The Psychology and Science of Daydreaming:
A Look Into the Relationship Between Maladaptive Daydreaming and Social Anxiety

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The dreams that people often remember do not occur during the night. The term daydreaming, synonymous with mind wandering, is scientifically defined as, “spontaneous, subjective experiences in a no-task, no stimulus, no-response situation…and includes unintended thoughts that intrude inadvertently into the execution of intended mental tasks…and undirected ideas in thought sampling during wakefulness” (Vaitl, 2013, p. 5). In layman’s terms, this consciousness occurs when thoughts creep into a human’s awake state of mind. Such thoughts can lead to distractions from current tasks, and allow a person’s stream of consciousness to take over for a few seconds.

Daydreaming can be explained through forms other than science, allowing it to be deeper understood for its psychological complexities. The first theory of daydreaming comes from Sigmund Freud who believed in the idea that, “Daydreaming is revelatory of the permanent condition or unfulfilled desire which is the hallmark of his general metapsychological conception of human existence” (Morley, 1998, p. 9). In this text, Freud essentially says that daydreams are wishes that humans visualize in a state that suspends reality. He believed that the state of consciousness of a daydream is one that requires the dreamer to suspend disbelief of the working world, while at the same time giving more value to the daydream world (Morley, 1998, p.7)

Another theory of daydreaming is presented by psychologist, William Schutz. His idea of what the dreaming realm is takes the form of actual worlds. Schutz believes in the idea of “subworlds,” which he originally called phantasms p.18). Each of these phantasms contribute to the human experience, allowing a person to achieve unique encounters in each psychological place. Schutz started to correlate his new coined term, “phantasm,” more directly with the daydreaming state. His deeper investigations on the human consciousness allowed him to engage
in the idea that a person’s waking experience is the most essential conscious state. Schutz explains this by saying that the connections and encounters with other people provide important elements to achieve a purpose driven life. In addition, Schutz expands further on his idea concerning phantasms stating that, “This is a world where the subject meets no resistance to its will and can always have things its own way” (Morley, 1998, p. 18) He uses this to explain that the dream world is a chance for a person to achieve what they desire, whether it be attainable or unlikely to gain; either way, the realistics are irrelevant in the case of phantasms. Through multiple definitions and theories, it becomes easier to gain a sense of what early thinkers believed daydreaming to arise from and further the investigation of how the daydreaming mind operates.

Daydreams are not only about the psychological experience, but bodily functions must occur in order to achieve this state of consciousness. Mind wandering occurs during a person’s awake state. This makes daydreaming very different than typical dreaming. The everyday brain is constantly analyzing data from the world by taking, “sensory input and transforming it in the brain into a series of electrical spikes” (Hougan, 2008, p. 25). Impulses are constantly firing from neuron to neuron whether a person is focusing on a certain task or allowing their mind to wander. A dream occurs when the mind is at rest, during the brain’s “default mode network”, which is focused in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and posterior cingulate cortex (Ogden, 2015)(Uddin, 2013, p. 1). This network fosters the idea of mind wandering and allows the brain to access previously learned material. According to NYMag, “when given nothing else to do, the brain defaults to thinking about the person it’s embedded in. Since then, the DMN has been implicated in everything from depression to creativity” (Baer, 2017). When these stored pieces of
information are retrieved, a person’s internal thoughts are pieced together in the same way the mind would during a dream that would take place during REM. However, these fantasies are short lived and typically go away after a matter of seconds. Unlike dreaming during the stage of sleep, dreams are easier to access during the waking state. The brain is the primary motor during the action of daydreaming, which involves a person remaining in a conscious state while falling into DMT for a few seconds to enter their daydream.

Although daydreaming is a fairly normal process, particularly in children, it can become a malignant force. This extreme is known as maladaptive daydreaming, which is defined as, “a fantasy activity that can be described as a behavioral addiction for vivid fanciful imagery that can last for hours, and be triggered or maintained either by evocative music or repetitive physical movement, such as pacing or rocking” (Somer, 2017, p. 177). Individuals diagnosed with maladaptive daydreaming, or MD for short, often find themselves caught up in their own fictional narratives. Reported cases of MD often claim to experience interference with their “academic, interpersonal, vocational functions” along with their “sleep, relationships, work, and academic performances” (Somer, 2017, p. 177). Maladaptive daydreaming extends further than simple daydreaming and appears to affect basic routines. Along with the setbacks that come with MD, the addiction “engenders irritation, anxiety, and even illness when curbed” (Somer, 2017, p. 177). These symptoms initialize a withdrawal like effect, which leads to the idea that this addiction could influence other disorders.

Since maladaptive daydreaming inhibits aspects of a person’s social life, it can be hypothesized that MD can be used as an ineffective coping mechanism in response to certain disorders, specifically social anxiety. Social anxiety is defined as, “the fear of interaction with
other people that brings on self-consciousness, feelings of being negatively judged and evaluated, and, as a result, leads to avoidance” (Richards, 2012). According to its definition, social anxiety seeks to avoid real communication with others and leaves the diagnosed without true connections. Not much research has been done to connect social anxiety with maladaptive daydreaming, however signs show that MD and social anxiety could be linked (Somer, 2017, p. 177). The two could very well go hand in hand, since certain personal experiences of maladaptive daydreaming allow a person to create their own environment around them. This could therefore provide an escape to the troubles that follow social anxiety. Additionally, many cases of those experiencing MD also have some sort of disorder accompanying the addiction including, “including depressive disorder, anxiety disorder, obsessive– compulsive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, borderline personality disorder, and dissociative disorder, along with their corresponding treatments” (Somer, 2017, p. 177). These disorders have the same idea of the need or lack of control behind them. This sense of security that people with these disorders seek can be temporarily gained through maladaptive daydreaming. Though research is scarce, maladaptive daydreaming and social anxiety are most likely correlated due to their symbiotic tendencies that they provide and rely on from one another.

Daydreaming is a common experience shared by all ages but commonly associated with a person’s childhood. It occurs for a few seconds when the conscious state of the brain falls into its default mode network, which is known as the brain’s resting period. However, like most things in excess, too much daydreaming can take an extreme condition known as maladaptive daydreaming. This disorder of MD allows the one suffering to create their own made up reality and can be closely linked to people with social anxiety due to their dependent natures.
References


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