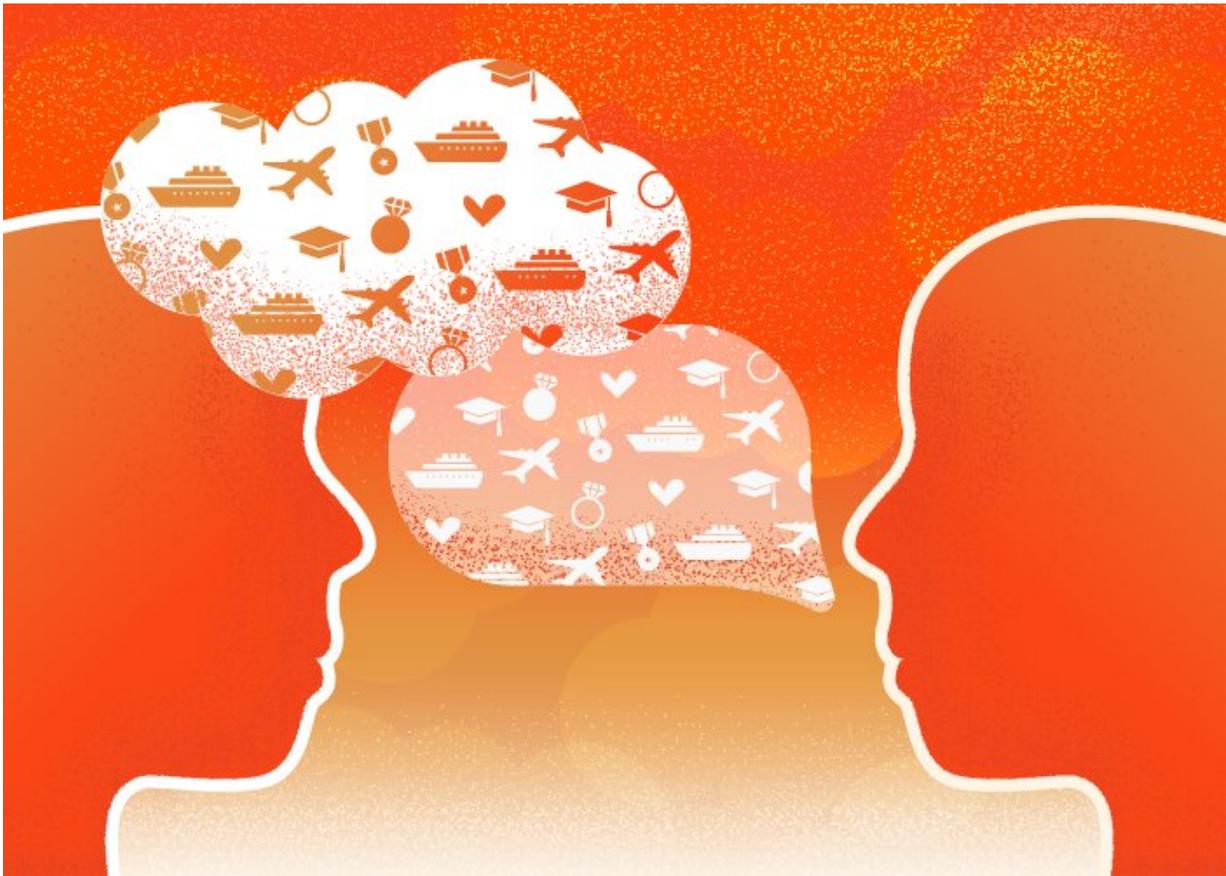


Why we're so bad at daydreaming, and how to fix it

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When prompted with topics that are pleasurable AND meaningful, participants enjoyed thinking more than when they could think about whatever they wanted.
Credit: Shannon Alexander/University of Florida

Did you daydream as a kid, maybe even get in trouble for it? If you find it harder to be pleasantly lost in your thoughts these days, you're not alone.

"This is part of our cognitive toolkit that's underdeveloped, and it's kind of sad," said Erin Westgate, Ph.D., a University of Florida psychology professor.

The ability to think for pleasure is important, and you can get better at it, Westgate says. The first step is recognizing that while it might look easy, daydreaming is surprisingly demanding.

"You have to be the actor, director, screenwriter and audience of a mental performance," she said. "Even though it looks like you're doing nothing, it's cognitively taxing."

Another obstacle revealed by Westgate's research: We don't intuitively understand how to think enjoyable thoughts.

"We're fairly clueless," she said. "We don't seem to know what to think about to have a positive experience."

Westgate wants to help people recapture that daydream state, which may boost wellness and even pain tolerance. In a study published today in the journal *Emotion*, Westgate and colleagues Timothy Wilson, Nicholas Buttrick and Rémy Furrer of the University of Virginia and Daniel Gilbert of Harvard University instructed participants to think meaningful thoughts. Westgate anticipated that this would guide the thinkers into a rewarding experience, but they actually found it less enjoyable than their unguided thoughts.

"I was so confused," she said. Then she took a look at the topics the participants reported thinking about.

"It was heavy stuff. It didn't seem to occur to them that they could use the time to enjoy their own thoughts."

When we're nudged to think for fun instead of meaning, we tend to default to superficial pleasures like eating [ice cream](#), which don't scratch the same itch as thoughts that are pleasant but also meaningful. But when Westgate provided participants with a list of examples that were both pleasant and meaningful, they enjoyed thinking 50% more than when they were instructed to think about whatever they wanted. That's knowledge you can harness in your [everyday life](#) by prompting yourself with topics you'd find rewarding to daydream about, like a pleasant memory, future accomplishment, or an event you're looking forward to, she says.

Daydreaming can be an antidote to boredom, which Westgate's work has shown can induce people to bully, troll and show sadistic behavior. In one experiment, participants opted to kill bugs with a coffee grinder to alleviate their ennui. (The bugs weren't actually hurt, but the participants didn't know that.) In another study, 67% of men and 25% of women preferred to give themselves an electric shock than be alone with their thoughts. Sure, our devices provide an endless stream of distraction, but in certain situations, electronic entertainment is unavailable or unsafe. ("If you're at a stoplight, I'd much rather you reflect on a nice picnic you once had than reach for your phone," Westgate said.)

Aside from its boredom-fighting abilities, thinking for pleasure can be its own reward. "It's something that sets us apart. It defines our humanity. It allows us to imagine new realities," Westgate said. "But that kind of thinking requires practice."

Here's how to master it.

- Trust that it's possible to have a good experience if you prime

your brain with topics you'll find pleasant. "This is something all of us can do once you have the concept. We give 4- and 5-year-olds these instructions, and it makes sense to them."

- That said, "This is hard for everybody. There's no good evidence that some types of people are simply better thinkers. I'm the world's worst person at this: I would definitely rather have the electric shock," Westgate said. "But knowing why it can be hard and what makes it easier really makes a difference. The encouraging part is we can all get better."
- Don't confuse planning things with thinking for pleasure. "People say they enjoy planning, but when we test it, they do not."
- Choose the right time to try. Research shows we're most likely to daydream when our minds are minimally occupied with something else, like showering or brushing our teeth. "The next time you're walking, instead of pulling out your phone, try it," Westgate says.

As you build your ability to daydream, you'll have a source of enjoyable thoughts at your disposal during stressful times, Westgate says.

"What we feel is a function of what we think. Thinking for pleasure can be a powerful tool to shape our emotions."

More information: Erin C. Westgate et al, What makes thinking for pleasure pleasurable?, *Emotion* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/emo0000941](https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000941)

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