

Research Paper

## From Escape to Entrapment: A Correlational Study between Maladaptive Daydreaming, Emotional Regulation Difficulties, & Daydreaming Content

Gracey Gaware<sup>1\*</sup>, Mrs. Shweta Kakade<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Maladaptive Daydreaming (MD) involves excessive immersive fantasy disrupting functioning as maladaptive emotion regulation. Examined MD-emotion regulation correlations in 95 Indian young adults (18-30, Tier 1/2 cities) using MDS-16, DERS-16, ERQ-10, IDCC. Spearman correlations: global DERS  $\rho=.37$   $p<.001$ , impulse control  $\rho=.25$   $p<.01$ , strategies  $\rho=.37$   $p<.001$ ; suppression  $\rho=.07$   $p=.52$  (ns). IDCC showed power/control, escape, relationship themes. MD links to regulation deficits in Indian youth; DBT-informed interventions recommended. Limitations: convenience sampling and cross-sectional design.

**Keywords:** *Escape, Entrapment, Maladaptive Daydreaming, Emotional Regulation Difficulties, Daydreaming Content*

The area of dreams and waking imagination has long sparked curiosity in humans, shaping art, myth, and psychological theory alike. Dreams, traditionally understood as a window into the unconscious or a route for emotional processing, are now described in neuroscientific frameworks as the brain's method for uniting memories, rehearsing threats, and regulating emotions during sleep (Hobson & McCarley, 1977; Desseilles *et al.*, 2011). Recent studies show that these nightly tales facilitate coping and creativity. (Desseilles *et al.*, 2011).

In all consciousness, this imaginative capacity manifests as daydreaming, a regulating feature of consciousness described by Singer (1966) as a supporting problem-solving, creativity, and emotional self-regulation. However, for some individuals, daydreaming becomes excessive and difficult to control, it becomes Maladaptive Daydreaming (MD) (Somer, 2002). Maladaptive daydreaming is defined and characterized by vivid, immersive, and prolonged fantasy episodes that can significantly disrupt daily life (Somer, 2022; Bigelsen, Lehrfeld, & Somer, 2016). Unlike adaptive daydreaming which might provide a short-term creative or emotional relief, Maladaptive Daydreaming is marked by loss of impulse control, distress over time spent fantasizing, and a huge impact on functioning in social, academic or occupational domains (Soffer-Dudek & Somer, 2018). Narrative themes

<sup>1</sup>Student, Nowrosjee Wadia College (Autonomous, Affiliated to Savitribai Phule Pune University), Maharashtra

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Nowrosjee Wadia College (Autonomous, Affiliated to Savitribai Phule Pune University), Maharashtra

\*Corresponding Author

Received: December 18, 2025; Revision Received: March 18, 2026; Accepted: March 22, 2026

## From Escape to Entrapment: A Correlational Study between Maladaptive Daydreaming, Emotional Regulation Difficulties, & Daydreaming Content

in Maladaptive Daydreaming are often emotionally empowered, sometimes fulfilling unmet emotional needs, or work as an escape from negative affect, loneliness, or stress (Somer, 2002; Reddy *et al.*, 2024). Importantly Trauma plays a key role in why some individuals develop Maladaptive Daydreaming. Histories of trauma including childhood abuse, neglect, and other adverse experiences can disrupt emotional processing and regulation, increasing dependencies on dissociative or escapist behaviors like maladaptive daydreaming (Somer, 2002; Soffer-Dudek & Somer, 2018). Maladaptive Daydreaming may function as a protective dissociative response to overwhelming trauma-related emotions or memories, offering temporary relief but ultimately reinforcing avoidance and worsening emotional difficulties (Bjureberg *et al.*, 2016; Cloitre, Miranda, Stovall-McClough, & Ham, 2005). This link emphasizes the complex interplay between trauma, emotional regulation, and maladaptive fantasy engagement. Maladaptive daydreaming is grounded in Haynes (2020) theory of Differential Emotional Processing Theory, which distinguishes an avoidant Emotion Protection Pathway from a more Emotion Growth Pathway (Haynes, 2020).

Parallel to the exploration of fantasy lies the study of emotions, which exert an influence over perception, motivation, and interpersonal relations. Foundational accounts like Ekman's (1992) basic emotion theory suggest emotions are universal, automatic responses to specific stimuli, while appraisal theories (Lazarus, 1991) emphasize the role of individual interpretation in shaping emotional experience and behaviors. Recent neuroscience confirms that emotions are multi-layered, encompassing physiological arousal, subjective feelings, and expressive behaviour all handled by our brain. (Desseilles *et al.*, 2011).

The key to well-being is the ability for Emotional Regulation, or the skill to modulate and manage one's emotions effectively (Gross & John, 2003). The process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 2015) outlines a series of strategies, from situation selection to cognitive reappraisal where individuals reinterpret a situation to alter its emotional impact to expressive suppression, which involves inhibiting outwards emotion. Efficient regulation links to adaptability, resilience, lower psychopathology risk, whereas chronic difficulties are linked to mood disorders, poor impulse control, and dysfunctional coping (Bjureberg *et al.*, 2016).

Emotional regulation difficulties refer to problems in how individuals understand, accept, and manage their emotions during stressful or upsetting situations. People facing these challenges may find it hard to identify what they are feeling, may reject or judge their emotions, and often struggle to stay in control of their behaviors when distressed, interfering with everyday tasks and goal-directed behavior (Weiss *et al.*, 2015). Individuals may also report not knowing how to reduce the intensity of their emotions or cope effectively, turning instead to unhelpful strategies that temporarily avoid emotions but worsen problems over time (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010). These issues are linked to anxiety, depression, ADHD, and compulsive behaviors (Gratz & Roemer, 2004; Schafer *et al.*, 2017).

In individuals prone to maladaptive daydreaming, this regulatory capacity appears compromised, contributing to increased reliance on avoidant emotional regulation strategies including immersive fantasy. Empirical studies document specific daydream content themes reflecting underlying emotional needs, including cognitive rehearsal, goal-related fantasies, interpersonal conflict resolution, and hostility or vengeance scenarios (Bailey-Shaw, 2024; Somer, 2002). Immersive daydreaming characteristics such as vividness, complexity,

## **From Escape to Entrapment: A Correlational Study between Maladaptive Daydreaming, Emotional Regulation Difficulties, & Daydreaming Content**

emotional tone, and thematic content reflect areas where psychological needs feel unmet (Somer, 2002; Thomson, 2025).

Maladaptive daydreaming is an under-recognized phenomenon that functions as an avoidant emotional and behavioral coping pattern. Prior research links higher maladaptive daydreaming with emotion regulation difficulties, fantasy proneness, and impulse control problems, largely within highly distressed clinical samples and using global indices of dysregulation. Consequently, evidence remains limited in non-clinical populations and for maladaptive daydreaming as a continuous construct. Examining associations with specific emotion regulation difficulties is therefore significant, informing assessment, psychoeducation, and targeted CBT- or mindfulness-based interventions that reduce reliance on fantasy.

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Eli Somer in 2002 conducted a foundational study on Maladaptive Daydreaming: A Qualitative Inquiry and identified maladaptive daydreaming as extensive fantasy activity interfering with functioning. 6 Participants in trauma practice that were interviewed described using emotional regulation by disengaging from stress and pain via mood enhancement and seeking companionship and soothing. The study revealed that maladaptive daydreaming served emotional regulation functions as fantasies helped individuals disconnect from painful situations and transform misfortune into desirable experiences. Key themes in their fantasies included violence, idealized self, power and control, captivity, rescue, escape and sexual arousal. This established MD as maladaptive emotion regulation demonstrating how individuals with maladaptive use fantasy to manage emotional distress.

Building on this, Somer and Herscus (2017) in their study Childhood Trauma, Social Anxiety, Absorption and Fantasy Dependence: Two Potential Mediated Pathways to Maladaptive Daydreaming examined childhood trauma, social anxiety, absorption, and fantasy dependence as pathways to Maladaptive Daydreaming in a cross-sectional study with 315 university students. They found significant moderate correlations between Maladaptive daydreaming and childhood trauma ( $r= 0.24$ ) and social anxiety ( $r= 0.25$ ), and large effect size correlations with absorption ( $r= 0.64$ ). Their model explained 65% of their maladaptive daydreaming variance via absorption ( $r= 0.64$ ) and fantasy addiction. This study supports the hypothesis that MD is associated with emotional regulation difficulties through maladaptive coping mechanisms like absorption and fantasy dependence.

Chirico, I., *et al.*, (2022) in their work Maladaptive Daydreaming and its Relationship with Psychopathological Symptoms, Emotional Regulation, and Problematic Social Networking Sites Use: A Network Analysis Approach studied on 531 young adults (297 MDers vs. 234 non-MDers). They found that MDers showed significantly higher score in all psychopathological variables except cognitive reappraisal compared to non-MDers. Network analysis revealed that among MDers, neither cognitive reappraisal nor expressive suppression connected through obsessive-compulsive symptoms between psychopathological symptoms and MD-interference with life. Test showed significantly different network structure between MDers and non-MDers ( $M= 0.24$ ),  $P= 0.01$ ). Independent t-tests showed significant difference between groups on expressive suppression and other variables (all  $p < 0.01$ ). These findings reinforce that MD is linked to deficits in effective emotional regulation strategies and increased psychopathology.

## From Escape to Entrapment: A Correlational Study between Maladaptive Daydreaming, Emotional Regulation Difficulties, & Daydreaming Content

Musetti, A, *et al.*, (2023) published: Longitudinal associations between maladaptive daydreaming and psychological distress during COVID-19 health crisis. In this they studied 814 participants over 13 months. The study demonstrated high MD stability over time ( $r=0.68$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and positive cross-lagged pathway from MD to psychological distress. MD at T1 predicated increased stress ( $\beta = 0.07$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) at T2. The model explained 49.9% of MD variance and 69.2% of depression variance. This longitudinal study supports the prediction that higher the MD levels are associated with escalating emotional regulation difficulties and psychological dysfunction over time.

Khan & Salman (2024) in their paper Media related Maladaptive Daydreaming, Emotional regulation and psychological Distress in University Students studies 156 university students. They found that there was a positive correlation between MD and both cognitive reappraisal ( $r=0.31$ ) and expressive suppression ( $r=0.21$ ), as well as psychological distress ( $r=0.26$ ). Their regression models further confirmed that MD predicted distress. This study confirms that MD associates with greater use of maladaptive emotion regulation strategies and elevated psychological distress.

Mancinelli *et al.*, (2024) published Maladaptive daydreaming as emotional regulation strategy: exploring the association with emotional regulation, psychological symptoms, and negative problem-solving orientation and in it they studied over 252 MDers aged 18-70 years. They identified that MD positively correlated with difficulties in pursuing goals under negative emotions ( $r = 0.32$ ) and reduced trust in emotional regulation strategies ( $r=0.27$ ), alongside negative correlations with depression, anxiety, and negative problem-solving through its role as emotion regulation strategy, although potentially maladaptive.

Reddy *et al.*, (2024) Lost Inside My Head- An Exploratory Study on The Effect of Daydreaming on Emotion Regulation and Fantasy Proneness in Indian student sample of 109 students and found significant differences between maladaptive daydreamers and normal daydreamers in emotional regulation difficulties ( $t(105) = 3.18$ ,  $p=0.002$ ) and fantasy proneness ( $t(106) = -4.64$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Maladaptive daydreaming showed pronounced deficits in non-acceptance of emotional responses, goal-directed behavior under distress, impulse control, and access to emotional regulation strategies, offering cross-cultural validation of MD's impact on emotional regulation.

Bailey-Shaw (2024) in her thesis An Exploration of the Content and Functions of Absorptive Daydreams presented a cross-sectional online survey study involving 385 English-speaking adults. Participants were put into the category of: Suspected Maladaptive daydreamers, Immersive Daydreamers and Conventional Daydreamer. She developed Immersive Daydreaming Content Questionnaire (IDCQ), designed to assess the specific themes present in absorptive daydreaming. She identified five content themes, with 'Reframing, Rehearsal and Realization of Dreams' being the most common and 'Hostility and Vengeance' the least. The MD group reported significantly higher frequencies across all content themes (all  $p, 0.001$ ). Absorptive daydreaming was found to be significantly more socially rewarding than conventional daydreaming, with the MD group experiencing the Highest social rewards ( $F=80.73$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.32$ ) especially admiration ( $F=55.33$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.28$ ). The MD group also has a significantly lower sense of self, including self-understanding ( $F=15.34$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and heightened feelings of tenuous existence ( $F=10.53$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Both MD and ID groups showed greater emotional stress vulnerability ( $F=37.38$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and more negative attitudes towards uncertainty ( $F=37.32$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

## From Escape to Entrapment: A Correlational Study between Maladaptive Daydreaming, Emotional Regulation Difficulties, & Daydreaming Content

Multinomial regression accurately classified 74.3% of participants ( $\chi^2 = 160.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with predictors of MD including content related to hostility/vengeance (OR = 1.38), speculative fictional worlds (OR = 1.36), and being the center of attention (OR = 1.31). This approach supports the view that daydreaming behaviors vary in adaptiveness, with MD representing more dysfunctional daydreaming is often associated with emotion regulation difficulties.

In recent study, Somer, *et al.*, (2025) Maladaptive Daydreaming and Psychopathology: A Meta- Analysis studied on 24,977 individuals across 40 independent studies. They found that there was a consistent positive association between MD and emotion regulation difficulties ( $r = 0.365$ ), negative affect, psychological distress, and lower self-efficacy and self-esteem. The robustness of these effects strengthens the empirical foundation for conceptualizing MD as intertwined with emotional regulation difficulties and psychopathology.

Together, these studies establish maladaptive daydreaming as a contributor to emotional regulation difficulties across populations and methodologies.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### *Hypotheses*

- H0: There is no significant relationship between maladaptive daydreaming severity and overall emotional regulation difficulties.
- H1: Higher maladaptive daydreaming is associated with overall emotional regulation difficulties.
- H2: Higher maladaptive daydreaming is associated with increased emotional suppression.
- H3: Higher maladaptive daydreaming is associated with greater impulse control difficulties.
- H4: Higher maladaptive daydreaming is associated with limited access to emotional regulation strategies.
- Exploratory Component: Percentage distribution of immersive daydreaming content using the IDCC.

#### *Objectives*

1. To establish the relationship between maladaptive daydreaming and emotional regulation.
2. To assess how emotional regulation difficulties increase with MD severity.
3. To identify common themes and reasons for daydreaming.
4. To contribute to theory and practice regarding MD and emotional regulation.

#### *Sample*

The sample comprised 95 individuals aged 18–30 years residing primarily in Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities. Convenience and snowball sampling were used.

#### *Research design*

A convergent parallel mixed-methods correlational cross-sectional design was used.

#### *Statistical analysis*

Data were analyzed using JAMOVI. Spearman correlation coefficients were used.

## From Escape to Entrapment: A Correlational Study between Maladaptive Daydreaming, Emotional Regulation Difficulties, & Daydreaming Content

### *Variables*

- **Predictor Variables**

1. Maladaptive Daydreaming [(MD) as a continuous variable]

- **Criterion Variables**

1. Difficulties in Emotional Regulation Strategies
2. Emotion Suppression
3. Impulse Control Difficulties
4. Limited Accesses to Emotion Regulation Strategies

### *Instruments*

Four measures were used in this study,

1. **Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale-16 (MDS-16):** The Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale-16 (MDS-16), developed by Dr. Eli Somer et al. in 2016, is a 16-item self-report scale measuring intensity and frequency of MD in clinical and non-clinical populations. Each item is rated on a 10- point Likert scale from 0% to 100% (scored as 0-100), the average score of items provides a total score. A cutoff average score of  $\geq 40$  indicates clinical maladaptive while, scores  $< 40$  are considered non-clinical. Psychometrically, the scale demonstrates excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.95$ ). The MDS-16 has been validated across multiple populations (Sándor *et al.*, 2020; Somer *et al.*, 2016).
2. **Immersive Daydreaming Content Checklist (IDCC):** The Immersive Daydreaming Content Checklist (IDCC) was constructed by Dr. Nirit Soffer-Dudek and Dr. Eli Somer in 2018. It is a self-reporting. The scale consists of 4 items measuring source of inspirations for daydreams, structure/repetition of dreams, functions of daydreaming, and themes of dreams accordingly. Responses included yes/no rating on selection of the given responses resulted in a score of 1. Based on that an overall score out of the total number of responses for the given items was recorded. The scale is validated for use for research purposes.
3. **Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale-16 (DERS-16):** Created by Bjureberg and Gratz (2016) with collaborators, the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale- 16 item measure is derived from the extended 36- items version (DERS-36) the scale is divided into 5 dimensions. The 5 dimensions are namely:
  - *Nonacceptance of Emotional Responses*
  - *Difficulties Engaging in Goal-Directed Behavior*
  - *Impulse Control Difficulties*
  - *Limited Access to Emotion Regulation Strategies*
  - *Lack of Emotional Clarity*

All dimensions were calculated and correlate over all difficulties in emotional regulation. Two dimensions specifically correlated differently are: Impulse Control Difficulties, and Limited Access to Emotional Regulation Strategies. Items are rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always), with higher scores indicating greater difficulties. The English version of the DERS-16 was developed and validated through psychometric analyses of the original DERS-36, demonstrating strong internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha of 0.92-0.94 (Bjureberge *et al.*, 2016; NovoPsych, 2025.).

4. **Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ):** The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ), created by Gross and John (2003), is a 10- item self-report scale measuring two primary emotion regulation strategies: cognitive reappraisal (6

## From Escape to Entrapment: A Correlational Study between Maladaptive Daydreaming, Emotional Regulation Difficulties, & Daydreaming Content

items) and expressive suppression (4 items). Items are scored on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The ERQ demonstrates acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha  $\alpha$  reported around 0.73. (Gross & John, 2003; Preece, Becerra, Robinson, & Gross, 2019).

### **Procedure**

An online survey through Google form was circulated. The data was collected through convenient and snowballing methods. The form first explained the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of the responses. The participants then filled a consent form and few demographic questions. This was followed by the psychological scales namely Immersive Daydreaming Content Checklist (IDCC), Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale-16 (MDS-16), Emotion Regulation Scale-10 (ERQ-10) and Difficulties in Emotional Regulation Strategies-16 (DERS-16) respectively. The data collected was then processed and correlational was established.

### **Data Collection**

Participants were recruited online through social media platforms, educational institutions and workplaces.

## RESULTS

**Table 1 Correlation between Maladaptive Daydreaming and Overall Difficulties in Emotional Regulation Strategies**

Spearman's Roh	df value	p-value
0.37***	93	<.001

\* Note.  $N = 95$ . Spearman's rho was used for all correlations. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

The results indicate a significant correlation between maladaptive daydreaming and overall/global difficulties in emotional regulation strategies. Specifically, the Spearman's roh value of 0.37 ( $p < .001$ ,  $df = 93$ ) demonstrates a positive association. These findings reject the null hypothesis and accepts the alternative hypothesis that maladaptive daydreaming is related to emotional regulation difficulties in the sample

**Table 2 Correlation between Maladaptive Daydreaming and Emotion Suppression**

Spearman's Roh	df value	p-value
0.07	93	0.52

\*Note.  $N = 95$ . Spearman's rho was used for all correlations. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

The results indicate a non-significant correlation between maladaptive daydreaming and emotion suppression. Specifically, the Spearman's roh value of 0.07 ( $p = 0.52$ ,  $df = 93$ ) demonstrates a very weak positive association that does not reach statistical significance. Therefore, the hypothesis proposing a positive correlation between maladaptive daydreaming and emotion suppression is not supported by these findings.

**Table 3 Correlation between Maladaptive Daydreaming and Impulse Control Difficulties**

Spearman's Roh	df value	p-value
0.25*	93	0.01

\* Note.  $N = 95$ . Spearman's rho was used for all correlations. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

## From Escape to Entrapment: A Correlational Study between Maladaptive Daydreaming, Emotional Regulation Difficulties, & Daydreaming Content

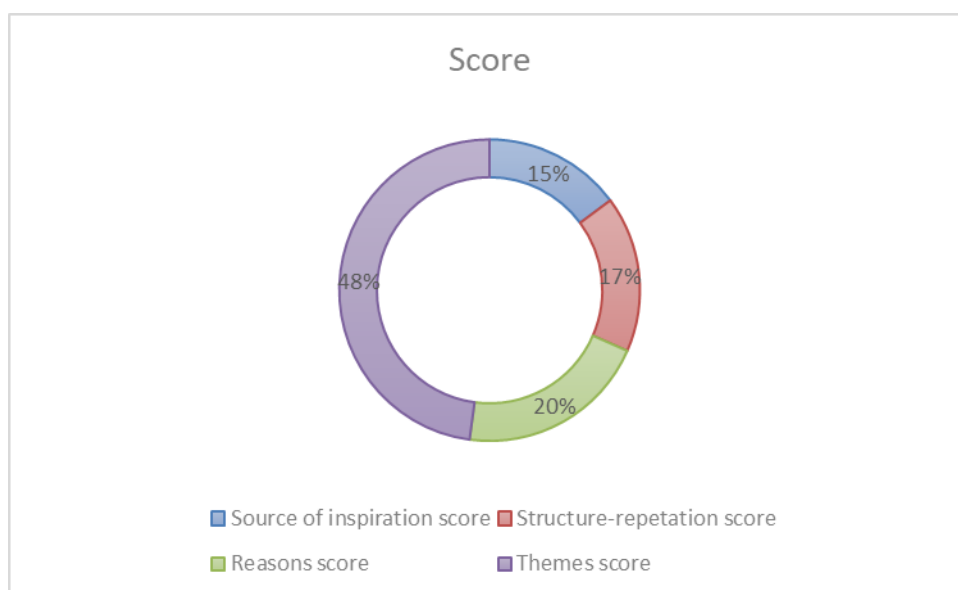
The results indicate a significant correlation between maladaptive daydreaming and impulse control difficulties. Specifically, the Spearman's rho value of 0.25 ( $p = 0.014$ ,  $df = 93$ ) demonstrates a positive association. These findings support the hypothesis that maladaptive daydreaming is positively correlated with impulse control challenges in the sample.

**Table 4 Correlation between Maladaptive Daydreaming and Limited Accesses to Emotion Regulation Strategies**

Spearman's Roh	df value	p-value
0.37***	93	<.001

Note.  $N = 95$ . Spearman's rho was used for all correlations. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

The results indicate a significant correlation between maladaptive daydreaming and limited accesses to emotion regulation strategies. Specifically, the Spearman's rho value of 0.37 ( $p < .001$ ,  $df = 93$ ) demonstrates a positive association. These findings support the hypothesis that maladaptive daydreaming is associated with limited accesses to emotion regulation strategies within in this sample.



**Figure 1. Percentage of immersive daydreaming content in the sample.**

\* Note.  $N = 95$ . Content was assessed using the Immersive Daydreaming Content Checklist (IDCC).

The chart indicates the percentages reported by the participants for the content of the daydreams. 48% percentage reported themes of the dreams, 20% reported reasons for daydreaming, 17% reported structure-repetition of the daydreams, and 15% reported the sources of inspiration of the daydreams.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined the relationship between maladaptive daydreaming (MD) and emotion regulation difficulties among 95 Indian adults aged 18–30 from Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities. The findings showed a moderate positive correlation between MD severity and overall difficulties in emotion regulation (Spearman's  $\rho = 0.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that higher MD is associated with greater global problems in understanding, accepting, and managing emotions. MD also showed significant positive correlations with impulse control difficulties

## From Escape to Entrapment: A Correlational Study between Maladaptive Daydreaming, Emotional Regulation Difficulties, & Daydreaming Content

( $\rho = 0.25$ ,  $p = .01$ ) and limited access to emotion regulation strategies ( $\rho = 0.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In contrast, the association between MD and emotion suppression was small and non-significant ( $\rho = 0.07$ ,  $p = .52$ ). Together, these results support the hypothesis that MD is linked to specific dimensions of emotion regulation difficulties, impulse control and perceived lack of effective strategies rather than to suppression of emotional expression.

The significant correlation between MD and global emotion regulation difficulties is consistent with previous work that conceptualizes MD as a maladaptive coping mechanism used to manage distressing affect and unmet emotional needs (Somer, 2002; Somer *et al.*, 2025). Studies have reported that individuals with higher MD tend to show greater difficulties in accepting their emotions, staying goal focused when distressed, and maintaining a coherent sense of self (Reddy *et al.*, 2024; Mancinelli *et al.*, 2024). Results extend these findings to an Indian, predominantly non clinical young adult sample and show that, even when MD is treated as a continuous variable rather than a categorical clinical condition, higher MD scores are meaningfully associated with broader emotion dysregulation (Somer *et al.*, 2025). This supports the view that MD is not only a rare extreme phenomenon but also a dimensional vulnerability factor for emotional difficulties in everyday populations (Somer, 2016).

The pattern of associations at the subscale level is particularly informative. The positive correlation between MD and impulse control difficulties suggests that, as MD severity increases, individuals find it harder to inhibit urges and stay in control of their behavior when experiencing negative emotions (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). In practical terms, this may manifest as difficulty "switching off" daydreams once they start, continuing to fantasize instead of attending to academic tasks, social interactions, or work demands, especially under stress (Soffer-Dudek & Somer, 2018). This is highly compatible with descriptions of MD as compulsive or addictive, where individuals feel pulled into fantasy to escape uncomfortable internal states and struggle to terminate these episodes even when they recognize negative consequences (Somer, 2002).

Similarly, the significant association between MD and limited access to emotion regulation strategies indicates that individuals with higher MD perceive fewer effective ways to manage their emotions when upset (Bjureberg *et al.*, 2016). Rather than drawing on adaptive strategies such as problem solving, cognitive reappraisal, or seeking social support, they may rely on immersive fantasy as the "go to" method of coping (Gross, 1998). Over time, this can narrow their regulatory repertoire, reinforcing the belief that only daydreaming can provide relief, and thereby deepening both MD and emotion regulation difficulties (Mancinelli *et al.*, 2024).

In contrast, the non-significant correlation between MD and expressive suppression suggests that MD is not strongly related to the tendency to inhibit outward emotional expressions (Gross & John, 2003). This is important for theory. It indicates that MD is more closely tied to internal, experiential processes (such as intrusive fantasy, loss of control, and lack of perceived strategies) than to overt behavioral suppression (Gross, 1998). In terms of Gross's process model of emotion regulation, data imply that MD is less about suppressing emotional responses after they arise and more about using fantasy earlier in the emotion process to avoid or escape from distressing situations and feelings (Gross, 1998). Thus, MD may function as a predecessor focused, avoidant regulation strategy altering inner

## **From Escape to Entrapment: A Correlational Study between Maladaptive Daydreaming, Emotional Regulation Difficulties, & Daydreaming Content**

experience rather than external expression while still failing to resolve the underlying emotional problem (Gross, 1998).

The exploratory Immersive Daydreaming Content Checklist (IDCC) findings provide detail on the sources, structure, themes, and reasons for daydreaming in the sample, revealing how MD functions as structured emotional escape. Regarding sources of inspiration, participants most frequently reported real-life events, and fictional media like movies/TV as sources for immersive episodes. They were reported by 15% of the sample. This pattern suggests narrative cues rapidly pull individuals into fantasy, particularly under boredom or low arousal states.

On structure and repetition, 17% reported highly structured, repetitive plots with predictable sequences (e.g., recurring characters, fixed story arcs), also described more fluid, evolving narratives. The dominance of rigid, looped structures aligns with impulse control difficulties ( $p=0.25$ ), as compulsive repetition mirrors the "stuck" quality of MD once initiated, fantasies follow ingrained scripts difficult to interrupt, consuming hours daily and reinforcing avoidance of real tasks.

Themes were led by power/control, escape, and idealized relationships, with lower rates of violence was reported by 48% of the participants. Power fantasies (e.g., becoming influential leaders or invincible figures) directly counter limited strategy access ( $p=0.37$ ), offering insight when real-life options feel scarce especially relevant for Indian youth facing exam pressures or familial expectations. Escape themes reflect withdrawal from immediate stressors, while idealized relationships compensate for social isolation in urban India.

Finally, reasons/functions highlighted mood enhancement/soothing, companionship, and stress relief was reported by 20%. These self-reported motives confirm MD's emotion regulation role: fantasy provides rapid, private relief when adaptive strategies seem unavailable, but reliance narrows coping options over time. Collectively, IDCC patterns externally triggered, rigidly structured power/escape narratives serving affective soothing explain why MD correlates strongly with DERS subscales: it becomes a default "strategy" trapping users in avoidant cycles.

Clinically, psychoeducation reframing MD as dysregulated coping reduces shame, with DBT skills training targeting impulse control and strategy deficits plus mindfulness offering practical campus interventions. Limitations include urban convenience sampling, cross-sectional design, and self-report bias; future longitudinal trials with diverse Indian samples needed.

### **CONCLUSION**

Maladaptive daydreaming is positively associated with emotional regulation difficulties, impulse control problems, and limited access to adaptive strategies in Indian youth, but not with expressive suppression. Findings support MD as an avoidant emotion regulation strategy and highlight the need for targeted psychoeducational and therapeutic interventions.

### **REFERENCES**

Aldao, A., Nolen-Hoeksema, S., & Schweizer, S. (2010). Emotion-regulation strategies across psychopathology: A meta-analytic review. *Clinical psychology review, 30*(2), 217–237. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2009.11.004>

**From Escape to Entrapment: A Correlational Study between Maladaptive Daydreaming, Emotional Regulation Difficulties, & Daydreaming Content**

- Alenizi, M. M., Alenazi, S. D., Almushir, S., Alosaimi, A., Alqarni, A., Anjum, I., & Omair, A. (2020). Impact of Maladaptive Daydreaming on Grade Point Average (GPA) and the Association Between Maladaptive Daydreaming and Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). *Cureus*, 12(10), e10776. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.10776>
- Bacon, A., & Charlesford, J. (2018). Investigating the association between fantasy proneness and emotional distress: The mediating role of cognitive coping strategies. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 135, 157–165. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2018.07.017>
- Baeten, J. J., De Moor, J. M. H., Arias, M. A., Garssen, J., Ostafin, B., & Meijer, E. (2013). Mindfulness and sleep quality: Evaluating the link with a randomised controlled trial. *Journal of Sleep Research*, 22(3), 337–348. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jsr.12014>
- Bailey-Shaw, C. (2024). An exploration of the content and functions of absorptive daydreams. The University of Huddersfield.
- BECK A. T. (1964). Thinking And Depression. II. Theory and Therapy. *Archives of general psychiatry*, 10, 561–571. <https://doi.org/10.1001/archpsyc.1964.01720240015003>
- Bigelsen, J., Lehrfeld, J. M., Jopp, D. S., & Somer, E. (2016). Maladaptive daydreaming: Evidence for an under-researched mental health disorder. *Consciousness and cognition*, 42, 254–266. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2016.03.017>
- Bjureberg, J., Ljótsson, B., Tull, M. T., Hedman, E., Sahlin, H., Lundh, L. G., Bjärehed, J., DiLillo, D., Messman-Moore, T., Gumpert, C. H., & Gratz, K. L. (2016). Development and Validation of a Brief Version of the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale: The DERS-16. *Journal of psychopathology and behavioral assessment*, 38(2), 284–296. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10862-015-9514-x>
- Campbell-Sills, L., & Barlow, D. H. (2007). Incorporating Emotion Regulation into Conceptualizations and Treatments of Anxiety and Mood Disorders. In J. J. Gross (Ed.), *Handbook of Emotion Regulation* (pp. 542-559). New York: Guilford Press.
- Chirico, Ilaria & Volpato, Eleonora & Landi, Giulia & Bassi, Giulia & Mancinelli, Elisa & Gagliardini, Giulia & Gemignani, Micol & Gizzi, Giulia & Manari, Tommaso & Moretta, Tania & Rellini, Emanuela & Saltarelli, Beatrice & Mariani, Rachele & Musetti, Alessandro. (2022). Maladaptive Daydreaming and Its Relationship with Psychopathological Symptoms, Emotion Regulation, and Problematic Social Networking Sites Use: a Network Analysis Approach. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*. 22. [10.1007/s11469-022-00938-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-022-00938-3).
- Cloitre, Marylene & Miranda, Regina & Stovall-McClough, Chase & Han, Hyemee. (2005). Beyond PTSD: Emotion regulation and interpersonal problems as predictors of functional impairment in survivors of childhood abuse. *Behavior Therapy*. 36. 119-124. [10.1016/S0005-7894\(05\)80060-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0005-7894(05)80060-7).
- Desseilles, M., Dang-Vu, T. T., Sterpenich, V., & Schwartz, S. (2011). Cognitive and emotional processes during dreaming: a neuroimaging view. *Consciousness and cognition*, 20(4), 998–1008. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2010.10.005>
- Gross, J. J. (1998). The emerging field of emotion regulation: An integrative review. *Review of General Psychology*, 2(3), 271–299. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.2.3.271>
- Gross, J. J. (2015). Emotion regulation: Current status and future prospects. *Psychological inquiry*, 26(1), 1-26.
- Gross, J. J., & John, O. P. (2003). Individual differences in two emotion regulation processes: Implications for affect, relationships, and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(2), 348–362. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.85.2.348>
- Haynes, Rachael. (2020). The Differential Emotional Processing Theory of Maladaptive Daydreaming. [10.13140/RG.2.2.24432.89608](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.24432.89608).

## From Escape to Entrapment: A Correlational Study between Maladaptive Daydreaming, Emotional Regulation Difficulties, & Daydreaming Content

- Hobson, J. A., & McCarley, R. W. (1977). The brain as a dream state generator: An activation-synthesis hypothesis of the dream process. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 134 (12), 1335–1348. <https://doi.org/10.1176/ajp.134.12.1335>
- Kemper, T. D. (1992). Review of *Emotion and Adaptation*, by R. S. Lazarus. *Contemporary Sociology*, 21(4), 522–523. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2075902>
- Khan, Hina & Qazi, Fatima. (2024). Media related maladaptive daydreaming, emotional regulation and psychological distress in university students. 3. 809-821.
- Mancinelli, E., Spisto, S., Sukhija, V.J. et al. Maladaptive daydreaming as emotion regulation strategy: exploring the association with emotion regulation, psychological symptoms, and negative problem-solving orientation. *Curr Psychol* 43, 28578–28589 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-024-06487-3>
- Musetti, A., Soffer-Dudek, N., Imperato, C., Schimmenti, A., & Franceschini, C. (2023). Longitudinal associations between maladaptive daydreaming and psychological distress during the COVID-19 health crisis. *Journal of behavioral addictions*, 12(1), 288–294. <https://doi.org/10.1556/2006.2023.00001>
- Preece, D. A., Becerra, R., Robinson, K., & Gross, J. J. (2020). The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire: Psychometric Properties in General Community Samples. *Journal of personality assessment*, 102(3), 348–356. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223891.2018.1564319>
- Reddy, M. B., Ranjitha, S., Alwar, S. V., & Rajan, E. J. E. (2024). Lost inside my head: An exploratory study on the effect of daydreaming on emotion regulation and fantasy proneness. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12(4). DOI: 10.25215/1204.247
- Sándor, A., Männich, Á., & Molnár, J. (2020). Psychometric properties of the Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale in a sample of Hungarian daydreaming-prone individuals. *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, 9(3), 853–862. <https://doi.org/10.1556/2006.2020.00050>
- Schafer, J. O., Naumann, E., Holmes, E. A., Tuschen-Caffier, B., & Samson, A. C. (2017). Emotion regulation strategies in depressive and anxiety symptoms in youth: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 46(2), 261–276. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-016-0580-4>
- Soffer-Dudek, N., & Somer, E. (2018). Trapped in a daydream: Daily elevations in maladaptive daydreaming are associated with daily symptoms and negative emotion. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 9, 194. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2018.00194>
- Somer, E. (2002). Maladaptive daydreaming: A qualitative inquiry. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 32(2-3), 197–212. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1020597026919>
- Somer, E., & Herscu, O. (2017). Childhood trauma, social anxiety, absorption and fantasy dependence: Two potential mediated pathways to maladaptive daydreaming. *Journal of Addictive Behaviors, Therapy & Rehabilitation*, 6(4). <https://doi.org/10.4172/2324-9005.1000170>
- Somer, E., Herscu, O., Samara, M., & Abu-Rayya, H. M. (2025). Maladaptive Daydreaming and Psychopathology: A Meta-Analysis. *International journal of psychology: Journal international de psychologie*, 60(2), e70027. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.70027>
- Somer, E., Lehrfeld, J., Bigelsen, J., & Jopp, D. S. (2016). Development and validation of the Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS). *Consciousness and cognition*, 39, 77–91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2015.12.001>

**From Escape to Entrapment: A Correlational Study between Maladaptive Daydreaming, Emotional Regulation Difficulties, & Daydreaming Content**

***Acknowledgment***

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

***How to cite this article:*** Gaware, G. & Kakade, S. (2026). From Escape to Entrapment: A Correlational Study between Maladaptive Daydreaming, Emotional Regulation Difficulties, & Daydreaming Content. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 14(1), 1724-1736. DIP:18.01.174.20261401, DOI:10.25215/1401.174