Study titles

• Shared Challenges and Cooccurrence of Maladaptive Daydreaming and Autism Spectrum Disorder
• Immersive and Maladaptive Daydreaming and Divergent Thinking in Autism Spectrum Disorders

What were these studies about?

Researchers wanted to learn about the ways in which autistic adults think and daydream. They examined maladaptive daydreaming in people who have autism and those who do not. Daydreaming is called maladaptive when it interferes with a person’s daily tasks and causes distress. The study also looked at the possible relationship between daydreaming and one type of creativity called divergent thinking. Divergent thinking occurs when someone starts with one idea or problem and develops different and unusual solutions to it.

How was the research done?

The studies included more than 220 independent autistic adults in SPARK, and a comparison group of more than 540 adults who do not have autism. Study participants completed online questionnaires about topics such as daydreaming, loneliness, regulating emotions, repetitive behaviors, and divergent thinking. Autistic adults who believed that their daydreaming was maladaptive could be screened by telephone for the condition.

What did the researchers learn?

RESULTS OF MALADAPTIVE DAYDREAMING (MD) SYMPTOM SCREENING IN AUTISTIC ADULTS

| Probable MD | 43% |
| No MD       | 57% |

Probable MD indicates high score on screening tool, not an MD diagnosis.

• Forty-three percent of the autistic adults reported symptoms of maladaptive daydreaming. Maladaptive daydreaming has not been accepted as a psychiatric diagnosis, and research into it continues.

• Autistic participants who reported more problems with loneliness and regulating their emotions were more likely to have maladaptive daydreaming. This group also had more symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

• Adults with and without autism had similar levels of originality in their answers to one measure of divergent thinking. Divergent thinking is just one aspect of creativity.
• Divergent thinking was not related to daydreaming in autism.2
• Unlike study participants who do not have autism, some autistic people reported never daydreaming.2

What was new and innovative about the studies?
This was the first research exploring several aspects of intense daydreaming, and the link between daydreaming and creative thinking, in autistic adults who do not have guardians.

What do the findings mean?
The intensive daydreaming reported by almost half of the autistic adults suggests that they can have rich inner lives and imaginations, says Melina J. West, Ph.D., main author of both articles. That is noteworthy because earlier research has suggested that some autistic people struggle with imagination or creativity, she says.

What are people saying?
Study participants:
• “I enjoyed the prompts that asked me to come up with creative uses for common, everyday items and think of things that were round and noisy. I realized when giving responses that I always have people who can support me when I feel vulnerable or depressed.”
• “I think for some participants, the study should ask about past day-dreaming habits compared to recent day-dreaming habits (for example, my past habits were far more spontaneous and random when I was in grade-school, but are more controlled and guided as an adult, to the point that it’s morphed into a long-term story project I’m working on). Other than that, fairly well-designed and unique survey.”
• “It would be interesting to explore the differences in daydreaming between childhood and adulthood. How I daydream in adulthood is different than when I was younger.”

Study researcher Melina J. West, Ph.D.:
“There's a longstanding idea in research that people with autism struggle with imagination. Even some of the measures that we use to assess autism have items in them about deficits in imagination. That just didn't seem quite right to me, and there is other research that disputes that. My research shows that, actually, there can be really, really rich imaginations in some people with autism.”

What’s next?
West would like to see more research on daydreaming and creativity in autism. She says that researchers are studying potential behavioral and mindfulness treatments for maladaptive daydreaming.

References

About SPARK Research Match
This SPARK program matches participants with research studies that they may want to join. These studies have been evaluated for scientific merit and approved by a scientific committee at SPARK. The program is free to researchers and participants. SPARK does not endorse or conduct these studies. Participants choose if they want to take part in a particular study.

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