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Social Instincts

Vivid Daydreams and What They May Mean

New research explores maladaptive daydreaming.

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KEY POINTS

- A new study looks at the personalities of people who are most likely to suffer from maladaptive daydreaming.
- Approximately 4 to 6 percent of people spend large chunks of their waking time in fantasy.
- By daydreaming, individuals “realize” unmet emotional and psychological needs in a fictitious environment.



Source: Jonathan Mabey / Unsplash

A new [article](#) appearing in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences* offers insight into the personalities of people who are most likely to suffer from maladaptive daydreaming (MD) — this is characterized by hyper-concentration on internally generated, dream-like content — as well as

the types of daydreams these people are likely to have.

“These individuals fantasize extensively and vividly, developing a compulsive psychological dependence on dreams that can compromise important obligations in life and substitute for human interaction,” say the authors of the study, led by Reut Brenner and Eli Somer of the University of Haifa in Israel. To be clear, however, maladaptive daydreaming is not listed in the DSM.

According to previous studies, approximately 4 to 6 percent of people spend large chunks of their waking time in fantasy. These fantasies become maladaptive when they produce shame, loneliness, emotional pain, and interfere with one’s ability to engage in normal life activities. Studies suggest that maladaptive daydreaming first appears in youth and is more likely to affect individuals exposed to childhood trauma.

In this study, the researchers were interested in identifying the common themes that appeared in the fantasies of people with maladaptive daydreaming. To answer this question, they invited 539 individuals with symptoms of maladaptive daydreaming to report the contents of their daydreams. They found the themes of “distraction from an unpleasant reality,” “wish fulfillment,” and “fighting boredom” to be the most commonly cited daydreaming themes. Other common themes were: “finding love,” “a rewarding pastime,” “being powerful, dominant,” “receiving extra attention,” “escape,” “being a rescuer,” and “experiencing physical violence as a victim.”

Next, the researchers assessed whether people with certain personality traits such as narcissistic grandiosity (the tendency to believe that one is superior to others and deserves special treatment), separation insecurity (fearing rejection and or separation from significant others), and anhedonia (lacking enjoyment or energy for life’s experiences) were any more or less likely to experience specific types of daydreams.

They found this to be the case. Specifically, individuals with maladaptive daydreaming who exhibited narcissistic grandiosity were more likely to daydream about themes such as wish-fulfillment, power, dominance, and violence. Persons with separation insecurity features were more likely to daydream about distractions from boredom, rewarding pastimes, and caring relationships. Finally, respondents with anhedonic traits experienced a greater recall of rewarding pastimes and distractions from unpleasant realities.

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The researchers view this as evidence that maladaptive daydreams offer an outlet for individuals to “realize” unmet emotional and psychological needs in a fictitious environment. They state, “Sufferers from the disorder can spend more than 60 percent of their waking time in an imaginary world they have created, realizing that it is a fantasy, and without losing complete contact with the real world. One man related how for 30 years now he has been repeatedly imagining the plots of a series that is constantly evolving.”

The authors note that not all immersive daydreaming is maladaptive and that it is normal to engage in mind wandering or fantasizing from time to time.

“Maladaptation develops simply because the person prefers engaging in the fantasized inner world rather than the external reality,” says Somer. “Distress often comes with the realization of the time wasted and the unaccomplished goals in life. Ironically, individuals with maladaptive daydreaming often regulate this distress with more daydreaming, a pattern often seen among people who struggle with addictions.”

References

A full interview with Reut Brenner and Eli Somer discussing this research can be found here: [What is known about the psychological disorder of maladaptive daydreaming or MD?](#)

Brenner, R., Somer, E., & Abu-Rayya, H. M. (2022). Personality traits and maladaptive daydreaming: Fantasy functions and themes in a multi-country sample. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 184, 111194.



About the Author

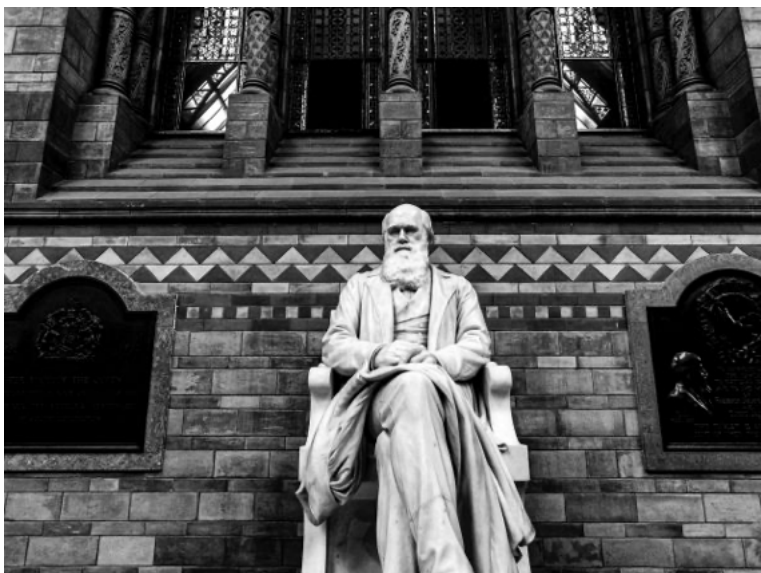


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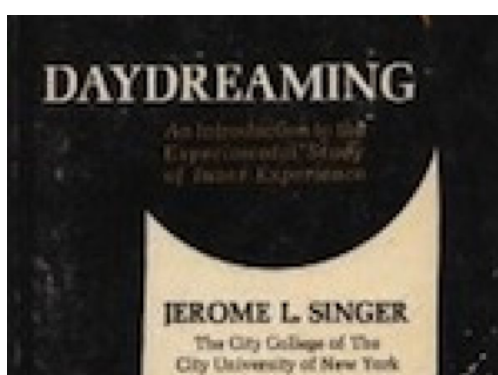
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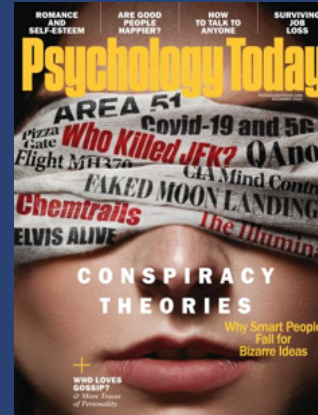
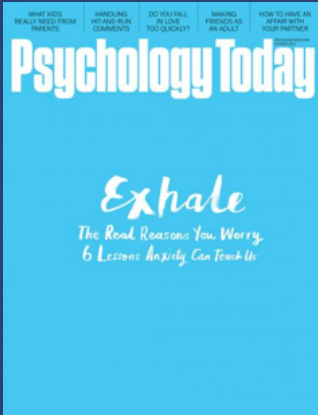
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