



KWIEL SYNNATZSCHE/PLAINPICTURE



# Daydream believer

A wandering mind is not the enemy of concentration, if you know how to guide it, says **Caroline Williams**

**Y**OUR exams start in less than a month. Or there's that make-or-break meeting next week that you need to prepare for. But no matter how hard you try to focus, you just can't. The clock is ticking, but the sun is shining and, oh, is that a barbecue you can smell?

If losing concentration sometimes feels inevitable, that's because it is – your brain is hardwired to give in to distractions and take you away with the fairies. To make matters worse, science has long backed up the idea that a wandering mind is the enemy of productivity. Failing to focus has been linked to lack of success, unhappiness, stress and poor relationships. It's enough to make you give up and head for the beach you were just daydreaming about.

But don't. Recently, psychologists have been having a rethink. If we spend so much time in a state of reverie, they reason, it's probably not some psychological mistake. It turns out that there are several kinds of mind-wandering, and they don't all make you unhappy or unproductive. A wandering mind could even be a key weapon in your cognitive arsenal – if you know how to use it.

To master mind-wandering, you first need to understand what's happening in the brain when you try to pay attention. Broadly speaking, we have two attention systems that constantly keep track of what's going on around us. One, the bottom-up system, snaps our focus to anything that stimulates the senses: a loud noise, an email notification or someone tapping you on the shoulder. It may be annoying, but this ancient skill evolved for a reason – it's no good focusing well enough to knap the perfect spear tip if you get eaten by a lion before you can use it. Ignoring such disturbances is physically impossible, so the only way to stop them from hijacking an otherwise productive day is to shut them out: eliminate unpredictable noise, turn off email notifications, disconnect Wi-Fi.

Even these extreme measures won't stop the brain's goal-directed system from leading you astray. This helps you focus on the task at hand. It involves a constant tug of war between the executive control network, a set of brain areas responsible for goal-oriented thinking and controlling impulses, and the default mode network, which fires up when we think about nothing in particular. The default network uses this time to do various bits of housekeeping – sorting through memories, forward planning and filing new information, for instance – but it is also the brain region that is most active when we daydream. ➤

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