

Great Escape

Daydreaming isn't just zoning out. New research shows it can help you **ZOOM IN ON YOUR GOALS** and be more creative.

MAYBE YOU JUMPED a plane to Hawaii in the middle of rush hour. Or won Wimbledon while doing the dishes. Whatever your most recent daydream may have been, odds are you spent almost half your day with your mind somewhere else, according to a study done last year by Harvard researchers. Although you might have a hard time forgetting Sister Margaret's words "Idle hands are the devil's workshop," recent research shows that having your head in the clouds can improve your life on the ground—helping you solve problems, think creatively, and even plot your future.

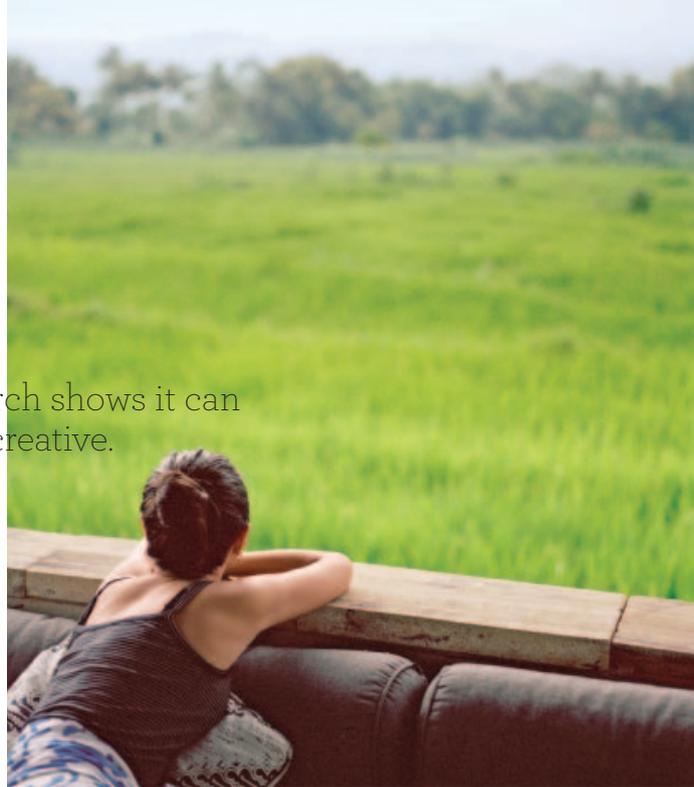
NOT SUCH A BLANK SLATE

What exactly is daydreaming? Neuroscientists define it as spontaneously thinking about something other than the task at hand, whether it's a fantasy getaway or the grocery list. Random mind-wandering, imagined conversations, and envisioned goals, plans, or strategies are all considered daydreaming. For decades, experts assumed that when we daydreamed, our brains were dormant. But in fact, "when you give people nothing to do but let their minds drift, certain

parts of the brain become even more active," says Jonathan Schooler, a psychology professor at the University of California—Santa Barbara. A 2009 study that Schooler worked on showed that when individuals were given fMRI scans (the kind that measures blood flow to the brain) during periods of mind-wandering, two pathways lit up: the so-called default network, the part of the brain associated with emotionally loaded thought, and the executive network, the region used to engage in focused mental activity. In other words, when we daydream, it's the rare time when our touchy-feely and task-master minds are both "on," and the combination can yield powerful results.

DAYDREAM ACHIEVER

Yes, many of our daydreams are pure flights of fancy, but the bulk of what we think about when our thoughts meander is practical. Several studies from the mid-1970s to the mid-'90s that sampled subjects' thoughts during the day found that the majority of an individual's daydreams were associated with daily life. "Daydreams serve a rehearsal function," says



Eric Klinger, a psychology professor emeritus at the University of Minnesota—Morris, who led many of the studies. "They remind you that you have to do this or that, or be somewhere at a certain time." That's where the executive side of the brain comes in, helping you hatch solutions to everyday issues (asking for a promotion) or figure out how to take action on bigger goals (starting a small business). And even when your mind roams into George-Clooney-in-the-tropics territory, it's worth paying attention. Klinger says that daydreams often reflect our real-life desires (such as more romance, or a vacation) even when they aren't literal representations of them.

THE CREATIVE SPARK

Many innovative geniuses, including Einstein and Mozart, were prolific daydreamers.

A study published this year in the journal *Neuroimage* showed that individuals with more active default networks (the part of the brain associated with daydreaming) scored higher on creativity tests. And multiple experiments have found that people are best able to solve a complex challenge once they've spent time away from it doing something that was only mildly demanding, thus giving them space to daydream. "By taking a break from the hyperfocused state, you're lighting up other areas of your brain," says Gaby Cora, a psychiatrist at the Florida Neuroscience Center in Miami. So when you're stumped, whether by writing a personal letter or by a complicated crafts project, she suggests doing something else that lets you daydream, such as going for a walk or weeding your garden. "When you come back, you'll feel more refreshed and focused."

DREAM ON: GREAT MOMENTS IN MIND-WANDERING

