

Research Paper

Lost Inside My Head - An Exploratory Study on The Effect of Daydreaming on Emotion Regulation and Fantasy Proneness

Manasa B. Reddy¹, Ranjitha S², Sai Varsaa Alwar³, Dr. Emilda Judith Ezhil Rajan^{4*}

ABSTRACT

Background and Aim: Dreams and daydreams are crucial in shaping our understanding of reality and self, influencing behavior, emotions, creativity, and attention. However, excessive daydreaming/maladaptive daydreaming can impair daily functioning and well-being. Maladaptive daydreaming is closely associated with fantasy proneness as a coping mechanism. Understanding its impact on emotional regulation can help identify strategies to promote well-being. This study compares fantasy proneness levels and difficulties in emotion regulation between daydreamers and maladaptive daydreamers. **Methodology:** The sample comprises undergraduate and postgraduate students aged 18 to 25 from India. A total of 168 responses were collected. Participants were screened using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) and were further assessed using the Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS-16), Creative Experiences Questionnaire (CEQ), and Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS-36). **Results:** In this study, 59 samples were excluded for not meeting the criteria, resulting in a final dataset of 109 responses ($M_{age} = 20.66$, $SD_{age} = 2$). Among these, 57 participants scored 40 or above on the MDS-16 questionnaire, categorizing them as maladaptive daydreamers, while 52 participants scored below 40, categorizing them as normal daydreamers. Analysis revealed significant differences in emotion regulation and fantasy proneness between the two groups. **Conclusion:** Our findings indicate that maladaptive daydreamers exhibit significant deficits in emotion regulation and an increased propensity to immerse themselves in an imaginary world to escape reality. Although maladaptive daydreaming is not currently classified as a mental health disorder, it represents a genuine condition with profound implications for an individual's self-perception and worldview.

Keywords: *Maladaptive Daydreaming (MD), Emotion Regulation, Fantasy Proneness*

Dreams are visual and imaginative experiences that have enlisted both psychology and neuroscience¹. Dreams hold immense importance in our lives based on our beliefs, followed by the manifestation of our deepest thoughts and emotions. Though

¹MSc Clinical Psychology, SRM Medical College, Hospital and Research Center

²MSc Clinical Psychology, SRM Medical College, Hospital and Research Center

³Research Associate, Division of Medical Research, SRM Medical College, Hospital and Research Center

⁴Associate Professor, Department of Clinical Psychology, SRM Medical College, Hospital and Research Center

*Corresponding Author

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controversial it is widely agreed that dreams offer a window into our subconscious and can reveal hidden desires and feelings that we may not be aware of in our waking lives².

Dreams can have immediate and lasting effects on behavior, influencing daytime anxieties and interpersonal relationships³. Dreams occurring during rapid eye movement (REM) sleep can reflect our thoughts, emotions, and fears. Other types of dreams include nightmares, lucid dreams, recurring dreams, vivid dreams, night terrors (more commonly experienced in children), and recurrent objectives⁴.

While dreams delve into our subconscious mind during our slumber, there's a parallel world of thoughts we navigate while awake - the world of Daydreams. Unlike dreams, which unravel in the domain of sleep and unconsciousness, daydreaming thrives during our conscious, waking hours, providing a haven for unrestricted exploration and contemplation. Despite their apparent differences, both dreams and daydreams share a profound role - they harness the power of imagination to shape our understanding of reality and self. They act as conduits for processing emotions, practicing scenarios, and assimilating past experiences, thereby contributing to the continuous evolution of our self-identity.

Daydreaming is closely tied to a specific brain network called the task-negative network, which generates "stimulus-independent thoughts" when we're not engaged in external tasks. Daydreaming helps us solve problems, explore our inner selves, plan for the future, and control our emotions^{5&6}. Daydreams can take different forms, including pleasant, negative, creative, nostalgic, and imaginative. Recent studies suggest that daydreaming may play a role in brain plasticity, making our brains adaptable and open to new connections during daydreams^{7&8}.

When an individual is excessively engaged in vivid and immersive daydreams or fantasies it is called maladaptive daydreaming. This condition is characterized by an overwhelming preoccupation with the inner world of fantasy that replaces real-life interaction and communication, leading to significant impairment in daily functioning and overall well-being. People with maladaptive daydreaming tend to lose touch with reality, experience difficulties in focusing, and struggle with social and emotional intimacy. This condition is still not widely recognized as a formal diagnosis, and more research is needed to understand its underlying causes and effective treatments⁹.

Multiple researchers have explored the correlation between different forms of daydreaming, creativity, and the shared neural basis underlying them. This diverse ability to daydream has led some individuals to dream in excess. This revealed that daydreaming is closely connected with creativity, but can also impact attention¹⁰. It is found that individuals who have imaginary companions tend to have a heightened imaginative capacity that enables them to generate and maintain elaborate and immersive imaginary worlds, particularly during daydreaming¹¹. These worlds can serve as a source of comfort, entertainment, or even inspiration. Moreover, people with imaginary companions are more creative than those who do not¹². These findings underscore the significance of daydreaming and its potential influence on creativity, attention, and imagination suggesting that it may be a valuable tool for fostering imaginative thinking and innovation.

Emotional regulation is crucial for one's psychological well-being as it involves managing and coping with intense emotions. Inadequate emotional regulation skills can lead to the

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development of maladaptive daydreaming as an unhealthy coping mechanism to manage distressing emotions²⁰. This can also relate to heightened emotional sensitivity that can be expressed as a personality trait of neuroticism.

Individuals with high neuroticism levels may find it hard to regulate their emotions effectively, as they are more prone to experiencing negative emotions. This increased sensitivity to negative emotions can make it challenging to manage and regulate them effectively, leading to more emotional distress and potentially more maladaptive behaviours²¹.

The heightened level of neuroticism which is characterized by negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, and depression, is more susceptible to maladaptive daydreaming. As these individuals typically value a stable environment, they can adapt the same through daydreaming and when in excess, it leads to maladaptive daydreaming. Maladaptive daydreaming leads to poor emotional regulation abilities when leading to an individual creating a cycle where negative emotions become more challenging to manage, ultimately worsening the intensity of these emotions and adding to overall distress.

A major addition to MD is an individual's need for fantasy proneness involving a vivid imagination, a rich inner fantasy life, and a tendency to blur the lines between fantasy and reality. Highly fantasy-prone people easily immerse themselves in fictional worlds and experience vivid daydreams. While this trait can enhance creativity and coping mechanisms, distinguishing between reality and fantasy can also lead to difficulties, reflecting maladaptiveness¹⁷.

Maladaptive daydreaming and fantasy proneness are closely linked in several ways. Both involve an intense state of daydreaming or fantasizing beyond the usual level. They serve as coping mechanisms against distress, loneliness, rejection, and abuse. For example, normal childhood fantasy can ease the distress of social isolation, but it can later become maladaptive behavior, leading the individual to seek help. Similarly, fantasy-prone individuals may experience psychological and physiological reactions to maladaptive daydreams, which can harm their work and relationships¹⁸.

Comorbid Conditions with Maladaptive Daydreaming

It can be noted that maladaptive daydreaming can lead to a range of negative consequences such as social isolation, poor social skills, anxiety, and depression. It has been suggested that maladaptive daydreaming may be a way for individuals to escape reality and cope with distressing emotions. Unfortunately, this coping mechanism can lead to additional distress as individuals struggle to manage their daily tasks while being consumed by their daydreams^{13&14}.

A recent contribution from Maladaptive Daydreaming is its association with problematic social networking site use (PSNSU), suggesting it is a potential vulnerability factor for PSNSU¹⁹. Maladaptive daydreamers have been reported to have higher levels of anxiety and depression during intense daydreaming episodes. Additionally, these symptoms can be exacerbated during times of stress such as the current pandemic. This can make it particularly challenging for individuals with maladaptive daydreaming to manage their mental health and cope with the added stressors of daily life. Therefore, it is important to recognize the potential negative consequences of maladaptive daydreaming and seek appropriate support to manage this condition^{15&16}.

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Rationale of the study

The recent trends in studying dreams have noted that Maladaptive daydreaming is frequently used as a coping method for people struggling with difficult emotions, trauma, or unmet psychological requirements. Understanding how MD affects emotional regulation can assist in clarifying the psychological repercussions of excessive daydreaming and identify potential intervention targets to promote overall well-being. This in-depth examination of the relationship between maladaptive daydreaming, emotional regulation, and fantasy proneness would improve our understanding of coping strategies, differences in fantasy involvement, and psychological wellness. Finding essential insights to address maladaptive daydreaming and its associated challenges can prove to be a boon to addressing and understanding the underlying mechanisms driving this conduct and identifying alternative, healthier coping strategies.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

This study aims to compare the level of fantasy proneness and difficulty in emotion regulation between daydreamers and maladaptive daydreamers.

Objectives

The current study aims to investigate the correlation between daydreaming and maladaptive daydreaming concerning fantasy proneness and emotional regulation. The study seeks to explore how these variables interact with each other and to examine the potential impact of maladaptive daydreaming on emotional regulation.

Hypothesis

- **H₁** - There is a significant difference in difficulty in emotional regulation between daydreamers and maladaptive daydreamers
- **H₂** - There is a significant difference in Fantasy proneness between daydreamers and maladaptive daydreamers

Variables used in the study

Variables of the study are maladaptive daydreaming, emotional regulation, and fantasy proneness.

Study Design

The study uses an ex post facto research design to assess the level of psychological distress retrospectively and if it's an indicating factor of childhood trauma. Ex post facto research is research in which the researcher cannot control independent variables because they have either already occurred, or cannot be controlled by nature.

It is also a Cross- sectional study connected to identifying the

Sample Design

The researcher will use a purposive sampling technique to select participants for the study. Purposive sampling is a selective technique where the researcher relies on their judgment to choose the population members who will participate in the study. It is also known as subjective or judgmental sampling.

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Sampling Procedure

An online survey via Google Forms was created and shared with online maladaptive daydreaming (MD) communities and social network groups. The survey specifically invited individuals aged between 18-25 years, who are currently pursuing their undergraduate and postgraduate studies in India, to participate in the study. Before starting the survey, participants received an overview of the study and provided their informed consent. The study emphasized voluntary participation and no incentives were offered to the individuals who took part in this research

Sample selection

Inclusion Criteria

- Both Male and female individuals were considered for the study.
- People living in India.
- Undergraduate and Postgraduate students between the ages of 18 to 25.

Exclusion Criteria

- Individuals with high scores on GHQ were excluded due to signs of significant mental disturbances.
- Working professionals (also includes people doing part-time work while studying).

Sample description

The survey was conducted among undergraduate and postgraduate students from India aged between 18 to 25. A total of 168 responses were collected, with an average age of 21 years. The sample consisted of 138 females, 30 males, and 2 participants who identified themselves as others. Among the participants, 62.4% were pursuing undergraduate studies while 37.6% were pursuing postgraduate studies.

Tools used

- Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS-16) is a 16-item self-report scale that measures the degree of MD behavior. The items are measured on a Likert scale ranging from 0% (never) to 100% (extremely frequent)
- The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS) is a self-report scale that consists of 36 items. The responses are specified on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = rarely; 5 = almost always)
- The Creative Experiences Questionnaire (CEQ) is a widely-used self-report measure of fantasy proneness, comprising 25 items (Yes/No) relating to experiences of fantasizing thoughts.
- The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) is a 12-item self-administered screening tool used to eliminate participants with severe mental disturbances.

Statistical Analysis

The statistical analysis focuses on the intermittent analysis between the variables through an independent sample t-test. An Independent sample t-test was used to compare the difference in emotional regulation between daydreamers and maladaptive daydreamers and also the difference in fantasy proneness between daydreamers and maladaptive daydreamers.

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Ethical Considerations

The participants will fill out the Informed consent form, and the debriefing about the study will be done by the researcher. Debriefing will be done through mail to the online participants. A brief introduction of the researcher will be made known to the participants. Details of the researcher will be made available to the participants to reach out to for any queries. The researcher keeps the participants' data confidential, and the details are only discussed with the supervisor if necessary. The participants are not forced to participate in the study. There is no physical or psychological harm expected out of this research. All ethical guidelines will be followed in the study.

RESULTS

Maladaptive daydreaming, fantasy proneness, and emotional dysregulation may present themselves differently in each person, they frequently share similar underlying mechanisms that stem from the desire for escapism, emotional processing, or self-soothing. This study aims to pinpoint discrepancies in emotional regulation and fantasy proneness between individuals who experience daydreaming and those who experience maladaptive daydreaming.

On examining the demographic variable while we observe Figure 1 the sample encompassed a cohort of 168 individuals aged 18 to 25, with a mean age of 21 years and a standard deviation of 2.67. This group comprised 138 females, 30 males, and 2 individuals identifying as non-binary. Notably, 62.4% pursued undergraduate studies, while 37.6% engaged in postgraduate endeavors. The study's scope was delimited by the exploratory nature of its inquiry, thereby necessitating a sample size constrained by participant availability.

The obtained sample was screened utilizing the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ), for substantial mental disturbances, leading to the exclusion of 59 individuals failing to meet the predefined criteria. Subsequently, 109 participants successfully concluded the MDS 16 questionnaire, with an average age of 20.66 years and a standard deviation of 2. Among these respondents, 57 attained a score of 40 or higher, warranting classification as maladaptive daydreamers, while 52 garnered scores below 40, thereby classified as daydreamers. Concerning Figure 2, the participants were categorized into two groups: daydreamers, characterized by MDS-16 scores below 40, and maladaptive daydreamers, identified by scores exceeding 40.

From Table 1 we can understand that an independent-sample t-test was employed to discern disparities in emotion regulation between these groups, revealing statistically significant differences ($t(105) = -3.18, p = 0.002$). The mean score for daydreamers ($M = 1.21, SD = 0.412$) contrasted with that of maladaptive daydreamers ($M = 1.49, SD = 0.504$), with a notable mean difference of -0.280 (95% CI: -0.454 to -0.105). Indicative of difference in emotional dysregulation concerning daydreamers and maladaptive daydreamers. Interestingly, no significant distinctions emerged in the subscales of DERS, specifically lack of emotional awareness and clarity, between the two groups. However, other subscales, encompassing non-acceptance of emotional responses, difficulties in engaging goal-directed behavior, impulse control challenges, and access to emotion regulation strategies, displayed statistically significant variances.

On further examination, an independent-sample t-test that was conducted to evaluate the fantasy proneness of daydreamers versus maladaptive daydreamers showed the results of significant disparities ($t(106) = -4.64, p < 0.001$) in scores, with daydreamers ($M = 1.21, SD$

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= 0.412) exhibiting a discernibly lower mean compared to maladaptive daydreamers ($M = 1.61$, $SD = 0.491$). The mean difference of -0.402 (95% CI: -0.574 to -0.232) underscored the significance of these findings.

DISCUSSION

Examining the emotional regulation and fantasy proneness variations between the daydreamers and the maladaptive daydreamers, the study intends to explore the underlying causes of maladaptive daydreaming and provide insights that may help individuals struggling with this condition to better understand and manage their symptoms.

Maladaptive daydreamers have been found to exhibit heightened challenges in managing their emotions compared to their counterparts. Maladaptive daydreamers consistently scored higher on the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS) when compared to daydreamers. This discrepancy underscores the tendency for maladaptive daydreamers to exhibit heightened negative reactions to distress. They tend to experience more negative emotions in response to adversity and struggle with accepting these emotional responses. This difficulty in emotional regulation impairs their ability to maintain productivity and concentration, particularly in goal-directed tasks during emotional distress. They were also prone to impulsive behaviors when faced with emotional upheavals, indicating a deficit in impulse control. Findings of Sándor, A., Bugán, A., Nagy, A., et al also found that maladaptive daydreamers struggle with emotional regulation²³. Bigelsen J, Schupak C & Bacon A, and Charlesford J have indicated that maladaptive daydreaming can be a coping mechanism or temporary escape and satisfies psychological needs^{25,26}. However, evidence also suggests that daydreaming can serve as a healthy coping strategy, reducing stress and anxiety by distracting from stressful situations^{27,28}. A study by Mills, C. et al showed that mind-wandering, including daydreaming, can improve one's mood if free-flowing²⁸ implying that the content and nature of daydreaming can impact one's emotional health.

Maladaptive daydreamers exhibit a heightened propensity for fantasy proneness compared to non-maladaptive daydreamers. While maladaptive daydreaming, fantasy proneness, and emotional dysregulation may manifest differently in each individual, they often share common underlying mechanisms rooted in the need for escapism, emotional processing, or self-soothing. Sándor, A., Bugán, A., Nagy, A., et al and Bacon A, & Charlesford J, have found that maladaptive daydreaming and fantasy proneness entail a significant level of involvement in imaginative activities, which, if not regulated properly, can result in emotional distress^{23,24}. They also concluded that such individuals often resort to their fantasies as a mechanism to cope with negative emotions; however, this could pose a problem if it leads to avoidance of real-life issues and responsibilities^{23,24}. Additionally, the degree to which daydreaming and fantasy proneness become maladaptive is influenced by an individual's capacity to regulate their emotions^{23,24}.

The current study's findings are congruent with results found by Schupak C, & Rosenthal J. which were indicative of maladaptive daydreamers showing a deep involvement in fantasy and excessive daydreaming to escape reality²⁹. Bigelsen J. et al stated that individuals who score high on fantasy proneness may be more likely to create detailed mental scenarios or characters that they can immerse themselves in during daydreaming.³⁰

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West MJ, Somer E. found that individuals exhibiting high fantasy proneness may also display a heightened propensity to experience emotions intensely. This heightened emotional intensity likely contributes to the immersive and emotionally charged nature of their daydreams³¹.

The comprehensive analysis indicates that maladaptive daydreamers have poor emotional regulation leading to exhibit heightened negative reactions to distress. Their challenges in effectively managing intense emotions often translate into difficulties in behavioral control and maintaining focus on tasks. With limited access to strategies for emotional regulation, they encounter obstacles in coping with negative emotions, often stemming from a lack of acceptance and a fear of experiencing them. Consequently, this emotional turmoil can lead to decreased attentiveness, resulting in diminished productivity. The findings also underscore the significance of exploring the intricate interplay between maladaptive daydreaming and fantasy proneness, emphasizing the need to comprehend the cognitive and emotional mechanisms underlying daydreaming and fantasy generation.

Maladaptive daydreamers perceive a lack of effective strategies for regulating their emotions, leading to a persistent belief that negative emotions and depressive thoughts persist. Interestingly, maladaptive daydreamers and daydreamers share difficulties in emotional self-awareness and clarity, suggesting a common challenge in recognizing and understanding their emotional states. However, the distinct deficits in emotional regulation observed specifically among maladaptive daydreamers underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of the relationship between maladaptive daydreaming tendencies and emotional regulation processes.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the correlation between maladaptive daydreaming (MD), emotion regulation, and fantasy proneness among university students in India. The results indicated that MD is characterized by significant deficits in emotion regulation and a pronounced tendency to escape reality through immersive fantasy worlds. Compared to normal daydreamers, individuals with MD exhibited more pronounced difficulties in emotion regulation, underscoring the distinctive features of this phenomenon. Additionally, a strong correlation was found between fantasy proneness and MD, highlighting the deeply emotional and absorbing nature of MD.

However, several limitations temper the study's conclusions, notably the small and non-representative sample size, which compromises the precision and generalizability of the findings. Future research should explore the cognitive and emotional mechanisms underpinning daydreaming, the precipitating factors for the onset of MD, and the neurobiological substrates associated with this condition. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into the developmental trajectory of MD, while cross-cultural investigations could illuminate how cultural norms influence its prevalence rates. Employing structured clinical interviews for MD diagnosis could offer clinical validation for individuals affected by this condition, thereby facilitating the development of tailored interventions to enhance the emotional and psychological well-being of young adults.

The complex relationship between maladaptive daydreaming, fantasy proneness, and emotion regulation underscores the need for further research to elucidate the underlying mechanisms. This research is crucial for developing targeted interventions for individuals experiencing difficulties in these domains, ultimately promoting better mental health and well-being.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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