

HEALTHY LIVING

Daydream believers

A wandering mind may improve your health

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Cox News Service

Our whole lives, we've been told to "focus," "concentrate" and "stay on task." If you're good at following those directions, chances are you've probably turned into a very responsible, perhaps even successful person. The downside is you might be stressed out, difficult and possibly a little bit dull.

But if you prefer to spend your free time getting lost in your own daydreams, you're probably relaxed, creative and perhaps just as successful as "Mr. Feet Planted Firmly on the Ground." And, as it turns out, having your head in the clouds might just be one of the healthiest things you can do for yourself.

Why we daydream

Dr. Avrum Geurin Weiss, a psychologist with Pine River Psychotherapy Associates in Atlanta, says that daydreams are very different from night dreams. It's the "difference between conscious and unconscious," he says.

Daydreams can briefly transport us from day-to-day living. "Daydreaming is more oriented toward the future, whereas most of our daily life is focused on the present," Weiss says. "You can think of daydreaming as balance. Being in the future is sometimes incredibly helpful."

In fact, Weiss even uses a daydreaming-type technique with his patients. "I consciously help people to daydream more," he says.

For instance, if a patient says, "I can't leave Atlanta. I can't quit my job. I can't do this ..." then Weiss asks him or her to peek into those daydreams. "Let's set aside those assumptions, and let's look at your fantasies," he'll say. The method often works. "I intentionally help people to imagine their lives differently."

Are our brains on snooze?

A study by Dartmouth College found that when we daydream, our brains not only are still quite active, they're processing pretty important stuff. The study combined both brain imaging and participants' own feedback to determine what exactly was happening in their minds when they daydreamed. The results showed that even if your brain is technically "at rest" when your mind wanders, there is activity in a default network of the brain.

But why do we wander at all? The researchers are just speculating, but they think that when we're faced with a mundane task, we daydream to remain aroused. Or, they say, daydreams could be a vehicle for bringing together experiences from a person's past or present to his or her future.

Imagining what the future can bring

And speaking of the future, it's not a bad place to be, if you've got the right imagination. Weiss says he believes that when people daydream and imagine possible futures, they can actually become happier.

"There's the old saying, 'What the mind can conceive, the body can achieve.' When you're daydreaming, you're helping yourself to believe that you can do it," he says.

He also thinks that all of this happiness and can-do attitude brought about by daydreaming has the power to relieve stress. And too much stress, as we've heard time and again, can affect every part of our bodies in a negative way. From our hearts to our brains to our immune systems, stress can do serious damage. So if daydreaming could save us from stress, it seems like it could help us physically, too.

"It's hard to see how it wouldn't," Weiss says.

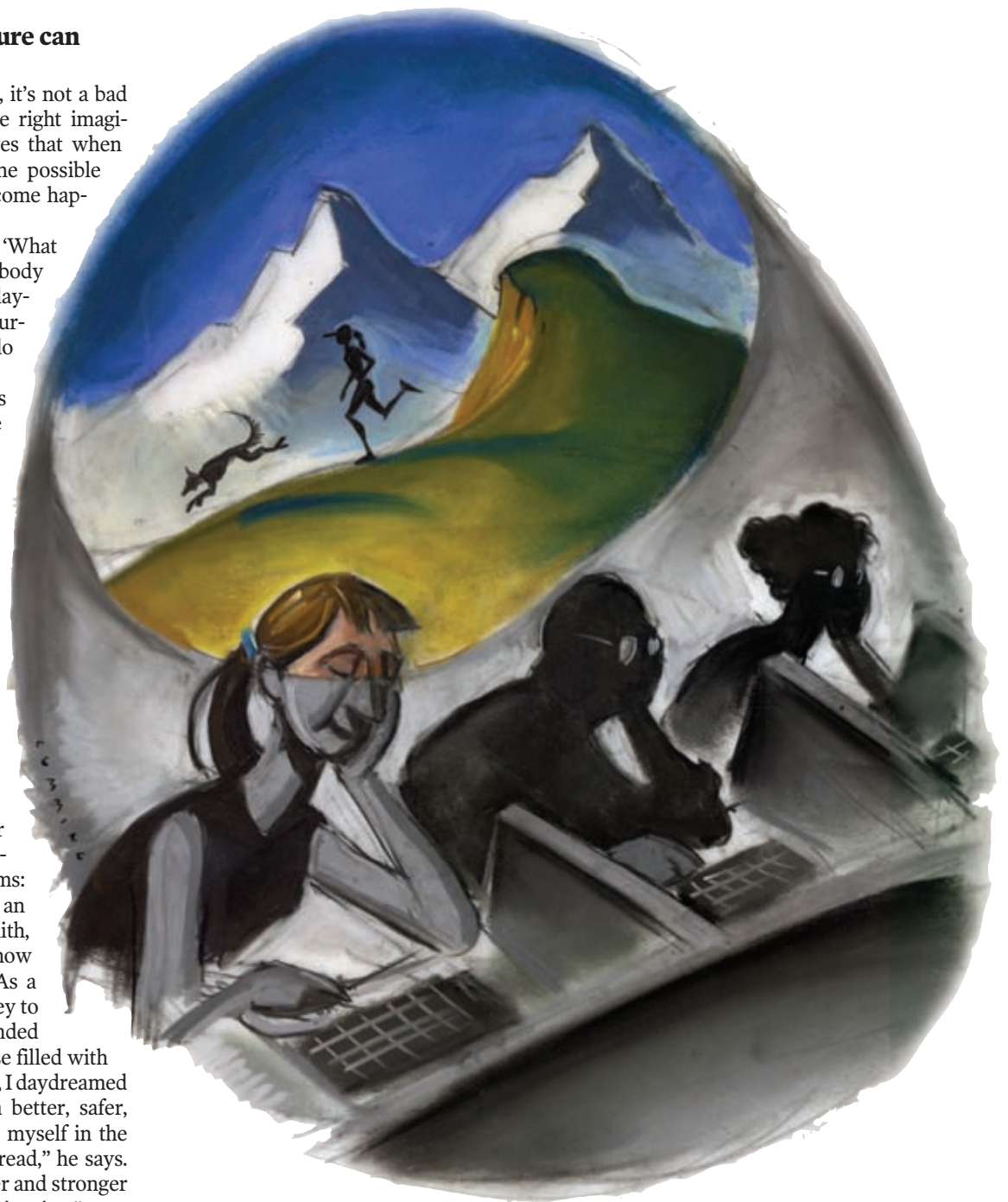
Bill Zimmerman, a former newspaper editor and author of "Doodles & Daydreams: Your Passport for Becoming an Escape Artist," (Gibbs Smith, \$14.95), knows firsthand how daydreaming can de-stress. As a child, daydreaming was the key to his survival, he says. "Surrounded at times by a background noise filled with family arguments or tragedies, I daydreamed as a young person to find a better, safer, happier world. I would place myself in the environments of the books I read," he says. "This always made me happier and stronger to cope with what I was experiencing."

Think up a different life

"In sports coaching, one of the things they do is to have you visualize," Weiss says. He says he believes this same type of visualization can help in all areas of your life. When you daydream about where you want to be in the future, "you're visualizing a different life for yourself," he says.

Zimmerman concurs.

"Everything is allowed in your daydreams," he says, "from thinking of a wonderful vacation you would like to take, to making an important discovery that will change the world, to meeting the love of your life, to imagining what it would be like



to have a conversation with your beloved pet, to taking revenge on a terrible boss who makes your life hell." (Of course, keep in mind that some daydreams are better left just like that — in your mind.)

Weiss says that those who daydream often can be great problem-solvers. He says that brainstorming is even a form of daydreaming: "In a creative setting, it's where people sit in a room to come up with ideas. And the only rule is that nobody can criticize any of the ideas."

"Most of the great advances in the world have essentially come from thinking outside the box," he says. It's no surprise then that Thomas Edison and Albert Einstein were both known to daydream (even though Einstein preferred to call his "thought experiments").

A time and a place

Just like ice cream, daydreaming can sometimes be too much of a good thing. If you're doing it so often that you're actually called a "daydreamer," then you're doing it too much, Weiss says. "Is this a person having trouble staying in the present and avoiding responsibilities that they're uncomfortable with?" he asks.

He says that when it comes to daydreaming, there's a time and a place. "It has a lot to do with what you're trying to do in the moment," he says. If you're trying to listen to someone, that's not a good time to daydream, for example. "Your math homework requires linear conscious skills," he says, so

daydreaming would definitely derail you from the task at hand.

Sometimes, our lifestyles in general make it hard to daydream. "I think that television and structured, passive forms of entertainment inhibit creativity in general, and daydreaming in particular," Weiss says.

Plus, constant worrying can stifle a good daydream. While Weiss says that it's normal to worry, we also have the ability to stop fretting and focus on good outcomes. He says you can even do this with a partner. "Take any particular piece of your life — your job, where you live, who your friends are, how you spend your free time — and imagine that piece is not fixed anymore," he says. "Imagine that piece could be anything at all — that you ... could live anywhere in the world. So, without inhibiting yourself with cost or logistics, where can you imagine living and what might it be like to live there?"

Hope is first step toward goal

As far as Zimmerman is concerned, every one of us could benefit from more daydreaming. "Daydreams provide hope; that is something essential for each of us who live in this harsh, wonderful world," he says.

But could they give us false hope? "Without hope, we could not survive spiritually," he says. "I believe that daydreaming is a necessary first step in making a dream come true. Maybe we can't make the whole dream come true, but we can make some of it real by hard work and compromise." ■

TRY THIS EXERCISE

This exercise from Braingle.com builds mental endurance and concentration:

Pick any small number (try 3) and start doubling it in your mind.

3, 6, 12, 24, 48, 96, 192, 384 ...

How far can you get?

Most people have a difficult time once they get past 10 doublings. Practice until you can get up to 20 (the 20th doubling of 3 is 3,145,728).

