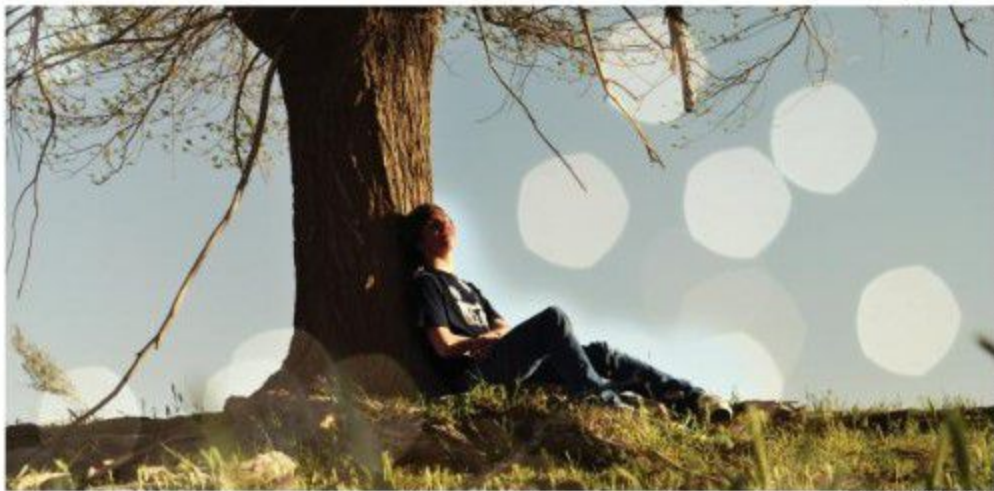


Mind wandering off in class? Daydreaming is good for you, says UBC professor



UBC neuroscientist Kalina Christoff says that the mind is more active during "mind-wandering" than problem-solving.

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Contributor

Daydreaming is often perceived as a waste of time or as a nonproductive experience of the lazy mind, but recent research has shown that it can actually be good for you.

Kalina Christoff, a cognitive neuroscientist who has taught at UBC for 10 years, said that daydreaming or "mind-wandering" can lead to a more creative and insightful mind. She was first intrigued by the idea during her undergraduate years in Bulgaria, when she was overseeing an experiment that required partici-

pants to "think aloud" to solve a problem, and she witnessed how their thoughts would drift from one thing to another.

According to Christoff, the brain is more active during "mind-wandering" than it is when trying to reason out a complex problem.

"What's interesting is that during mind-wandering, both the part of the brain involved with deliberate problem-solving [the pre-frontal cortex] and the part that is only triggered during rest, are activated," said Christoff. "The only other time this occurs is when people are thinking creatively."

Christoff said that one of the ways that "mind-wandering" has been studied so far in psychology is by giving someone an easy, mundane task and then waiting to see how their mind wanders away from the task. She called this "task-unrelated thinking."

Although such "mind-wandering" might delay a physical task from being done, Christoff said that it can still be linked to some grander life task such as survival or fulfilment.

"If you're stuck in a job you don't like, and you're given the task of completing an Excel

spreadsheet for example, your mind might keep wandering and it has nothing to do with the task at hand, but it's actually related to your global task to make yourself happy," said Christoff.

According to Christoff, what happens during "mind-wandering" is quite related to what happens during sleep. During sleep, the brain organizes our experiences and memories into meaningful connections and helps you arrive at new conclusions and remember things.

During "mind-wandering" you are not asleep, but your brain still builds connections that you would otherwise not make. The random nature of the thoughts allows us to make revelations and develop certain insights that we typically would not if we were thinking in a more deliberate fashion.

So why does our mind wander? Christoff said that it is an adaptive tendency, in that it allows us to be fluid and process different experiences so that we are not stagnant. The self-reflective properties help us make meaning and better understand both specific tasks and our lives overall.

"[Mind-wandering] allows us to map our own space of experiences and get to know our internal environment," she said. "We are better able to understand ourselves and the causal nature of the world because we can see the bigger picture." 