

Updates to Spiritual Intelligence

Chapter 1 Updates

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Depressed People Have Twice as Much Mind Wandering

A study published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders* has found that people living with major depressive disorder (MDD) experience mind wandering more than twice as often as those without depression. Not only is it more frequent, but those with MDD also report their mind wandering as being notably more negative in tone. This tendency to drift into unpleasant thoughts was especially pronounced in individuals who often felt low or were in a negative mood.

Mind wandering occurs when our focus shifts spontaneously away from the task at hand or our surroundings and drifts into inner thoughts or daydreams. This happens most commonly when we're doing routine tasks that don't demand much attention. While mind wandering can sometimes fuel creativity and problem-solving, excessive or uncontrolled mind wandering has been linked to negative effects like rumination, which is the repetitive focus on distressing thoughts, and difficulties with emotional regulation.

In people with depression, mind wandering often centers around regrets, fears, and worries, intensifying feelings of hopelessness. Research shows that individuals with depression experience both more frequent and less controllable mind wandering, which can exacerbate depressive symptoms. This mental pattern can overload the brain, making it harder to concentrate or be productive.

To deepen the understanding of mind wandering in MDD, lead researcher Matthew S. Welhaf and his team looked into its frequency and emotional tone in individuals' daily

lives, comparing it to that of people without depression. Unlike many studies that rely on structured scales or assessments, this research used a real-time experience sampling method, where participants reported their experiences several times a day, allowing for a more authentic, moment-to-moment capture of their mental states.

The study included 106 adults, all native English speakers under the age of 40. Half of the participants were diagnosed with MDD, and the other half served as healthy controls with no history of mental health conditions. Those with MDD had a slightly higher average age of 28 compared to 25 in the control group. About 70% of each group was female.

Each participant received a handheld electronic device with the Experience Sampling Program 4.0 installed. Over a span of 7–8 days, they received prompts eight times a day between 10 a.m. and 10 p.m., totaling up to 56 prompts. Participants were asked to respond if they were mind wandering at that moment and to rate their current emotions. The prompts also included a brief assessment of rumination.

The study found that those with MDD reported mind wandering in 37% of prompts, compared to 17% among the healthy controls. This substantial difference underlines how much more often people with depression experience mind wandering than their non-depressed counterparts. However, both groups were equally likely to think about past events during these episodes, so the timing of the thoughts didn't differ significantly.

Yet a critical distinction emerged in the tone of the thoughts. Among the MDD group, mind wandering carried a negative tone in 42% of cases, whereas only 10% of healthy participants reported negative tones during mind wandering. Individuals with depression were more likely to mind wander when they felt a higher negative mood and a lower positive mood. Interestingly, this link between mood and mind wandering did not appear in healthy individuals.

In MDD participants, mind wandering was predictive of later positive mood levels, which was not the case in the healthy group. This finding suggests that for those with depression, mind wandering can influence their future mood, particularly their positive mood, rather than the other way around. This dynamic implies that mind wandering might play a role in shaping mood patterns and highlights its potential as a therapeutic focus for improving mood regulation in depression.

In the words of the study authors, “Individuals with MDD frequently report engaging in mind wandering in everyday life, and this appears to be coupled with affect. Mind wandering may have maladaptive effects in MDD and could serve as a target for intervention.”

Reference: Welhaf, M. S., et al. (2024). Mind-wandering in daily life in depressed individuals: An experience sampling study. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 358, 134-142. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2024.06.015>

The Surprising Science of Sacred Gatherings

A landmark study involving over 200,000 people uncovered a striking pattern: those who regularly attended religious or spiritual services reported significantly higher levels of well-being—across nearly every measure we use to define a flourishing life.

Optimism. Gratitude. Purpose. Relationship quality. Altruism. The more often people attended, the more these qualities rose.

What’s fascinating is that this trend held true across cultures and continents. The uplift wasn’t limited to belief—it was tied to behavior. Simply showing up mattered. Being part of a gathering, again and again, created measurable shifts in people’s lives.

Interestingly, attendees also reported slightly more suffering and pain. But rather than undermining the results, this may reflect a greater willingness to be open, to be vulnerable, and to speak truthfully about their experience—qualities that are themselves signs of healing.

Whether rooted in formal religion or informal spirituality, these gatherings offer something many of us are missing in modern life: a sense of belonging, structure, and shared meaning. And as decades of research now show, these qualities are directly linked to longevity, resilience, and emotional health.

The sacred is not just a concept. It’s a practice.

References (APA Style):

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VanderWeele, T. J. (2024, July 18). *A surprising predictor of well-being*. Flourishing in Action. <https://www.flourishinginaction.org/blog/surprising-predictor-of-well-being>