HOME

Daydreaming Isn’t a Waste of Time: Scientists Reveal 7 Surprising Benefits for the Adult Brain

By bestfolkmedicine · 25/10/2026 · 11 min read



We encourage children to dream, imagine, and explore imaginary worlds. But somewhere along the way, adults are told to stop daydreaming and focus on reality. Now, neuroscience suggests that letting your mind wander may be more valuable than we once believed.

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When was the last time you allowed yourself to do absolutely nothing—except imagine?

Perhaps you pictured yourself living somewhere beautiful, achieving a lifelong dream, having a conversation that never happened, or experiencing a future that exists only in your imagination.

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For a few moments, the outside world disappeared.

You weren't sleeping. You weren't concentrating on a task. You were simply daydreaming.

Most adults dismiss these moments as wasted time, distractions, or signs of poor concentration.

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But researchers studying the human brain have discovered something fascinating.

Daydreaming isn't always a failure of attention. Under the right circumstances, it may support creativity, future planning, emotional well-being, and problem-solving.

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In fact, some of the brain's most interesting processes occur when our attention shifts away from the world around us and toward our internal thoughts.

However, not all daydreaming is beneficial. Scientists are discovering that what we imagine—and whether we can control our wandering thoughts—makes a significant difference.

Here are seven potential benefits of daydreaming that may change how you think about your imagination.

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1. Daydreaming May Make You More Creative

Have you ever struggled to solve a problem, stepped away for a while, and suddenly discovered the answer while showering or taking a walk?

That experience has a scientific explanation.

Psychologists call it *creative incubation*.

When we temporarily stop concentrating on a difficult problem, our minds may continue processing information and making connections in less deliberate ways.

What Scientists Discovered

In a 2012 study published in *Psychological Science*, researchers investigated whether allowing the mind to wander could improve creative problem-solving.

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Participants worked on tasks requiring them to think of unusual uses for ordinary objects.

Afterward, some completed a relatively undemanding activity that encouraged mind-wandering, while others rested or performed more demanding activities.

Participants who completed the undemanding activity showed greater improvement when returning to previously encountered creative problems.

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The findings suggested that mental wandering during simple activities may help the brain generate creative solutions.

The surprising benefit: Sometimes the best way to solve a problem is to stop concentrating on it for a while.

This doesn't mean daydreaming automatically increases intelligence or creativity, but it may create opportunities for fresh ideas.

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2. It May Help You Plan Your Future

Daydreaming isn't always about escaping reality.

Sometimes, it's about preparing for it.

Think about the last time you imagined changing careers, moving somewhere new, starting a business, or achieving a personal goal.

You may have mentally rehearsed conversations, explored possibilities, and considered what your future could look like.

Scientists refer to this ability as *prospection*—the mental representation of possible future events.

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What Research Reveals

A 2011 study published in *Consciousness and Cognition* examined the relationship between mind-wandering and future-oriented thinking.

Researchers found that spontaneous thoughts frequently focused on future events and personally meaningful goals.

In other words, the wandering mind often thinks about what comes next.

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This suggests that daydreaming may sometimes serve a useful planning function.

However, imagining success isn't the same as achieving it.

Research into motivation also suggests that unrealistic positive fantasies can become counterproductive when they replace practical preparation.

The surprising benefit: Constructive daydreaming may help us explore possibilities and anticipate challenges before making real-world decisions.

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3. Positive Daydreaming May Support Emotional Well-Being

Not every daydream involves winning the lottery or traveling to a tropical island.

Sometimes, we imagine reconnecting with someone we love, achieving something meaningful, or experiencing a peaceful moment.

These mental experiences can generate genuine emotional responses.

What Scientists Discovered

A 2016 investigation involving four studies and 1,081 participants examined different styles of daydreaming and their relationships with psychological well-being.

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Researchers identified an important distinction.

People who reported more *positive-constructive daydreaming* also tended to report greater positive emotions, personal growth, and a stronger sense of purpose.

However, daydreaming characterized by guilt, worry, or distress was associated with poorer emotional outcomes.

These findings were correlational, meaning they did not prove that positive daydreaming directly causes better mental health.

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Nevertheless, they suggest that the emotional content of our imagination matters.

The surprising benefit: Imagining meaningful, pleasant situations may contribute to positive emotional experiences, particularly when daydreaming is constructive rather than distressing.

4. Daydreaming May Strengthen Creative Problem-Solving

Creativity isn't limited to artists, musicians, or writers.

Everyday life requires creative thinking.

We use it when navigating relationships, finding solutions at work, managing family responsibilities, and adapting to unexpected challenges.

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Daydreaming may provide an opportunity to mentally explore alternative approaches.

For example, imagine having a disagreement with a colleague.

Later, while walking home, you replay the conversation and imagine responding differently.

You might discover a calmer way to explain yourself or realize that you misunderstood the other person's perspective.

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This doesn't guarantee that your imagined solution will work.

But mental exploration may expand the possibilities you consider.

Researchers studying mind-wandering have identified potential connections between spontaneous thought, creative thinking, and personally relevant problem-solving.

The surprising benefit: Allowing thoughts to move beyond immediate circumstances may help us consider solutions that are less obvious during focused thinking.

5. It Activates Brain Networks Involved in Memory and Imagination

One of neuroscience's most fascinating discoveries concerns what happens when we're not concentrating on an external task.

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The brain doesn't simply switch off.

Instead, several interconnected brain regions remain active.

One important system is known as the **default mode network**, or DMN.

This network includes regions involved in self-referential thinking, autobiographical memory, and imagining possible future experiences.

What Happens Inside the Brain?

When attention turns inward, the brain may draw on memories, personal knowledge, and past experiences to construct imagined scenarios.

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For example, picturing yourself on a beach you've never visited may involve combining memories of previous holidays, photographs, sounds, and emotions.

Your brain uses existing information to create a new mental experience.

Brain-imaging research also suggests that future-oriented planning involves interactions between the default mode network and systems associated with cognitive control.

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This helps explain why imagination can feel vivid and personally meaningful.

However, activating the default mode network is not inherently a health benefit. The network is involved in several forms of thought, including some associated with rumination.

The surprising benefit: Daydreaming engages neural systems involved in remembering the past, imagining the future, and constructing meaningful mental experiences.

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6. It May Help You Understand Yourself Better

As adults, we spend enormous amounts of time responding to external demands.

Work deadlines. Family responsibilities. Financial decisions. Notifications. Appointments.

There is often little opportunity to reflect on what we actually want.

Daydreaming may provide space for that reflection.

When the mind wanders toward personally meaningful subjects, it can bring our values, hopes, concerns, and priorities into awareness.

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For example, repeatedly imagining a different career may reveal dissatisfaction with your current work.

Thinking about spending more time with family might highlight what matters most to you.

Or imagining a new challenge could reveal an interest you've been ignoring.

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The 2016 research into daydreaming styles found that positive-constructive daydreaming was associated with personal growth and a stronger sense of purpose in life.

The findings don’t establish that daydreaming causes self-discovery, but they suggest a meaningful relationship between constructive imagination and psychological well-being.

The surprising benefit: Intentional reflection and constructive imagination may help adults better understand their goals, values, and emotional priorities.

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7. It May Provide a Pleasant Mental Escape From Everyday Pressure

Life can sometimes feel overwhelming.

A busy schedule, unresolved responsibilities, and constant stimulation can leave little room for quiet thought.

Positive daydreaming may offer a temporary opportunity to step away mentally from immediate demands.

Imagine sitting by a window and picturing a peaceful mountain landscape.

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Or remembering a favorite childhood holiday.

Or imagining a future moment when a difficult situation has improved.

These experiences may evoke comfort, hope, or relaxation.

But there is an important scientific distinction.

Pleasant, intentional imagination is not the same as uncontrolled mind-wandering.

Some studies have linked spontaneous mind-wandering—particularly when thoughts are negative or repetitive—with worse mood.

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Therefore, researchers do not consider all forms of daydreaming beneficial for emotional health.

Positive mental imagery may be enjoyable and emotionally supportive, but it should not be presented as a proven treatment for stress, anxiety, or depression.

The surprising benefit: Choosing to imagine pleasant or meaningful experiences may provide a brief emotional break, although the effects depend on the individual and the content of their thoughts.

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Why Do Children Daydream So Freely While Adults Often Stop?

Children naturally engage in imaginative play.

They invent characters, create imaginary worlds, and explore possibilities without worrying whether every idea is realistic.

As we grow older, our responsibilities increase.

We learn to prioritize efficiency, measurable results, and productivity.

Daydreaming can begin to feel like something we should avoid.

However, imagination remains an important part of adult cognition.

We use it when planning a holiday, preparing for an interview, anticipating a difficult conversation, or imagining what our lives might look like in five years.

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In reality, adults never completely stop imagining.

We simply become more selective about when we allow ourselves to do it.

And neuroscience suggests that this internal mental activity can sometimes serve valuable functions.

When Does Daydreaming Become Unhealthy?

Although constructive daydreaming may offer benefits, excessive fantasy can become problematic.

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Researchers distinguish ordinary imagination from a phenomenon called *maladaptive daydreaming*.

This involves intense, immersive fantasy that becomes difficult to control and may interfere with everyday responsibilities, relationships, sleep, or emotional well-being.

Some individuals spend hours absorbed in elaborate imaginary scenarios.

A 2025 meta-analysis involving 40 studies and nearly 25,000 participants found that maladaptive daydreaming was associated with higher levels of psychological distress, including depressive and anxiety symptoms.

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However, these findings do not prove that excessive daydreaming directly causes those conditions.

Maladaptive daydreaming is also not currently recognized as a separate diagnosis in major diagnostic manuals.

Warning Signs Worth Recognizing

Daydreaming may deserve attention when it:

- Regularly interferes with work or personal responsibilities.
- Becomes difficult to stop or control.
- Replaces important relationships and activities.
- Causes significant distress or guilt.
- Interferes with sleep or daily functioning.
- Feels more compelling than participating in real life.

If these experiences are causing distress, discussing them with a qualified mental health professional may help.

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The goal isn't to eliminate imagination.

It's to maintain a healthy relationship with it.

How to Make Daydreaming More Constructive

You don't need complicated techniques or expensive wellness programs to create space for imagination.

A few simple habits may help.

Take a Walk Without Constant Distractions

Walking in a familiar, safe environment may give your mind an opportunity to wander.

You don’t need to fill every moment with podcasts, phone calls, or social media.

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Allow Quiet Moments

Try spending a few minutes sitting comfortably without immediately reaching for your phone.

Notice where your thoughts naturally go.

Imagine Positive but Realistic Possibilities

Picture something meaningful you would like to experience or achieve.

Consider what it would feel like and what steps might bring it closer.

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Use Imagination to Explore Problems

When you’re stuck on a creative challenge, try taking a short break and doing something simple.

Return to the task afterward and see whether new ideas emerge.

Turn Dreams Into Small Actions

If you frequently imagine accomplishing something important, ask yourself what practical step you can take today.

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Imagination can inspire action, but meaningful change usually requires both.

The Science of Daydreaming: What We Know and What We Don’t

Research has changed the way psychologists understand spontaneous thought.

Instead of viewing every wandering thought as a failure of concentration, scientists increasingly recognize that mind-wandering has both potential costs and benefits.

Current evidence supports several important observations:

- Certain mind-wandering conditions can facilitate creative problem-solving.
- Spontaneous thoughts frequently involve personally relevant future plans.
- Positive-constructive daydreaming is associated with aspects of psychological well-being.
- Brain networks involved in memory and future thinking participate in internally directed thought.
- Unwanted or negative mind-wandering can impair attention and may be associated with psychological distress.

However, research does not establish that daydreaming prevents dementia, increases IQ, repairs brain cells, or treats mental illness.

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Many proposed benefits are based on associations or specific experimental tasks rather than long-term clinical outcomes.

Understanding these limitations is essential when interpreting the science.

Final Thoughts: Maybe Adults Need Permission to Dream Again

Somewhere between childhood and adulthood, many of us begin treating imagination as a luxury.

We become focused on deadlines, responsibilities, and practical decisions.

And when our minds drift toward imagined possibilities, we often rush to bring our attention back.

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But scientists have revealed that the wandering mind isn't always an unproductive mind.

Sometimes it's exploring possibilities.

Sometimes it's combining ideas.

Sometimes it's reflecting on personal goals, reconstructing memories, or imagining a better future.

Daydreaming isn’t necessarily wasted time. Under the right circumstances, it may be one of the ways our brains explore ideas beyond the limits of the present moment.

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The important distinction is whether imagination enriches real life or becomes a way of avoiding it.

So the next time you catch yourself staring out of a window, imagining something wonderful, don’t immediately assume you’re being unproductive.

Your brain may be exploring an idea worth paying attention to.

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Children are encouraged to use their imagination. Perhaps adults shouldn’t be so quick to abandon theirs.

Do you still daydream as an adult, or have responsibilities slowly pushed your imagination aside? Tell us in the comments—what do you find yourself dreaming about most?

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