

A LINE ON LIFE

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Daydreaming — Land of Make-Believe *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Has your reading ever been interrupted by daydreams? Why do we daydream? What do we know about daydreaming?

In 1956, a psychological study was done to find out what college students daydream about. They found that most of their daydreams involved vocational success, sex and romance, money and possessions, achievement or physical attractiveness. Another study in 1958 found that students spend about one-fourth of lecture time daydreaming, mostly about sex. Essentially, daydreams tend to reflect areas of current interest or concern in a person's life.

Two of the most common daydream "plots" are the "*conquering hero*" and the "*suffering martyr*" themes. In the conquering hero fantasy, the daydreamer is a famous, rich or powerful person — a star, athlete, musician, famous surgeon, brilliant lawyer or magnificent lover. Themes like these seem to reflect needs for mastery and escape from the frustrations and compromises of everyday life.

Suffering martyr daydreams are built around feelings of being neglected, hurt or unappreciated by others. In suffering-martyr fantasies, some event occurs that causes others to regret their actions and realize what a wonderful person the daydreamer was all along. At one time or another, just about everyone has felt misunderstood and unappreciated. These feelings seem to underlie the suffering-martyr daydreams.

Are daydreams good or bad? In 1974, a psychologist found three patterns in fantasy — two negative and one positive. Some people find that their daydreams are *distracting*. They have difficulty concentrating, their mind wanders, and their daydreams often make them anxious. A second pattern is represented by the person who has very *negative daydreams* filled with unpleasant emotions, guilt, self-torment, fears of failure, hostility, aggression and self-doubt. These people definitely do not enjoy their daydreams.

Daydreaming typically serves a positive function.

Most people fall into the third category — the "*happy daydreamer*." They have pleasant daydreams and enjoy them, using them for self-amusement, future panning, problem solving and so on.

Daydreams serve many functions. They often fill a need for **stimulation**, when a person must perform a routine or monotonous task. They also improve the ability to delay immediate pleasures, so future goals can be achieved. Daydreams can help define future plans and aspirations by allowing the daydreamer to try out various roles, lifestyles and

occupations.

Fantasies often act as a substitute source of **gratification** at times of frustration or deprivation. For example, during World War II, psychologists studied 32 conscientious objectors, who all volunteered to go on a semi-starvation diet for six months. By the end of the twenty-fifth week, food dominated their thoughts, talk and daydreams. (The same thing occurs when I go on a diet!)

Daydreams can be a valuable **outlet for frustrated impulses**. If you have a momentary urge to kill that fool in front of you on the highway, substituting fantasy for action may avert disaster. Psychological studies in the laboratory confirm that releasing hostility through daydreams can reduce the impulse to behave aggressively.

Perhaps the greatest value of fantasy is its contribution to **creativity**. In your daydream, nothing is impossible — a quality allowing for a tremendous flexibility and fluency of thought.

So — daydreaming is generally associated with positive emotional adjustment, lower levels of overt aggression and greater mental flexibility or creativity. There are, of course, limits to everything. If you spend so many waking hours in a dream world that you are unable to do your work, you are no longer having daydreams — you are being *had* by your daydreams!

* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, 1983, West Publishers, pages 263-264.