

The Business Brain

The meaning — and power — of a wandering mind

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What are you thinking about while you're reading this newspaper? If your attention is riveted to the page – intently focused on the death toll in Libya, or the rising price of grain in China – then you're likely to be much happier at this moment than a reader whose mind has wandered off to the Caribbean beach he'll be lounging on next week.

And if you're somehow aware that your mind has wandered off while you're idly scanning the text – and can draw associations between what you're reading and the fantasy you've escaped to – you're likely to be someone who can find unusual solutions to problems that no one else can solve.

Both facts are new research findings about daydreaming, a ubiquitous human pastime that, until recently, we didn't know much about. "Overall, people's minds wander about 47 per cent of the time, and there is variation according to activity. When you brush your teeth, it's about 60 per cent of the time, and when you're talking to someone else, it's 30 per cent," said Matt Killingsworth, a researcher at Harvard University who, along with psychology professor Daniel Gilbert, published a recent study on daydreaming in *Science* titled "A Wandering Mind is an Unhappy Mind."

The unhappiness part was news to me. Being able to escape the monotony of rote work was a gift, I thought, that brought pleasure and relief to the few who were talented enough sustain a rich imaginary life. I was wrong on two counts. First, daydreaming is hardly a rare activity if everyone's mind wanders during half their waking hours. And second, daydreaming – even when entertaining pleasurable fantasies – provides less satisfaction than focusing on the present. "Surprisingly, even people engaged in the least enjoyable activities were less happy when mind-wandering. You're better off focusing on what you're doing," said Mr. Killingsworth.

He and Dr. Gilbert discovered a negative relationship between happiness and daydreaming by sampling the moods and activities of 2,250 adults via an application on their iPhones. When their phones beeped, they had to describe how they were feeling (on a scale of 1 to 100), what they were doing, and what they were thinking about.

In 250,000 samples (that is, slices of data provided at a single moment in time), the researchers found that people's minds wandered a minimum of 30 per cent of the time for every activity they engaged in, except sex. "This suggests that daydreaming pervades human experience," said Mr. Killingsworth, and also implies that if we were more successful at controlling our thoughts we might have more control over our happiness, too.

That's not so easy, however.

And what if the goal is not a state of bliss but rather a solution to a tricky problem, or a novel mash-up of new ideas? Jonathan Schooler a psychology professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, along with colleagues at the University of British Columbia and Stanford, are about to publish several new studies that show a link between a certain style of daydreaming and creative problem-solving.

"On boring tasks, people regularly daydream within a minute or two. Much of the time we're not aware that we're daydreaming; we don't know where our thoughts are going," said Dr. Schooler. But being able to "self-catch" our thoughts while occupied with something else (as opposed to zoning out completely) gave people a performance advantage when solving a problem requiring creative synthesis. "Crucially, the population of mind-wanderers performed better than individuals who were on task," he wrote.

Essentially, doing a moderately demanding task while being vigilant about where your thoughts are wandering promotes creativity, said Dr. Schooler.

Applying this "daydream check" rule allowed me to fix a dead phone on my desk; while my mind wandered briefly to my recent holiday, I recalled with a flash how the hotel technician repaired a remote control device – and did the same to my phone. Voilà!

My technical epiphany underscores Dr. Schooler's second finding about the advantages of mind-wandering: There's an incubation effect – problem-solving improves after a small delay – during which our minds are otherwise occupied, though still checking in.

The moral of the story is that if you want your daydreams to be productive, then keep track of your thoughts. But if you want to be happy, then be here now.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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