

Daydreamers are also distracted by the world around them, new study finds

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Look! A seagull. I once dropped an ice-cream in Eastbourne. Now, where was I? Oh yes...

A new study published today (20 August 2013) has revealed that those prone to mind wandering are also more likely to be distracted by irrelevant external events.

In a series of experiments led by University of Sussex psychologist Dr Sophie Forster, subjects were asked to perform simple tasks such as identifying whether a letter flashed on a screen was an X or an N. Pictures that were completely irrelevant to the task ([cartoon characters](#)) were also flashed on the screen as external distractors.

In these tasks, people were typically slower to respond when presented with task-irrelevant external distractions (i.e. the cartoon character pictures). However, this effect was significantly greater among those who identified themselves as frequent mind-wanderers.

Dr Forster says: "Our study suggests that people who find it harder to ignore distracting things happening around them also find it harder to ignore their own irrelevant thoughts, and vice versa.

This was surprising as other mind-wandering researchers have suggested that people who spend more time focused on their internal thoughts might be less receptive to effects of distractions in the external environment. This doesn't seem to be the case."

She adds: "Mind wandering can be a very disruptive form of [distraction](#) that can negatively impact on whatever task we are doing. In fact, previous research has demonstrated that mind-wandering interferes even with fairly simple tasks. Prevention of mind-wandering can be particularly hard, as while a person may be able to simply remove themselves from many sources of external distraction (e.g., by moving to a quiet room), internally-generated distractions clearly cannot be escaped in this manner!"

The study introduces a [methodology](#) that can predict people's propensity to being distracted by both internal and external forms of distraction, which the researchers believe could be useful for the study of some clinical disorders. For example, current diagnostic checklists for Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) may mention symptoms such as being easily distracted without specifying whether the sources are internal or external.

Dr Forster says: "It's fascinating to study mind wandering because we don't yet understand its neurological significance – nor why some people

do it more than others. While it can be deeply frustrating for the mind wanderer – and those with them – that they can't keep focused on the task in hand, it's possible there may also be all kinds of benefits for creative or strategic thinking."

Dr Forster's paper, 'Distracted by your mind?: Individual differences in distractibility predict [mind wandering](#)', is published online in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*.

Provided by University of Sussex

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