



Marilyn Price-Mitchell, Ph.D.

Daydreaming: Not a Useless Waste of Time **Why wandering minds are often the most creative.**

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As a child, daydreaming was one of my favorite activities. Or should I say, non-activities? I spent hours alone in my room with random thoughts wandering through my mind. I loved to think about patterns, people, and the mysteries of how things were connected. My parents believed I was doing homework. And because I did well enough in school, they had no reason to think otherwise.

Looking back, I remember feeling embarrassed about my daydreaming. After all, isn't daydreaming a useless waste of time? At least, that's how I understood daydreaming as a child. It's why I made excuses to be in solitude. That way, no one would make fun of me. No one would know that I wasn't accomplishing a thing. Or so I thought.

Today, I look at daydreaming differently. I recognize how the process of mind-wandering is a critical aspect of [creativity](#), our ability to produce and communicate original ideas. Like all things human, creativity is not simple or easily understood. In fact, creativity is full of contradiction, complexity, and perplexing mystery.

In their book [Wired to Create: Unraveling the Mysteries of the Creative Mind](#), Scott Barry Kaufman and Carolyn Gregoire dig into the science of creativity in a new and exciting way.

They convincingly argue that this “messy” ability we call creativity is integral to our everyday lives. Our brains are not only wired to be creative, but our creativity is connected to all aspects of our lives—to our thriving.

I couldn't agree more.

The Advantages of Daydreaming

Let's face it. Most of us are daydreamers. According to a study by Harvard psychologists Daniel Gilbert and Matthew A. Killingsworth, we daydream forty-seven percent of our waking hours. That's right. Forty-seven percent!

Whenever we are the least bit bored, our minds naturally wander. What happens in those hours of daydreaming? We explore associations. We make connections. We search for possibilities.

Kaufman and Gregoire devote an entire chapter of their book to the topic of daydreaming. In fact, they present good scientific evidence that both daydreaming and using solitude for reflection are among the attributes of highly creative people.

In an excerpt from their book, Kaufman and Gregoire point out the many benefits of daydreaming:

Creative thinkers know, despite what their parents and teachers might have told them, that daydreaming is hardly a waste of time. But unfortunately, many students learn to suppress their natural instincts to dream and imagine— instead, they're taught to fit into a standardized mold and to learn by the book, in a way that may not feel natural and that very well may suppress their innate desire to create. But as two prominent psychologists recently noted, “Not all minds who wander are lost”— in fact, the mind's wandering is vital to imagination and creative thought.*

Nearly fifty years ago, psychologist Jerome L. Singer established that daydreaming is a normal and indeed widespread aspect of human experience. He found that many people are “happy daydreamers” who enjoy their inner imagery and fantasy. According to Singer, these daydreamers “simply value and enjoy their private experiences, are willing to risk wasting a certain amount of time on them, but also can apparently use them for effective planning and for self-amusement during periods of monotonous task activity or boredom.”*

Singer coined the term positive-constructive daydreaming to describe this type of [mind wandering](#), which he distinguished from poor attention and [anxious](#), obsessive [fantasies](#). By making these important distinctions, Singer was able to highlight the positive, adaptive role that daydreaming can play in our daily lives, under the right circumstances*. From the beginning of his research, he found evidence that daydreaming, imagination, and fantasy are related to creativity, storytelling, and even the ability to delay gratification*.*

Of course, mind wandering can be costly when it comes at the wrong time, especially in regard to things like reading comprehension, sustained attention, [memory](#), and academic performance. The inability to control your attention when the task at hand requires it often leads to frustration, just as the tendency to get wrapped up in distracting negative thoughts can lead to unhappiness. But when we consider the fact that most of our important life [goals](#) lie far into the future, it's easier to see how daydreaming might be beneficial. When our inner monologues are directed toward and measured against goals, aspirations, and [dreams](#) that are personally meaningful, the benefits of daydreaming become much more clear*.*

Over the past decade, scientists have employed newer methodologies to investigate these potential benefits. In a review of the latest science of daydreaming, Scott and colleague Rebecca McMillan noted that mind wandering offers very personal rewards, including creative incubation, self-awareness, future-planning, reflection on the meaning of one's experiences, and even compassion.*

Like all human abilities, it's important to understand both sides of daydreaming—the positives and negatives. Many parents worry about children who daydream excessively. And indeed, daydreaming can cause developmental challenges. In 2002, Eli Somer introduced the term [maladaptive daydreaming](#) to describe how mind-wandering can interfere with academic, physical, and interpersonal functioning. When daydreaming inhibits healthy development, affects sleep habits, or increases negative behaviors, parents should seek professional advice.

For the majority of children (and adults) daydreaming is not only a good thing, it's essential to our flourishing as human beings.

Now, go do some daydreaming!

References

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Excerpt

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