

Allowing The Mind To Wander Is More Pleasant Than We Predict (M)



Most people dislike spending time alone thinking and predict it will be unpleasant.

People enjoy spending time alone with their thoughts much more than they predict, a study finds.

Even without the distractions of phone, TV or others, people find it surprisingly fun just to sit on their own thinking.

Indeed, people forced to sit on their own for 20 minutes doing nothing reported just as much enjoyment as those allowed to check the news on the internet.

Dr Aya Hatano, the study's first author, said:

"Humans have a striking ability to immerse themselves in their own thinking.

Our research suggests that individuals have difficulty appreciating just how engaging thinking can be.

That could explain why people prefer keeping themselves busy with devices and other distractions, rather than taking a moment for reflection and imagination in daily life."

The study included 259 people in six related experiments.

In the first of these, participants were asked to sit alone with their thoughts for 20 minutes without doing anything else, like looking at a device, walking around or reading.

The results showed that people enjoyed it more than they predicted.

In subsequent variations, participants were asked to sit in a small, dark tent and also in a bare conference room while the thinking time was varied from 3 to 20 minutes.

The findings were the same.

In the era of information overload, these results are particularly relevant, said Dr Kou Murayama, study co-author:

"It's now extremely easy to 'kill time.'

On the bus on your way to work, you can check your phone rather than immerse yourself in your internal free-floating thinking, because you predict thinking will be boring.

However, if that prediction is inaccurate, you are missing an opportunity to positively engage yourself without relying on such stimulation.”

Benefits of mind wandering

We tend to think of time spent sitting doing nothing as time wasted.

But, this is not (always) so.

Studies have shown that mind wandering has [benefits including increasing creativity and helping people solve problems](#).

Dr Murayama said:

“By actively avoiding thinking activities, people may miss these important benefits.”

People in the study were not exactly overjoyed with their enforced thinking experiences: they rated it around the mid-point on a 7-point scale.

It is just that they thought it would be much worse than that.

Perhaps that is why a study has found that [people choose electric shocks over sitting quietly for 15 minutes and thinking](#).

Possible futures

However, it might depend on the exact type of thinking people are doing, said Dr Murayama:

“Not all thinking is intrinsically rewarding, and in fact some people are prone to vicious cycles of negative thinking.”

For example, [research finds](#) that when left to its own devices the mind almost always wanders to negative thoughts and brings us down.

Set against this, [directing the mind to wander](#) is a cognitive skill that can be beneficial in some contexts.

For example, it can allow us to mentally rehearse upcoming events, or solve problems we might encounter.

In other words, it allows the brain to work out possible futures for us.