Intervention program offers help for people suffering from maladaptive daydreaming

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An intervention program that includes mindfulness techniques, self-monitoring, and tools to enhance personal motivation offers help for people suffering from maladaptive daydreaming.

This pathological form of daydreaming leads sufferers to spend a large part of their waking hours daydreaming to an extent that impairs their daily functioning. The results of a new study by researchers from the University of Haifa were published in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*.

"Since this phenomenon has not yet been officially recognized as a disorder in the medical handbooks, sufferers often feel a sense of shame and guilt and find it difficult to find an effective therapy for their condition. We believe that the results of the new study, and the fact that it was published in a leading journal in the field of clinical psychology, will raise awareness of this phenomenon among professionals and thereby help many sufferers," explains Prof. Eli Somer of the University of Haifa, one of the authors of the study and the researcher who discovered and defined this daydreaming disorder in 2002.

Since then, other researchers have taken an interest in the phenomenon and joined the International Consortium for Maladaptive Daydreaming (ICMDR).

Maladaptive daydreaming is characterized by an extensive immersion in vivid fantasies featuring elaborate plots rich in characters and action. In later studies, Prof. Somer and his colleagues found that maladaptive daydreaming impairs social, family, and employment functions.

Researchers now estimate that around two percent of the population suffers from this condition. The phenomenon is based on an innate trait and is associated with adverse life circumstances such as childhood trauma. There is a link between maladaptive daydreaming and other disorders, such as ADHD and OCD.

Since maladaptive daydreaming has not yet received official recognition as a psychiatric disorder, physicians and therapists are often unaware of

the problem. Sufferers often find it hard to obtain a precise diagnosis and an appropriate therapeutic response.

The current Israeli study, led by Dr. Oren Herscu of the University of Haifa, under the supervision of Prof. Somer and in cooperation with Dr. Nirit Soffer-Dudek of Ben-Gurion University and Dr. Asaf Federman of Reichman University, marks a further step in the understanding of this condition and ways to treat it.

In the first part of the study, the researchers collected information about coping techniques among people suffering from the condition. Based on their findings, they developed an eight-week self-directed, Internet-based therapy program that included mindfulness meditation techniques that helped sufferers improve their non-judgmental awareness of their surroundings and bodies. Lastly, the participants were asked to regularly monitor the length of time they spend daily in fantasy.

Another essential component of the program was enhancing the participants' motivation to participate in daily exercises. Three-hundred-fifty-three individuals with high levels of maladaptive daydreaming were exposed to weekly online video and text lessons involving daily homework tasks.

The participants were divided into three groups: one completed the entire intervention program, the second was only exposed to mindfulness training, and the third group received no intervention and was asked to do their best to reduce their maladaptive daydreaming.

The study results showed a significant improvement in both treatment groups: a significant positive change was noted in 80 percent of the participants. The improvement occurred almost immediately among individuals who completed the entire program, while the process was more gradual among those who received the partial program.

However, the two groups showed equal significant gains at a six months follow-up. Around one-fourth of the participants who completed the entire intervention program showed completely recovered from the condition following eight weekly sessions; all their indices measuring daily functioning were normal.

An additional 40 percent significantly reduced the severity of their maladaptive daydreaming symptoms, substantially improved their daily functioning, and showed a reduction in ancillary symptoms, such as anxiety or depression, alongside a substantial rise in measures of well-being. The participants in the control group, who did not undergo any intervention, showed no improvements in any aspect, and their maladaptive daydreaming remained unchanged.

"This is the first study describing the development and efficacy of an intervention program for this under-researched condition. In the absence of any evidence-based therapy, our data offer real hope for those who suffer from the condition. The study's publication in the leading clinical journal of the American Psychological Association represents a milestone in raising professional awareness of the phenomenon and developing an evidence-based treatment for sufferers. We hope that this clinical trial will also move us closer to the inclusion of this disorder in the leading mental health handbooks, such as DSM and ICD," the researchers conclude.