

Fantasizing about your dream vacation could lead to poor decision-making

May 31 2012

Summer vacation time is upon us. If you have been saving up for your dream vacation for years, you may want to make sure your dream spot is still the best place to go. A new study has found that when we fantasize about such trips before they are possible, we tend to overlook the negatives – thus influencing our decision-making down the line.

"We were interested in the effects of positive fantasies – what happens when people imagine an idealized, best-case-scenario version of the future, compared to when they imagine a less idealized version," says Heather Kappes of New York University, author of the study published online this week in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. "This is one of the first papers to examine selective information acquisition at this early stage, before people are seriously considering a possibility."

Say, for example, that you would like to take a trip to Australia this year but think you are very unlikely to do so – you have no more [vacation time](#) left, cannot afford it, or would rather save up for a new car. But you still daydream about how nice it would be to see the Australian Outback and lie on the white sand beaches, perhaps without thinking about the long plane ride there or the poisonous animals. Those daydreams, Kappes says, have powerful effects.

To test those effects, Kappes and co-author Gabriele Oettingen asked people to imagine a particular future about one of three topics: wearing glamorous high-heeled shoes, making money in the stock market, or taking a vacation. To induce positive fantasies for each topic, the study

participants were prompted to think about how great it would be to do each activity. In the control condition, participants also imagined experiencing the future, but were prompted to think about the negatives as well, with questions like "Would it really be so great?" In both conditions, participants wrote down what they were thinking, for the researchers to ensure they were engaged in the imagery.

After that exercise, the researchers offered the participants a choice of different types of information. For example, participants could browse a website describing the positive and negative health consequences of wearing high heels, and researchers noted how much more time they spent reading about positive versus negative consequences. Or, they could choose which of five (fictitious) tripadvisor.com reviews they wanted to read, and researchers recorded whether they chose one that was more pro-trip (i.e., five stars) or con-trip (i.e., one star).

Kappes' team found that for each topic, imagining the idealized version made people prefer to learn about the pros rather than the cons of the future event. "These effects are pronounced when people are not seriously considering pursuing a given future," Kappes says.

The work has important implications for even the most deliberate of decision-makers. "When people are seriously considering implementing a decision like taking a trip, they often engage in careful deliberations about the pros versus cons," Kappes says. "Our work suggests that before getting to this point, positive fantasies might lead people to acquire biased information – to learn more about the pros rather than the cons. Thus, even if people deliberate very carefully on the information they've acquired, they could still make poor decisions."

People need to be aware of these effects to ensure that they acquire balanced information before it is time to make a decision, she says. The study also contributes to a larger body of research about the powerful

consequences of mental imagery – and shows that positive thinking may not always be best. "Although there are benefits to imagining a positive future, there are also drawbacks, and it's important to recognize them in order to most effectively pursue our goals."

More information: The paper "[Wishful Information Preference: Positive Fantasies Mimic the Effects of Intentions](#)" was published online on May 30, 2012, in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, a journal of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP).

Provided by Society for Personality and Social Psychology

Citation: Fantasizing about your dream vacation could lead to poor decision-making (2012, May 31) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-05-fantasizing-vacation-poor-decision-making.html>

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