There wasn’t anybody in my whole life who was ever happy to see me, it didn’t matter, and I’d enter a room, and they’d say, “Ugh.” I had asked various therapists about the daydreaming, but of course none of them knew what I was talking about. I told all the same things: “It’s just depression, or Oh, that’s normal,” or Just try and stop. So I wrote about it online, and for two years I just got a lot of comments. People jumped on it, enthusiastically wondering the same things. I got about 200 replies. But there were also people throwing out completely useless suggestions. There was a guy who hounded me, saying that I was crazy, so I stopped looking. A few years later, I thought, What the heck, I’ll go back and peruse the comments, and I saw a note from a researcher named Cynthia Shupack saying, “I’m studying this. Here’s my email address.” That was it, one line. I emailed her back asking if this is legit: “What’s going on?” And she replied very sweetly. She was
That's so brave. If something needs to be done and nobody else will do it, I'll make the jump. I'm terrified, but I'm brave. People think bravery means you're not scared, but I don't agree.

What did you think when you found out that there may be a condition called maladaptive daydreaming that scientists are researching?

At first, I think, I realized how much of my life it has destroyed, so I saw it as a horrible, evil thing. But then I realized there are many people who find me mind-blowing, and I'm not saying that to compliment myself. Once you blow someone's mind, they don't necessarily come back for more.

You no longer consider your daydreaming maladaptive, right? How did you take control of it?

I'm not known for being succinct, but I'll do my best. I realized that no one could accept me until I showed them what there is to accept. So the first step was coming out and declaring: "This is what I am." And if you see experts and they don't know what's going on, but you've been living with it your entire life, guess who's the expert? You are! You have to have the strength to articulate what's going on in your mind. And if you're afraid that people will think you're weird, well, if they're that kind of person, chances are they already think you're weird.

How did that help?

Living openly, talking about it to anyone and everyone, is strangely cathartic. I see it all the time in people unmasking themselves or coming out of the closet as gay, trans, opening up about mental conditions, whatever. The instant they tell the world who they are, they seem to instantly change. They become a better version of themselves. It becomes part of them and no longer controls them.

Practically speaking, what else did you do?

Distraction helped. You can't just say, "Don't daydream." It's like saying, whatever you do, do not look at that chair! All you want to do is look at the freaking chair. You just have to find something that distracts you. And so I became passionate about speaking out about daydreaming. I think that occupied my mind and gave me a purpose.

And that replaced the daydreaming itself?

I still daydream, and the fantasy world and its characters are busier than ever, but it kind of faded into the background. I was, however, so busy engaging with people about it online, and I also had some serious health issues to deal with. So I found that I had to exhaust my mind with other things. But if I don't daydream at all, I miss it. So I do need extra downtime for my fantasy world. I think that occupied my mind and gave me a purpose.

What do you mean?

The most obvious example would be my battle with books and learning in college. That was pure hell. Having to focus and write essays. Milton? Milton was my personal hell. I couldn't focus. I couldn't read. I had to constantly remind myself not to fight my mind because I would always lose. Can't sit still? Don't fight it. Get up, walk around, sit down again, write a bit, get up, walk around, don't get mad, sit down, try again, etc. Getting mad at your brain only makes it worse. Work with it, not against it. It's like your physical health. Find out how to get along with your body because you're stuck with it.

So you went back to college?

I did. After I got the dreams under control. And it's by a Herculean effort that I got a degree in English literature in 2012. Everyone was fascinated. My professor speculated as to how many great authors may have had this. Instead of being judged, people wanted to know more about my daydreaming. I think that occupied my mind and gave me a purpose.

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So how are things these days?

I live a very isolated life. I've pretty much spent every holiday and every birthday alone since my 20s. I have the two cutest cats that ever lived. They saw it as a creative gift.

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I did, after I got the dreams under control. And it's by a Herculean effort that I got a degree in English literature in 2012. Everyone was fascinated. My professor speculated as to how many great authors may have had this. Instead of being judged, people wanted to know more about my daydreaming. They saw it as a creative gift.

So how are things these days?

I live a very isolated life. I've pretty much spent every holiday and every birthday alone since my 20s. I have the two cutest cats that ever lived. They saw it as a creative gift.

And that replaced the daydreaming itself?

I still daydream, and the fantasy world and its characters are busier than ever, but it kind of faded into the background. I was, however, so busy engaging with people about it online, and I also had some serious health issues to deal with. So I found that I had to exhaust my mind with other things. But if I don't daydream at all, I miss it. So I do need extra downtime for my fantasy world. I think that occupied my mind and gave me a purpose.

What do you mean?

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