

Your Dreams

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I've heard so many people say: "I don't dream" or "I never remember my dreams." I suspect the latter is more accurate as dreams are the brain's way of processing our life events and making sense of them, so we all dream. You might have noticed your twitching cat or your 'running' dog while they are asleep. They are dreaming too.

Dreams are a natural gift that we have been given to make sense of the events in our lives, to alert us to when something is 'stuck' or wrong in our processing system and to assist us with solving our everyday as well as our deeply rooted problems. They are fascinating, exhilarating, confusing, mysterious and can be absolutely terrifying. Sometimes they are repetitive and when they are, there is a message there for us.

Understanding the mechanism and the importance of dreaming is helpful to those of us who wish to tap into our psyche and get better insight into the things that disturb us. Learning to unravel the mystery that is produced and directed by our own minds while we sleep is possible, rewarding and can lead to the healing of most disturbing life events including witnessing or experiencing trauma.

Those of us who suffer from depression, anxiety, self-harming behaviors and disrupted relationships can understand the roots of our problems by tracking, dissecting, investigating and unravelling the patterns in our dreams. We can tap into exactly how we are feeling in our everyday lives while we slumber and from this viewfinder, we can begin to adjust our patterns of behavior that keep us unhappy or unhealthy.

We are so busy living while we are awake that we fail to notice when something is 'off' and often fail to recognize the impacts of our own behaviors. We navigate through difficult situations at work or at school and home and we attempt to stay composed, appear competent and capable. We get the kids off to school, ourselves off to work, play the part of best wife or husband, maintain our friendships as best we can and try to have fun in our 'off' time. While we are zooming through our days, our subconscious is tracking our events. It is recording the impact of every little thing on our emotional memory and it is storing it, saving it for later, to play back for us in some twisted manifestation of wearing our pajamas on a public train that turns into an elephant with wings that is carrying us away or some other bizarre concoction of cryptographed events.

When all is going well and there are no major glitches, we fall asleep at night with no major delays or issues and wake up the next day to do it over again. We may or may not remember our dreams. If we do, it is likely that they were not disturbing but rather either mundane and so not memorable or happy, setting the mood for another productive day.

When things do not go well, we struggle with all of the above, feel overwhelmed throughout the day, doubt ourselves and typically report sleep issues. We either can't fall asleep, can't stay asleep, sleep fitfully or have terrible dreams that either wake us up or leave us feeling defeated and disgusted before our feet even hit the ground in the start of another day.

When our sleep is disrupted in some way, it may interfere with what we call Rapid Eye Movement or REM sleep. Sleep has been researched for many years and it has been evidenced that there are periods of both REM sleep and Non-REM (NREM) sleep during every night for everyone. The periods of REM sleep and when they occur, how long they last, differ for some. For most, after attaining a sleep mode, we spend about 20 minutes solidly sleeping with no active brain activity. The brain and the body are resting. Then, a REM cycle lasting about 10 minutes occurs and it is believed that during REM periods, we are dreaming. Then there is a period of time again when we are only resting, not dreaming. We are in NREM mode. REM periods can be up to as many as 5 a night and during these periods, we are actively dreaming, processing our daily events, making sense of our lives, feelings, relationships and patterns of behavior that may have been formed in childhood and follow us into adulthood.

Life becomes challenging for all of us at times. Every time we experience a change, we experience a need to process, readjust and make sense of the newness of our situation. Change can be positive: getting a new job, starting a new family or moving to an exciting new place. It can also be negative: losing a loved one, failing health or sudden financial problems. Every adjustment requires mutation in stages and the alterations are inevitable to adapt to the newness. It is during these times that our REM phases become most active as we desperately try to make sense of our new territory and adapt to it. This is when dreams may become memorable or disturbing. Disturbing dream content can hinder our progress of adapting to our experiences.

If you don't ever, or seldom, remember your dreams, I encourage you to learn strategies to enhance your recall. Recalling your dreams is the first step in improving your processing and understanding yourself and the character that you play on your life stage. If you are content and happy in your life, then perhaps this is not necessary for you but if you feel challenged, have bad dreams often and are disturbed by them, then I do encourage you to read more to learn about how to take back control in your life, regardless of your situation, through your dreams.

Our brain seldom rests, even when sleeping, it's working, processing, unwinding the knots of the day. Dreams are in pictures rather than words and the meaning of them is coded in ways that we don't understand even though they are our codes! It is believed that they are encrypted because if we understood their true meaning while we are dreaming, the profoundness may wake us from our much-needed cocooning. It may also be that we do not have the words to express what is happening for us and so we are seeing it in pictures. This is especially likely when we are 'crisis dreaming.' Learning to read the code and decipher the cryptic messages can be exactly the key that fits the lock to our depression, PTSD, anxiety, ever-failing attempts at relationships and much more.

So how do we do this? Dr. Rosalind Cartwright & Lynn Lamberg (1992) in their book "Crisis Dreaming" summarize decades of sleep/dream research and provide a detailed description of how to solve your problems through your dreams. There was a time when much of psychology relied heavily on the content of dreams to assist people to navigate their clinical issues. It started with Freud and then became mainstream as psychoanalysis held the therapeutic limelight on center stage. Dr. Cartwright's self-help methodology is clear, simple and effective. If followed properly, it can help you learn to understand the messages your dreams are sending to you as well as master them, which lends mastery to your waking life as well.

The process is simple. You start by writing down all the details of your dreams on a regular basis – keeping a dream journal. Then you pull out the descriptors and patterns in the dreams. You will start to notice themes, common dimensions and familiar feelings that they evoke. If you suffer from bad dreams often or nightmares, you will learn to wake yourself up in the dream or re-write it while it is happening so that it ends well, with you in control and safe rather than reeling and frightened.

The process works for children as well although we give them the tools rather than ask them to figure it all out themselves. They are naturally prone to bad dreams partially because they are dependent and so worry about their survival constantly and partially because they are learning about the world and becoming aware of the fact that it can be unpredictable and scary. This requires a great deal of integration of information as they are constantly learning and becoming aware of their mortality as well as everyone else's. Their dreams are riddled with monsters and fears about the stability of their lives and those they love as they try to make sense of it all. Helping them learn to be in, or take back, control in their dreams can have a colossal effect on reducing their anxiety and permitting them to be more relaxed when both awake and asleep.

I have participated in this process. I suffered from recurring 'out-of-control' dreams in which I was afraid, failing, alone and in danger. I often awoke feeling defeated and discouraged before I started my days. As I got older, these dreams changed to nightmares where I was being chased, attacked and sometimes killed. I lived my life afraid and sleeping was a restless, fitful, often disturbed event. Through my work as a Psychologist's assistant some 25 years ago, I was given the "Crisis Dreaming" book to read. It changed my life. I started a dream journal, tracked my dream dimensions and patterns and began to notice themes that were confusing to me but meaningful. One of the themes I noticed was that many of the things in my scary dreams were yellow. In one dream, I was at a movie theatre watching the movie "The Yellow Submarine." We were all sitting in those moveable chairs like the ones in a 7D theatre. When the yellow submarine came on the screen, all the chairs got connected like a rollercoaster and it was speeding headfirst into the screen which was covering an endless pit that we were falling into. In another, I was being chased by 3 men with yellow machine guns. Writing them down allowed me to notice these important commonalities. I also recognized that in most of the dreams I felt out of control, afraid, helpless to stop what was happening and mostly, I was a victim. At that age and stage of my life, my daily events were mainly the same as my dreams. I had many of the same feelings and did not know how to change.

I was confused about the yellow images for a long time but through deliberately processing this pattern, I made the connection. My childhood home is yellow and I experienced many a trauma there. The lightbulb went on and it all made sense. "Out of control" was an understatement for my childhood and "Helpless" was my middle name.

Through dream work, I learned how to take back control in my waking life by empowering myself and taking control of the circumstances I was manufacturing in my dreams. I was continuously playing out my feelings of helplessness and because I felt helpless in life most of the time, I was of course helpless in my dreams. When I realized this, I changed my dreams so that I was no longer a voiceless, defenseless bystander or the target of "killers." At first, I learned to wake myself up so that I was not trapped in a horrifying experience being re-victimized and then I learned how to successfully rewrite my dreams so that I defeated my villains or redirected my fatal story. It was exhilarating and I woke up feeling

invigorated, strong and ready for the day. My attitude began to change and I began to express myself assertively and appropriately, protecting and honoring myself and others.

I have been a practicing psychologist for more than a decade now and still do dream work personally. I also do it professionally, inviting my clients to peer into their mysterious dark portholes to dredge up and sift through their deeply-rooted beliefs about themselves and the world around them. The results are profound. People learn to creatively craft their dreams so they are the powerful, capable heroes of the night and as a result, they regain their personal power, unravel their depressive/anxious thoughts and make clearer life decisions.

Dream work has the potential to be empowering and life changing for everyone. I invite you to try it. Happy dreaming....and living.

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