

Maladaptive Daydreaming as A Coping Mechanism to Escape Loneliness

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ABSTRACT

Maladaptive Daydreaming (MD) and Loneliness are important psychological phenomena that warrant investigation because of their possible interaction. This study looks at the connections between 120 young Indian people, ages 18 to 30. Using a quantitative method, the study examines the prevalence of MD and its relationship to loneliness. The findings indicate that there is a considerable positive correlation between MD and loneliness. In keeping with its role as a coping mechanism, they also show that loneliness is a powerful predictor of MD. These results provide useful guidance on how to address psychological discomfort and social isolation in the context of Indian culture.

Keywords: *Loneliness, Maladaptive Daydreaming*

DAYDREAMING

According to the definition provided by the APA Dictionary of Psychology, a conscious fantasy, often referred to as a dream, is a state in which an individual visualizes, imagines, and considers many possibilities. Daydreaming is a normal aspect of the constant flow of ideas and thoughts that occupy a person's waking hours. These daydreams may be voluntary, purposeful, or inadvertent, meaningless, or merely imaginative thoughts. Research indicates that there are three main causes of different daydreaming patterns: poor attentional control, guilt-ridden and nervous daydreaming, and constructive and happy daydreaming (VandenBos, 2015).

The scientific literature states that daydreaming is considered to account for over half of all human thoughts (Klinger, 2009; Singer, 1966; Somer et al., 2017). According to many, daydreaming is a common occurrence that makes up a large portion of regular mental activity (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010; Somer et al., 2017).

MALADAPTIVE DAYDREAMING (MD)

It's more than just occasional, harmless daydreaming. It comprises excessive, vivid imaginations that can make people anxious and make it difficult for them to go about their daily lives normally. Sometimes these dreams become so detailed and engrossing that a person might waste hours in them, sometimes to the point where they take the place of social

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interactions. In these daydreams, people create idealized versions of themselves or set up fictitious characters (Yuko, 2023). There is evidence that people who are struggling have an insatiable need to daydream (Somer et al. 2016a; Somer et al., 2017). For example, one person commented, “It feels like an addiction.” “To obtain my dose, I frequently have to leave the house” (p. 474). “I am in control of the medications I take, but not the quantity (p. 475).”

Daydreams have a role that is defined by their frequency and material (Canpolat, 2022; Rana & Vyas, 2022b). A person with MD benefits from several things, such as enhanced creativity, self-awareness, future planning abilities, and compassion (McMillan, Kaufman & Singer, 2013; Rana & Vyas, 2022b). Singer used the phrase “positive-constructive daydreaming” to differentiate this type of mental straying from inattention and nervous, obsessive thought patterns. Maladaptive daydreamers employ this behaviour as a coping strategy for social interaction, emotional stress, and loneliness (Somer et al., 2016; Rana & Vyas, 2022b). Research has shown that it helps individuals plan, think creatively, solve problems, face obstacles in the future, and interact with others in social situations (Andrews-Hanna et al., 2013; McMillan, Kaufman & Singer, 2013; Rana & Vyas, 2022b).

LONELINESS

The second variable, loneliness, is the emotional and cognitive discomfort or anguish that arises from being by oneself or from feeling isolated in any other manner. Psychology theory and research offer a range of perspectives: Social psychology focuses on the emotional pain that results from unfulfilled basic needs for love and intimacy (VandenBos, 2015).

Daydreaming is an unhealthy pattern of behavior that causes feelings of despair and loneliness, according to a number of reliable research (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008; Watkins, 2008; Yousaf, Ghayas & Akhtar, 2015b). Some experts claim that excessive daydreaming is not indicative of a mental illness, but rather a coping mechanism for extreme mental illness, abuse, prior trauma, and even loneliness. Daydreaming has been linked in several studies to feelings of loneliness and a deficiency of social support (Killingsworth & Gilbert 2010, 2013; Smith & Alloy, 2009; Smallwood et al., 2009; Yousaf, Ghayas & Akhtar, 2015b).

Perceived social support is considered to be the most important component in the link between loneliness and daydreaming. Based on a study conducted on a sample of college students, higher levels of social support are linked to more passionate and problem-solving daydreaming, whereas lower levels are negatively correlated with more constructive daydreaming. Furthermore, more negative and melancholy daydreaming is linked to loneliness, and this may be harmful to relationships and a good quality of life (Mar et al., 2012). Poerio (2016) suggested that future studies might look at the advantages of social daydreaming for people's interactions with others and their own well-being. Furthermore, mimicking pleasant interactions while daydreaming may be helpful in treating maladaptive social cognition associated with depressive, anxious, and lonely sensations.

It is crucial to emphasise (Soffer-Dudek & Oh, 2024) that their results do not provide light on causality-related problems. Maladaptive daydreaming, or MD, can exacerbate feelings of guilt and loneliness while impeding aspirations in life, which can be a contributing cause to suicidality. On the other hand, it may be a side effect of suicidality, acting as a route out of a

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difficult situation—a known mechanism seen in people who are thinking of taking their own lives to end their emotional suffering.

“People who are alone tend to have vivid imaginations, love daydreaming, and enjoy telling stories,” (Thompson, 2021). A person's perspective, behaviour, and personality are all irreparably altered by persistent loneliness (Peplau, 1982; Thompson, 2021). Loneliness and the capacity for solitude foster daydreaming and the growth of the creative mind.

Poerio et al. (2016) also looked at the impact of social daydreaming on socioemotional adjustment during the transition to university life. People reported feeling less alone and more socially involved, and they had stronger relationships and less magical images in their daydreams, according to the research. Results point to the functional role that social daydreaming plays in supporting socio-emotional adjustment during significant life transitions, highlighting the importance of assessing the social content of stimulus-independent cognitions. With a focus on considering significant others, (Poerio et al., 2015) investigated the role of daydreaming as a cognitive strategy for re-establishing social connectedness following a loneliness induction. Creative social daydreaming may effectively restore a sense of connectedness and boost socio-emotional well-being, as evidenced by the outcomes of social daydreaming, which also demonstrated a rise in pro-social conduct and a decrease in the need for interpersonal involvement.

Yousaf et al. (2015b), sampled 177 undergraduate students at the University of Sargodha to identify the association between daydreaming, loneliness, and perceived social support was investigated. According to the study, daydreaming is significantly and favourably predicted by loneliness. The UCLA Loneliness Scale, the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List, and the Short Imaginal Processes Inventory (translated into Urdu) were used in the study. There were gender disparities observed, with girls scoring much higher than boys on the daydreaming scale.

This study attempts to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on maladaptive daydreaming and loneliness by concentrating on significant objectives. Our objective is to use empirical research to quantify the incidence of maladaptive daydreaming in individuals who are alone. By analyzing the mechanics of this relationship, we hope to get a better understanding of how individuals navigate the challenging terrain of loneliness.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

To investigate how maladaptive daydreaming and loneliness are related, as well as how it might be used as a coping strategy to avoid loneliness.

Objectives

The study's goals are to look at the relationship between maladaptive daydreaming and loneliness as well as the function of maladaptive daydreaming as a coping strategy for getting away from loneliness.

Hypothesis

- H1: Among people in the Indian population, maladaptive daydreaming and loneliness will be significantly positively correlated.
- H2: Among people in the Indian population, maladaptive daydreaming is a significant coping mechanism for escaping loneliness.

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Sample

A sample of 120 individuals were chosen for this study. The sample included representation for both males (n = 70) and females (n = 50). Their ages range from 18-30.

Tools:

The Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale- 16, developed in 2016 by an international team led by medical expert Eli Somer, was applied. Its sixteen measures, which employ an 11-point rating system for each question, cover significant subjects including Kinaesthesia, Yearning, Impairment, and Music—a characteristic that has been discovered to be frequent among those who engage in maladaptive daydreaming. Two additional questions on music consumption were added to the 14-item scale in an update. The total score, which ranges from 0 to 100, is determined by averaging the component scores. Maladaptive daydreaming that is clinically relevant is indicated by a mean score of 40 or above. Give each question a score between 0 and 10, as this is a linear scale. Add up each person's results from all 16 questions. A total score of 40 or higher indicates that maladaptive daydreaming is probably present. The measurement tool features an acceptable incremental validity and convergent validity (Sándor et al., 2020), and Cronbach's alpha reliability for the 16 items on the final 4-country sample was 0.92-0.96 (Soffer-Dudek et al., 2021b).

The degree of loneliness was measured using the *UCLA Loneliness Scale* developed by Russell et al. in 1978. It is a 20-item test designed to measure how lonely and socially isolated a person feels on a subjective level. The ratings that participants assigned to each item were O ("I often feel this way"), S ("I sometimes feel this way"), R ("I rarely feel this way"), or N ("I never feel this way"). To score the scale, assign a value of 3 to each of the following: O, S, R, and N. Keep scoring consistently. Additionally, the scale has strong internal consistency (coefficient alpha .96), test-retest correlation, contemporaneous and preliminary concept validity, and test-retest correlation (Russell et al., 1978).

RESULTS

Table 1: The study's variables' mean, standard deviation, and correlation matrix

	M	SD	1	2
1 Loneliness	22.47	13.10	--	.34*
2 Maladaptive Daydreaming	43.90	30.18	.34*	--

* $p < .01$

The mean, standard deviation, and correlation of the variables examined in this study are shown in Table 1. A substantial positive connection, significant at the 0.01 level, was discovered between maladaptive daydreaming and loneliness.

Table 2: Loneliness as a predictor of maladaptive daydreaming: a linear regression analysis

Predictor Variable	B	β	S.E	R ²	F
Loneliness	.79	.34	.17	.118	19.98**

** $p < .001$

With loneliness as the predictor variable, regression analysis was computed and shown in Table 2. The results demonstrated that maladaptive daydreaming may be robustly and favourably predicted by loneliness {B = .79, β = .34, S.E = .17, F = 19.98, $p < .001$ }, with loneliness explaining 11.8% of the variation in maladaptive daydreaming (R² = .118).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between maladaptive daydreaming (MD) and loneliness, as well as if MD is a coping strategy used to avoid loneliness. The UCLA Loneliness Scale and the Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale-16 (MDS-16) were used in the study, which involved 120 young people of Indian descent, ages 18 to 30. Regression analysis and correlation approaches were used in this study to throw light on cultural variations in coping mechanisms and explore the relationship between MD and loneliness, as there has been little research on this issue, particularly in the Indian setting.

The results of this study provide insight into the complex interaction that exists between loneliness and maladaptive daydreaming (MD) in the setting of Indian culture. By investigating the frequency of maladaptive daydreaming and its association with loneliness, the study provides important new understandings into how people use creative coping strategies to deal with psychological pain and social isolation. The substantial positive link between maladaptive daydreaming and loneliness is one of the study's most noteworthy findings. According to this correlation, people who are feeling particularly lonely may be more likely to daydream unhelpfully in an attempt to cope with their emotional pain. Regression analysis confirms the observed link and shows that maladaptive daydreaming is strongly predicted by loneliness ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$). Regression analysis revealed that loneliness is a significant predictor of maladaptive daydreaming behaviour, explaining 11.8% of the variation in maladaptive daydreaming scores ($R^2 = .118$, $F = 19.98$, $p < .001$). These results corroborate previous studies (Smallwood et al., 2009; Yousaf et al., 2015b) that found the primary causes of daydreaming to be loneliness and other undesirable characteristics.

The acquired data provide additional support for the study's two main hypotheses, namely,

H1: *“Among people in the Indian population, maladaptive daydreaming and loneliness are significantly positively correlated.”*

This data lends credence to the theory that people who are feeling particularly alone are more likely to daydream in an unhealthy way in an attempt to cope with their emotional pain. The association that was found emphasises how critical it is to identify creative coping mechanisms while dealing with psychological discomfort and social isolation.

H2: *“Among people in the Indian population, maladaptive daydreaming is a significant coping mechanism for escaping loneliness.”*

Regression analysis reveals loneliness as a significant predictor of maladaptive daydreaming behaviour, implying that people who struggle with feeling cut off from their social networks or lacking in meaningful social interactions may turn to maladaptive daydreaming as a coping mechanism.

The aforementioned results are consistent with previous research (Yousaf et al., 2015b), which showed that loneliness was a strong and favourable predictor of daydreaming.

The correlation's consequences go beyond personal experiences to encompass wider societal ramifications, especially in a cultural context such as India where social relationships are highly valued. According to the research, people who feel cut off from their social networks or who don't have enough meaningful social interactions may turn to maladaptive daydreaming as a coping strategy. These results are consistent with (Poerio et al., 2016) research, which found that daydreamers experienced higher-quality interactions, less fantasising, less loneliness, and more connectedness. People also reported feeling happier,

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closer to others, and less unhappy overall at the same time. Comprehending these adaptive mechanisms is crucial in formulating solutions that effectively tackle feelings of loneliness and its concomitant psychological consequences.

Limitation, Recommendation, and Implications of the Study

The cross-sectional methodology, small sample size of 120 individuals, and dependence on self-reported measures are some of the study's drawbacks that highlight the need for longitudinal studies to comprehend the temporal dynamics and causal linkages between loneliness and maladaptive daydreaming. Understanding cultural quirks is essential to creating treatments and resilience-building techniques that are suited for the target culture. Analysing cultural settings in comparison may highlight commonalities or cultural quirks that guide customised solutions. Future studies, maybe with bigger sample sizes, should use interdisciplinary methods to investigate the effects of loneliness and maladaptive daydreaming on mental health in a variety of contexts. This study highlights the significance of recognising maladaptive daydreaming in resolving psychological discomfort and loneliness, furthering our understanding of the link between loneliness and maladaptive daydreaming in the Indian cultural setting.

CONCLUSION

Maladaptive daydreaming (MD) and loneliness are related in this study of Indian young adults, and the results show a strong positive correlation between the two. The results indicate that MD is predicted by loneliness, emphasizing the significance of figuring out useful coping strategies for psychological discomfort, particularly in Indian cultural contexts. This study adds to our understanding of these occurrences and emphasizes the need for culturally responsive therapy, despite several limitations such as its cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reports. Insights may be further enhanced and customized therapies for a range of people can be developed by future research that makes use of longitudinal techniques and cultural assessments.

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Conflict of Interest

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