## When the Mind Wanders, Happiness Also Strays By JOHN TIERNEY

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A quick experiment. Before proceeding to the next paragraph, let your mind wander wherever it wants to go. Close your eyes for a few seconds, starting ... now.



And now, welcome back for the hypothesis of our experiment: Wherever your mind went — the South Seas, your job, your lunch, your unpaid bills — that daydreaming is not likely to make you as happy as focusing intensely on the rest of this column will. I'm not sure I believe this prediction, but I can assure you it is based on an enormous amount of daydreaming cataloged in the current issue of <a href="Science">Science</a>. Using an <a href="https://example.com/iPhone">iPhone</a> app called <a href="trackyourhappiness">trackyourhappiness</a>, <a href="psychologists">psychologists</a> at Harvard contacted people around the world at random intervals to ask how they were feeling, what they were doing and what they were thinking.

The least surprising finding, based on a quarter-million responses from more than 2,200 people, was that the happiest people in the world were the ones in the midst of enjoying sex. Or at least they were enjoying it until the iPhone interrupted.

The researchers are not sure how many of them stopped to pick up the phone and how many waited until afterward to respond. Nor, unfortunately, is there any way to gauge what thoughts — happy, unhappy, murderous — went through their partners' minds when they tried to resume.

When asked to rate their feelings on a scale of 0 to 100, with 100 being "very good," the people having sex gave an average rating of 90. That was a good 15 points higher than the next-best activity, exercising, which was followed closely by conversation, listening to music, taking a walk, eating, praying and meditating, cooking, shopping, taking care of one's children and reading. Near the bottom of the list were personal grooming, commuting and working.

When asked their thoughts, the people in flagrante were models of concentration: only 10 percent of the time did their thoughts stray from their endeavors. But when people were doing anything else, their minds wandered at least 30 percent of the time, and as much as 65 percent of the time (recorded during moments of personal grooming, clearly a less than scintillating enterprise).

On average throughout all the quarter-million responses, minds were wandering 47 percent of the time. That figure surprised the researchers, <u>Matthew Killingsworth</u> and <u>Daniel Gilbert</u>.

"I find it kind of weird now to look down a crowded street and realize that half the people aren't really there," Dr. Gilbert says.

You might suppose that if people's minds wander while they're having fun, then those stray thoughts are liable to be about something pleasant — and that was indeed the case with those happy campers having sex. But for the other 99.5 percent of the people, there was no correlation between the joy of the activity and the pleasantness of their thoughts. "Even if you're doing something that's really enjoyable," Mr. Killingsworth says, "that doesn't seem to protect against negative thoughts. The rate of mind-wandering is lower for more enjoyable activities, but when people wander they are just as likely to wander toward negative thoughts."

Whatever people were doing, whether it was having sex or reading or shopping, they tended to be happier if they focused on the activity instead of thinking about something else. In fact, whether and where their minds wandered was a better predictor of happiness than what they were doing.

"If you ask people to imagine winning the lottery," Dr. Gilbert says, "they typically talk about the things they would do — 'I'd go to Italy, I'd buy a boat, I'd lay on the beach' — and they rarely mention the things they would *think*. But our data suggest that the location of the body is much less important than the location of the mind, and that the former has surprisingly little influence on the latter. The heart goes where the head takes it, and neither cares much about the whereabouts of the feet."

Still, even if people are less happy when their minds wander, which causes which? Could the mind-wandering be a consequence rather than a cause of unhappiness?

To investigate cause and effect, the Harvard psychologists compared each person's moods and thoughts as the day went on. They found that if someone's mind wandered at, say, 10 in the morning, then at 10:15 that person was likely to be less happy than at 10, perhaps because of those stray thoughts. But if people were in a bad mood at 10, they weren't more likely to be worrying or daydreaming at 10:15.

"We see evidence for mind-wandering causing unhappiness, but no evidence for unhappiness causing mind-wandering," Mr. Killingsworth says.

This result may disappoint daydreamers, but it's in keeping with the religious and philosophical admonitions to "Be Here Now," as the yogi Ram Dass titled his 1971 book. The phrase later became the title of a George Harrison song warning that "a mind that likes to wander 'round the corner is an unwise mind."

What psychologists call "flow" — immersing your mind fully in activity — has long been advocated by nonpsychologists. "Life is not long," <u>Samuel Johnson</u> said, "and too much of it must not pass in idle deliberation how it shall be spent." <u>Henry Ford</u> was more blunt: "Idleness warps the mind." The iPhone results jibe nicely with one of the favorite sayings of <u>William F. Buckley Jr.</u>: "Industry is the enemy of melancholy."

Alternatively, you could interpret the iPhone data as support for the philosophical dictum of <u>Bobby McFerrin</u>: "Don't worry, be happy." The unhappiness produced by mindwandering was largely a result of the episodes involving "unpleasant" topics. Such stray thoughts made people more miserable than commuting or working or any other activity.

But the people having stray thoughts on "neutral" topics ranked only a little below the overall average in happiness. And the ones daydreaming about "pleasant" topics were actually a bit above the average, although not quite as happy as the people whose minds were not wandering.

There are times, of course, when unpleasant thoughts are the most useful thoughts. "Happiness in the moment is not the only reason to do something," says <u>Jonathan Schooler</u>, a psychologist at the <u>University of California</u>, <u>Santa Barbara</u>. His research has shown that mind-wandering can lead people to creative solutions of problems, which could make them happier in the long term.

Over the several months of the iPhone study, though, the more frequent mind-wanderers remained less happy than the rest, and the moral — at least for the short-term — seems to be: you stray, you pay. So if you've been able to stay focused to the end of this column, perhaps you're happier than when you daydreamed at the beginning. If not, you can go back to daydreaming starting...now.

Or you could try focusing on something else that is now, at long last, scientifically guaranteed to improve your mood. Just make sure you turn the phone off.