



Short Communication

How daydreaming relates to life satisfaction, loneliness, and social support: The importance of gender and daydream content

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ABSTRACT

Daydreaming appears to have a complex relationship with life satisfaction and happiness. Here we demonstrate that the facets of daydreaming that predict life satisfaction differ between men and women (Study 1; $N = 421$), that the content of daydreams tends to be social others (Study 2; $N = 17,556$), and that who we daydream about influences the relation between daydreaming and happiness variables like life satisfaction, loneliness, and perceived social support (Study 3; $N = 361$). Specifically, daydreaming about people not close to us predicts more loneliness and less perceived social support, whereas daydreaming about close others predicts greater life satisfaction. Importantly, these patterns hold even when actual social network depth and breadth are statistically controlled, although these associations tend to be small in magnitude. Individual differences and the content of daydreams are thus important to consider when examining how happiness relates to spontaneous thoughts.

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1. Introduction

Both empirical evidence and everyday experience reveal we have a mind with a penchant for simulating alternative realities (Smallwood & Schooler, 2006). Almost everyone reports engaging in some form of daydreaming on a daily basis (96%; Singer & McRaven, 1961), with estimates of how much of our day is devoted to daydreaming ranging from 30% to 50% (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010; Klinger & Cox, 1987). Yet there is no consensus on the role of daydreaming in emotional well-being.

On the one hand, daydreaming provides a helpful means for escaping a banal existence. People commonly report deliberately launching into vivid daydreams to ease boredom at work, for example (Fisher, 1987; Singer, 1961). Daydreaming also alleviates emotional stress, conflict, and physical pain (Lang, 1995). In fact, individuals with a proclivity for daydreaming exhibit less physiological reactance to stressful events (Singer & Antrobus, 1972), and asking people to daydream results in a less acute stress response for those anticipating an electric shock compared to those without such instructions (Rowe, 1963). In medical patients, guided daydreaming reduces the need for pain medication and shortens hospital visits (Antall & Kresevic, 2004), as well as promotes greater overall well-being during recovery (Frick et al., 2008). Daydreaming has also been associated with other positive qualities that might promote happiness. Children with a disposition for internal musings exhibit more self-control and patience than children who have no such inclination (Singer, 1961), for example.

On the other hand, daydreaming may be a symptom of dissatisfaction with one's life. In fact, many clinical psychologists

