

It's normal for your mind to wander. Here's how to maximize the benefits

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Credit: James Wheeler from Pexels

Have you ever found yourself thinking about loved ones during a boring meeting? Or going over the plot of a movie you recently watched during a drive to the supermarket?

This is the cognitive phenomenon known as "[mind wandering](#)". Research suggests it can account for [up to 50%](#) of our waking cognition (our [mental processes](#) when awake) in both [western and non-western societies](#).

So what can help make this time productive and beneficial?

Mind wandering is not daydreaming

Mind wandering is often used interchangeably with daydreaming. They are both considered types of inattention but are not the same thing.

Mind wandering is related to a primary task, such as reading a book, listening to a lecture, or attending a meeting. The mind [withdraws](#) from that task and focuses on internally generated, unrelated thoughts.

On the other hand, daydreaming does not involve a primary, active task. For example, daydreaming would be thinking about an ex-partner while traveling on a bus and gazing out the window. Or lying in bed and thinking about what it might be like to go on a holiday overseas.

If you were driving the bus or making the bed and your thoughts diverted from the primary task, this would be classed as mind wandering.

The benefits of mind wandering

Mind wandering is believed to play an important role in [generating new ideas](#), conclusions or insights (also known as "aha! moments"). This is because it can give your mind a break and free it up to think more creatively.

This type of creativity does not always have to be related to creative pursuits (such as writing a song or making an artwork). It could include a new way to approach a university or school assignment or a project at work.

Another benefit of mind wandering is relief from boredom, providing the opportunity to [mentally retreat](#) from a monotonous task.

For example, someone who does not enjoy washing dishes could think about their upcoming weekend plans while doing the chore. In this instance, mind wandering assists in "passing the time" during an uninteresting task.

Mind wandering also tends to be future-oriented. This can provide an opportunity to [reflect upon and plan](#) future goals, big or small. For example, what steps do I need to take to get a job after graduation? Or, what am I going to make for dinner tomorrow?

What are the risks?

Mind wandering is not always beneficial, however. It can mean you miss out on crucial information. For example, there could be disruptions in learning if a student engages in mind wandering during a lesson that covers exam details. Or an important building block for learning.

Some tasks also require a lot of concentration in order to be safe. If you're thinking about a recent argument with a partner while driving, you run the risk of having an accident.

That being said, it can be more difficult for some people to control their mind wandering. For example, mind wandering is [more prevalent](#) in people with ADHD.

What can you do to maximize the benefits?

There are several things you can do to maximize the benefits of mind wandering.

- **be aware:** awareness of mind wandering allows you to take note of and make use of any productive thoughts. Alternatively, if it is not a good time to mind wander it can help bring your attention back to the task at hand
- **context matters:** try to keep [mind](#) wandering to non-demanding tasks rather than demanding tasks. Otherwise, [mind wandering could be unproductive](#) or unsafe. For example, try think about that big presentation during a car wash rather than when driving to and from the car wash
- **content matters:** if possible, try to keep the content positive. Research [has found](#), keeping your thoughts more positive, specific and concrete (and less about "you"), is associated with better well-being. For example, thinking about tasks to meet upcoming work deadlines could be more productive than ruminating about how you felt stressed or failed to meet past deadlines.

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