

THE Great ESCAPE

Escapism is often denounced as a waste of time, but are there hidden benefits that are being overlooked?

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Everywhere we turn, we are bombarded by negativity. Whether it be from a 24-hour news cycle, divisive politics, economic worries or the pressure to balance an increasing workload with a personal life, it comes as little surprise that depression and anxiety cases are growing at an alarming rate. No wonder then that people are more desperate than ever to escape in order to maintain their own sanity.

This is not a new phenomenon either. Humans have immersed themselves in some form of escapist activity for thousands of years, whether it be through storytelling, song or live theatre. The only difference now is that technology provides us with a vast selection of choices to enjoy. Entire industries, such as Hollywood, are dedicated to catering to the public's insatiable need for escapism.

Escapism can be defined as anything that detaches somebody from their immediate reality, usually through an activity that involves imagination or entertainment. The most obvious forms of this include watching TV, scrolling through social media, playing

games, shopping, reading and listening to music. Even activities that are a vital part of our daily existence, such as eating food, having sex and exercising, can become outlets for escapism.

So why is it important? Because escapism is a deep-seated human need. Imagination is what sets humans apart from animals. Without it, humans would not be able to delve into their deeper consciousness, dream, re-live memories, create art or imagine new possibilities of being.

Escapism is also a powerful coping mechanism for dealing with negative emotions such as anxiety and sadness. It is a healthy outlet that temporarily removes us from an existence that can sometimes be too painful to bear. Without it, humanity would plunge into a persistent state of hopelessness and cynicism.

There is much comfort to be found in being able to escape into a world that provides a guarantee that things will turn out okay in the end and that the good guys will always prevail. Reality, however, is unpredictable and offers no such promise.

That is not to say that escapism cannot be used as a form of catharsis. Watching sports or listening to music can provide us with a platform to vent our emotions in a safe space without risking harm to ourselves or others. Video games, in particular, enable us to discharge tensions without any real-life consequences, and to flush out negative emotions through fantasies of invincibility and theatrical outrage.

It is important to know when to engage with an emotion and when to ignore it. Emotions are often fleeting, and it can be more helpful to distract ourselves from a negative emotion rather than to focus on it. Emotions are notoriously cyclical in their nature, and sometimes ruminating on them can strengthen the emotion and end up making us feel worse.

By allowing ourselves to detach for a while and shut off our emotions, we can give our minds a chance to reset and process matters more effectively. When we are overwhelmed, we can become blindsided by our problems and lose sight of the bigger picture. Indulging in some light-hearted escapism can remind us of the positive things in life. We are then better equipped to face reality from a fresher and more balanced perspective.

Escapism provides us with a boost of feel-good hormones such as serotonin and dopamine, an essential replenishment of the same neurochemicals that we lose when we are feeling stressed. This can help to dramatically improve mood and keep anxiety and depression at bay.



Escapism can also give us back a much-needed sense of control. By projecting ourselves through the personas we see on the big screen or in books, we can become the masters of our own domain and enjoy the sense of power, security and freedom that comes with it. Imagining ourselves as somebody who possesses something that we may lack, whether it be beauty, money or success, can be a powerful antidote against the disappointment of our own existence.

Furthermore, escapism can be a form of low-effort relaxation. Instead of viewing it as laziness or as a waste of time, we should look at it as 'refuelling'. According to Dr Michael Hurd, a psychotherapist, and writer for the website 'The Daily Dose of Reason', refuelling 'refers to things of secondary importance that we do in order to mentally or psychologically recharge our spirits so that we can better handle the primary commitments of career, relationships or family.'

Comparing our brains to computers can help to override the guilt associated with taking time out for ourselves. Just as a computer can overheat, too much

THE DOSE MAKES THE POISON

Escapism is a powerful coping method, but it can easily become a defence mechanism for protecting ourselves against feeling any discomfort at all. Too much escapism can lead to behavioural addictions, such as gambling or binge-eating.

It is important to differentiate between healthy escapism and avoidance. Positive escapism is a form of self-care, temporarily disengaging us from problems to re-energise, whereas avoidance can become a habitual way of ignoring our problems.

Avoidance is being so consumed by our chosen form of escapism that it becomes our primary purpose in life, rather than as a means of 'refuelling'. It can lead to problems at work, alienate us from our loved ones and cause us to stagnate in our personal growth.

We must recognise what it is we are trying to avoid through chronic escapism. It could be feelings of loneliness or boredom, or using it to compensate for a lack of interpersonal interaction.

According to Norwegian psychologist Frode Stenseng, two forms of escapism exist, depending on the motivation that lies behind each activity. Self-suppression (numbing activities such as abusing alcohol and drugs) comes from a desire to avoid unpleasant feelings, whereas engaging in self-expansion (activities such as meditation and creating art) are motivated by wanting to gain positive experiences and discover new aspects of the self.

It is vital that we strike the balance between using 'avoidant' coping strategies such as temporary distraction, and 'approach-oriented' techniques such as tackling challenges head on. Escapism is an important weapon in our wellbeing arsenal, but it is not the only one that we have to hand.

seriousness and negativity can fry our nervous systems. Without escapism, we would burn out much more easily.

The great thing about escapism is that there is little effort involved and the benefits are often immediate. Recent studies have shown that escapism can increase levels of restorative sleep, awareness and social connections while significantly reducing stress. Paradoxically, it can also boost our levels of productivity. Escapism can provide a much-needed respite for our brain by encouraging easier thinking and a lower need for cognition. This means that when we do need to work hard, we can learn and focus better as our brains are not so exhausted.

Escapism essentially is about embracing 'mindlessness'. The concept of mindfulness and 'living in the present' has been all the rage in recent years, and while they are

important for our mental health, so is the ability to switch off. Our society's obsession with achievement, success and busyness means that we can feel pressured to use our downtime constructively through goal-oriented pursuits such as learning a new hobby. But trying to be productive all the time is not good for us. Allowing ourselves to engage in a 'mindless' or relaxing activity for no other purpose than to unwind activates our parasympathetic nervous system, which slows down our breathing and heart rate. This can reduce anxiety and stress by creating a sense of calm within us, which can help to reduce blood pressure and strengthen our immune system.

So the next time guilt creeps in about spending all day binge-watching Netflix, remember that 'practising mindlessness' is a crucial part of our mental wellbeing toolbox. ■

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