

# Daydreaming Can Have a Dark Side

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While someone is zoning out, their mind isn't just blank. Instead, people who are daydreaming may be intensely ruminating on their future accomplishments, hopes, and goals. Research on daydreaming and other mind wandering has shown that this can help people generate innovative solutions to problems, an idea that the business world has started catching on to. But research is also showing that daydreaming can have a dark side.

Several studies have shown that spontaneous thoughts can be open and expansive, allowing the mind to creatively “wander” through different topics, helping people come up with expected solutions to problems. But a recent article in [\*Clinical Psychological Science\*](#), shows how the kind of spontaneous thoughts that just pop into our heads can sometimes have negative consequences.

According to Igor Marchetti (Ghent University) and colleagues, individuals who struggle with negative emotions or who are under intense stress are particularly vulnerable to negative thoughts when their minds wander. When an at-risk individual is struggling to accomplish a goal, their spontaneous thoughts and daydreams may take a dark turn. Instead of open-ended wanderings, they may get locked into a repetitive, negative train of thought that produces thoughts like “I’ll never find a job,” “the boss hates me,” or “I’m going to screw up this big presentation.”

“In other words, a powerful and negative emotional reactivity to internal cues has the capacity to lock the train of thoughts into a thematically narrow content channel (i.e., funneling effect) and to substantially reduce the breadth of the associative network,” the researchers write.

Marchetti and colleagues note that these repetitive, negative thoughts share many of the features of cognitive risk factors for depression. Consequently, for at-risk individuals, mind wandering and daydreaming may pave the way toward depressive symptoms or other mood disorders. And studies suggest that may be especially true when they engage in daydreaming, rather than problem solving, as a response to stress.

“Many findings indeed report that well-known mechanisms leading to depression, such as rumination, hopelessness, low self-esteem, and cognitive reactivity, are consistently associated with daydreaming and are likely to exacerbate negative mood in individuals,” they explain.

Intriguingly, dozens of experimental studies have suggested that positive distractions can help relieve depressed mood.

“This interpretation is supported by findings that pleasant activities brightened mood and reduced rumination in depressed individuals, presumably by interrupting their ruminative train of thought because the positive distraction overrides the existing cognitive processing priority, and this mood-brightening and rumination-reducing effect was especially marked in more highly depressed individuals,” the researchers explain.

A recent meta-analysis suggests that there might be a neurobiological reason for this, suggesting that socioemotional processing and spontaneous thoughts may rely on common brain areas.

Researchers have developed specific counseling techniques to help people who are coping with negative thoughts. The counseling aims to reduce commitment to unrealistic or self-destructive goals, and to instead direct the person towards more adaptive, less stress-provoking goals.

“Longing for unrealistic, overvalued, unreachable goals or being reluctant to relinquish them (once failed) are both likely to cause mental distress and should, in turn, be targeted by clinical interventions,” the researchers conclude.

## **Reference**

Marchetti, I., Koster, E., Klinger, E., & Alloy, L. B. (2016). Spontaneous thought and vulnerability to mood disorders: the dark side of the wandering mind. *Clinical Psychological Science*. doi: 10.1177/2167702615622383