

Daydream Believing: Imagining Connections

March 12, 2015

Imagine this scenario. You're working away in your cubicle, and a co-worker strolls by, humming a tune. You recognize it as an old ballad, *Suzanne*, and you immediately think of your friend, Suzanne, who you haven't talked to in a while. How is she? She was frustrated at work last time you chatted. Wonder if she's okay now. And then you remember—it's her birthday next week. You should buy her a little something, but what? She loves daisies, and she usually gathers for her birthday with a small group of family and friends, including Drew. Wonder what Drew is up to these days. . . .

Then, snap! You're back in your cubicle, and work is demanding your attention.

It's a daydream, the sort of mental drifting we all go through every day, many times a day—while walking to the office, making dinner, catching rays on the beach. Just random firings of the imagination, here and gone in a moment.

Or are they? We tend to think of daydreams as distracting or entertaining—not much more. But new research is calling this view into question. Psychological scientist Giulia Poerio of the University of Sheffield has been studying daydreaming—and its cognitive cousin, mind wandering—and she believes we may be underestimating the power of this fleeting form of imagination. We spend an inordinate amount of our waking time daydreaming—half of our waking thought, according to some estimates—and much of this drifting is social in nature. Is it possible that imagining others shapes our momentary feelings, and affects our overall well-being—much like real events?

That's the intriguing idea that Poerio and her colleagues have been investigating in a series of laboratory studies. She wanted to explore whether social daydreams, like the one described above, are associated with increases in social emotions. She used an experience sampling technique to examine naturally occurring daydreams and related feelings. Specifically, she investigated whether social daydreams—but not non-social daydreams—boost feelings of love and connection.

Poerio sent text messages to a group of young men and women four times during a single day, and asked them to answer questions about their most recent social and non-social daydreams—both the content and the emotions of the daydream. She also asked them about their feelings before and after the daydreams—love and other positive social feelings, plus pleasure, anxiety, boredom, and so forth. She also asked about their relationship with the person at the center of the daydream—how much they liked the person and how close they were.

Poerio expected that social daydreams would trigger positive social feelings linked to the imagined experience—and to the daydreamers' underlying goals and needs. And that's just what she found, and discussed this week at the first International Convention of Psychological Science in Amsterdam. Everyday daydreams were associated to increased feelings of love and connection—but only if the daydreams were about people. Social daydreams were also connected with increased happiness.

These results suggest that people's everyday social feelings are shaped by their imaginary, as well as actual, social worlds—and that daydreams can be a source of positive feelings toward others. Importantly, the increases in positive feelings were unrelated to the emotional content of the actual daydream. This suggests that imagining social situations is not merely pleasant, but comparable to real social experiences in terms of emotional outcome. What's more, the daydreamer's relationship to the person in the daydream was important: Imagining intimates elicited greater feelings of love and connection.

Social daydreams may be a powerful tool for regulating emotions. Indeed, increases in love, happiness and connection occurred only when daydreamers were emotionally “low” to being with. It appears that these random flights of imagination may compensate for emotional deficiencies, simulating social contact at times when actual connection is not possible.

Wray Herbert is reporting this week from the first International Convention of Psychological Science in Amsterdam.