

## IS MENTAL TIME TRAVEL GOOD FOR US?

Conor Feehly | Discover Magazine | 9/13/23

*Forget the “be here now” concept, which stresses focus on the present.  
Allowing your mind to wander freely has its own benefits.*

In our fast-paced modern lives, we are increasingly encouraged to stop and focus on the present. And there are tangible advantages.

Studies on the effects of mindfulness and meditation—practices that gear people’s cognitive capacities towards the present moment—have pointed to reduced stress, increased focus and less emotional reactivity. As a result, mindfulness has become a billion-dollar industry that promises to alleviate all manner of psychological ills.

However, Anna-Lisa Cohen, a psychology professor at Yeshiva University in New York, says that while there is concrete evidence pointing to the positive changes that mindfulness can bring about, we shouldn’t overlook other tools.

“While there is scientific evidence that mindfulness and meditation do lead to positive changes in our brains and biology, especially for stress reduction,” Cohen says, “I think it is also important to carve out space in the public forum to acknowledge the new science on the benefits of doing the opposite.”

### What Is Mental Time Travel?

Cohen points to recent research on “self-projection,” better known as “mental time travel.” In short, this is our unique ability to reflect on past experiences and project ourselves into the future.

“Our ability to disengage from the present and immerse ourselves in imaginary worlds is one of our most extraordinary gifts as humans and underlies some of our greatest accomplishments,” she says.

Being present at pivotal moments obviously has its values: Keeping the mind from wandering could be the difference between disaster and a job well-done, especially for a brain surgeon or air-traffic controller.

But researchers are becoming increasingly aware that our default cognitive state — what we know as daydreaming — consists largely of being *detached* from the present moment. And given the frequency with which some of us wander in our thoughts, it’s likely that this mode of thinking serves an important role in our day-to-day lives.

When we allow this to happen and separate from the present, Cohen says, we unlock a form of cognitive flexibility that’s otherwise unavailable.

“Now the imagination is involved. Psychological barriers are lowered. Suddenly, ideas, concepts and possibilities that we might not have considered have a better chance of coming to mind. There is a fluidity to our thinking,” she says.

### **The Evolution of the Wandering Mind**

A 2017 study in *Psychological Science* found that we spend an astonishing 30 to 50 percent of our waking hours detached from the present moment.

In another study, published in 2015, researchers attempted to figure out the general contents of mind wandering episodes. Their results show that when people were mind wandering, thoughts were most often oriented toward the future and were goal-related.

Research psychologists generally agree that the degree to which humans can separate from the present moment and contemplate things beyond our immediate senses is a unique feature of our species.

Evolutionary psychologists Thomas Suddendorf and Micheal Corballis, for example, have argued that the cognitive development of mental time travel was a crucial step in the evolutionary success of our species.

With it, we can imagine mutually exclusive possible futures. We can make plans and contingencies in case they go awry. Just ask the insurance industry.

### **When Is Mind Wandering Too Much?**

“No other nonhuman animals look further back into the past, or further into the future,” says Cohen.

But while this ability has underlined some of humanity’s greatest accomplishments, it can also bring about a host of unwieldy emotions — some of which, like regret, anxiety and embarrassment, we might want to avoid.

Because we can imagine what should have been done otherwise, or all the ways in which something can go wrong, it's inevitable: If we are *too* focused on the past or the future, this could be destructive to our well-being. And here, it comes full circle back to mindfulness and being present.

For the overly active mind wanderer, the overthinker, a little bit of mindfulness might be the right way to balance the psychological systems that have set us up for evolutionary success.

After all, if you are forever somewhere else, you might miss the nuances of the moment — and the things that make planning for a future worthwhile.