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Why Does Daydreaming Get Such a Bad Rap?

Daydreaming is seen as frivolous, a waste of time. But have you considered daydreaming's positive effects?

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WebMD Feature*

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Call someone a daydreamer and you may as well just call them a flake, a space cadet, or a slacker.

Why are we so down on daydreaming?

"Daydreaming is looked upon negatively because it represents 'non-doing' in a society that emphasizes productivity," says John McGrail, a clinical hypnotherapist in Los Angeles. "We are under constant pressure to do, achieve, produce, succeed."

But daydreaming can be beneficial in many ways and, ironically, can actually boost productivity. Plus, it's something almost everyone does naturally. Psychologists estimate that we daydream for one-third to one-half of our waking hours, although a single daydream lasts only a few minutes.

At their best, daydreams allow you "a range of possibilities which, in the hard cold light of reality, aren't possible," psychiatrist Stuart Twemlow tells WebMD. Twemlow is director of the Hope Program at The Menninger Clinic in Houston.

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Specifically, daydreaming helps you:

Relax. Like meditation, daydreaming allows your mind to take a break, a mini-vacation in which to release tension and anxiety and "return" refreshed. It's also very useful for controlling anxiety and phobias. Say, for example, that you're afraid of flying, which you have to do for an upcoming trip. By mentally rehearsing the various steps involved -- driving to the airport, getting on the plane, taking off, etc. -- you'll be better able to handle the actual events. It also helps to practice deep breathing anytime a certain thought makes you tense.

Manage conflict. The same kind of organized daydreaming -- or visualization -- used to curb anxiety is

also useful for personal conflicts. Psychotherapist Tina Tessina calls it "rewinding the tape." As you review in your mind an argument you had with someone, you go back and imagine responding differently than you did. Try this a few times, responding differently each time, and you'll begin to figure out better ways of dealing with the person in the future. "This exercise really helps you avoid your standard knee-jerk reactions," Tessina tells WebMD.

Maintain relationships. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, especially among daydreamers. Happy couples tend to think about one another when they're apart, which has the effect of psychologically maintaining the relationship, says James Honeycutt, PhD, author of *Imagined Interactions: Daydreaming about Communication*. "We daydream about the people we love," Honeycutt tells WebMD. "We imagine sharing good news with them, along with our successes and failures. Unhappy couples daydream about arguments and ruminate about conflict while happy individuals think positively ahead."

Next: More Daydreaming Benefits

Boost productivity. "Often I find that allowing myself a few minutes for daydreaming can help me to be more productive in the long run," says Cari Noga, a freelance writer in Traverse City, Mich. "For example, just the other day I had a lot to do around the house: laundry, dishes, cleaning, bathroom scrubbing. I tried throwing myself into the work, but I found myself getting distracted. So I sat on the couch and allowed myself 15 minutes of daydream time. I let my mind wander, and instead of thinking about things I had to do, I imagined things, places, people. When my 15 minutes were up, I was in a much better mood, my mind was clearer, and I really had the urge to get things done. And my house got cleaned!"

Cement your beliefs and values. When you daydream about scenarios in which you're trying to convince someone of something you believe in strongly, you are also in a sense getting to know yourself and what you stand for better.

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Boost creativity and achieve goals. The beauty of daydreams is that nothing is impossible. "I used to daydream about seeing my book in print," says Jen Singer, author of *14 Hours 'Til Bedtime: A Stay-at-Home Mom's Life in 27 Funny Little Stories*. "And now it is. I find that when I aim high while daydreaming, I end up working harder to make my dreams become realities. Lately I've been daydreaming about being on *The Today Show* or *Ellen*."

Olympic athletes and performers use this same kind of visualization, which has been shown to help their performance in the way that actual physical practice does.

Relieve boredom. People with monotonous jobs, like factory workers and security guards, often use daydreaming to keep their minds stimulated and to get them through the day.

All this is not to say that there aren't potential negatives to daydreaming. Obsessive thinking, for example, can interfere with day-to-day functioning in some cases. Likewise, lonely people can further isolate

themselves if they spend a too much time ruminating about the past.

In general, though, we should nix the negative stereotypes and become, in the words of The Monkees, "daydream believers."

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SOURCES: James Honeycutt, PhD, professor of social psychology, Louisiana State University. John McGrail, clinical hypnotherapist, Los Angeles. Tina Tessina, psychotherapist, Long Beach, Calif. Stuart Twemlow, MD, director, The Hope Program, Menninger Clinic, Houston. Cari Noga, Traverse City, Mich. Jen Singer, author, *14 Hours 'Til Bedtime: A Stay-at-Home Mom's Life in 27 Funny Little Stories*.



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