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Sleep disorder (Photo by: INGIMAGE)

Studies identify disorder of ‘maladaptive daydreaming’

By JUDY SIEGEL-
ITZKOVICH
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Haifa researcher: Affliction ‘takes over their lives’

• By JUDY SIEGEL A psychological disorder – maladaptive dreaming – that had previously been unknown to psychiatrists has been identified and described in psychiatry and psychology journals by researchers at the University of Haifa, Fordham University in New York City, and the University of Lausanne in Switzerland.

Sufferers from the disorder spend about 60 percent of their waking time in an imaginary world they have created, realizing that it is a fantasy and without losing contact with the real world.

“One man told us about 35 characters participating in the repertoire of stories he imagines.

Another related how, for 30 years, he has been repeatedly imagining the plots of a series that is constantly evolving,” said Liora Somer from the Multidisciplinary Center for the Treatment of Victims of Sexual Abuse at Haifa’s B’nai Zion Medical Center, first to identify maladaptive dreaming. “Daydreaming usually starts as a small fantasy that makes people feel good, but over time, the process becomes addictive – until it takes over their lives. At this stage, the disorder is accompanied by feelings of shame and a sense of lack of fulfillment.

But because until now, the disorder has been unknown, when they come to receive treatment, therapists usually dismissed their complaints.”

Wandering thoughts, fantasies and daydreams are part of the inner world of almost everyone, and they are depicted in popular culture, including literature and film. But until now, science has not addressed the pathological aspects of this otherwise normal mental activity.

The story began in 2002, when Professor Eli Somer of the University of Haifa was treating adults who had been sexually abused as children. He identified six survivors who used to escape regularly into a world of the imagination where they fantasized compensatory empowering stories in which they enjoyed traits and life experiences that were missing in their real lives.

Somer named the phenomenon “maladaptive daydreaming,” but at the time, he did not continue

his investigation of the phenomenon. This article was followed in 2011 by a study by Jayne Bigelsen and Cynthia Schupak of 90 people who complained of excessive daydreaming. Their study that showed that maladaptive dreaming is also spread among many people who have not had adverse childhoods.

Following these two studies, Somer and Bigelsen received messages from many people around the world who related to them how they had suffered from exactly the same phenomenon asking for their advice and help.

Together with Somer and Prof. Daniela Jopp from the University of Lausanne, he conducted two qualitative studies and interviewed dozens of individuals who claimed to be suffering from the phenomenon. In these studies, they discovered recurring themes.

For example, although maladaptive daydreaming first started as a positive experience providing pleasure and relaxation, it developed into an addictive habit that took over their lives and impaired their functioning. “Maladaptive daydreaming naturally necessitates isolation from others and is almost always accompanied by repetitive body motions, such as pacing or rocking. About a quarter of these individuals had endured childhood trauma and many suffered from social anxiety,” said Somer.

Somer and Jopp were recently joined by Bigelsen and Jonathan Lehrfeld of Fordham, who shared similar interests.

Together they published two extensive quantitative studies published recently in the journal *Consciousness and Cognition*.

“One woman told us about the 35 characters “starring” in the plots she imagined, she explained how these characters had been with her since childhood, and that she didn’t recall a moment when her mind was clear of them.

Another woman told of how for 30 years, she has continued imagining in her mind the plot of a series that she saw when she was 10 years old, but how the plot was constantly changing and evolving.

“People with this disorder have developed an extraordinary ability to become completely immersed in daydreaming, to such an extent that their daydreams can make them laugh or cry. This ability to feel fully present in a self-directed imaginary plot is not only a powerful source of the attraction, but it also makes it difficult to disengage from it, creating a mental addiction,” said Jopp.

Somer concluded by saying “When people spend about 60% of their waking time daydreaming, it’s no wonder that they feel frustrated that they can’t achieve their goals in life. The next step in our research should focus on developing an effective treatment for sufferers.”



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