

Put down devices, let your mind wander, study suggests

July 28 2022



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People consistently underestimate how much they would enjoy spending time alone with their own thoughts, without anything to distract them, according to research published by the American Psychological

Association.

"Humans have a striking ability to immerse themselves in their own thinking," said study lead author Aya Hatano, Ph.D., of Kyoto University in Japan. "Our research suggests that individuals have difficulty appreciating just how engaging thinking can be. That could explain why people prefer keeping themselves busy with devices and other distractions, rather than taking a moment for reflection and imagination in [daily life](#)."

The research was published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

In a series of six experiments with a total of 259 participants, the researchers compared people's predictions of how much they would enjoy simply sitting and thinking with their actual experience of doing so. In the first experiment, they asked people to predict how much they would enjoy sitting alone with their thoughts for 20 minutes, without being allowed to do anything distracting such as reading, walking around or looking at a smartphone. Afterward, participants reported how much they had enjoyed it.

The researchers found that people enjoyed spending time with their thoughts significantly more than they had predicted. This held true across variations of the experiment in which participants sat in a bare conference room or in a small, dark tented area with no [visual stimulation](#); variations in which the thinking period lasted for three minutes or for 20 minutes; and one variation in which the researchers asked people to report on their enjoyment midway through the task instead of after it was over. In every case, participants enjoyed thinking more than they had expected to.

In another experiment, the researchers compared one group of

participants' predictions of how much they would enjoy thinking with another group's predictions of how much they would enjoy checking the news on the internet. Again, the researchers found that people underestimated their enjoyment of thinking. The thinking group expected to enjoy the task significantly less than the news-checking group, but afterward, the two groups reported similar enjoyment levels.

These results are especially important in our modern era of information overload and constant access to distractions, according to study co-author Kou Murayama, Ph.D., of the University of Tübingen in Germany. "It's now extremely easy to 'kill time.' On the bus on your way to work, you can check your phone rather than immerse yourself in your internal free-floating thinking, because you predict thinking will be boring," he said. "However, if that prediction is inaccurate, you are missing an opportunity to positively engage yourself without relying on such stimulation."

That missed opportunity comes at a cost because previous studies have shown that spending time letting your mind wander has some benefits, according to the researchers. It can help people solve problems, enhance their creativity and even help them find meaning in life. "By actively avoiding thinking activities, people may miss these important benefits," Murayama said.

It is important to note that participants did not rate thinking as an extremely enjoyable task, but simply as more enjoyable than they thought it would be, according to Murayama. On average, participants' enjoyment level was around 3 to 4 on a 7-point scale. Future research should delve into which types of thinking are most enjoyable and motivating, according to Murayama. "Not all thinking is intrinsically rewarding, and in fact some people are prone to vicious cycles of negative thinking," he said.

Future research should also explore the reasons why people underestimate how much they will enjoy thinking, according to the researchers. The results also need to be replicated in more diverse populations than the current study, in which all participants were college students in Japan or the U.K.

More information: Thinking About Thinking: People Underestimate How Enjoyable and Engaging Just Waiting Is", *Journal of Experimental Psychology* (2022). doi.org/10.1037/xge0001255

Provided by American Psychological Association

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