

Dreaming

Some people recall only their most vivid dreams while some can recollect all dreams every morning. Others will never remember any of their dreams. Irrespective of this, everyone dreams every night.

When we sleep, we go through phases of light and deep sleep. One stage of sleep is known as REM (rapid eye movement) in which our eyes move back and forth quickly. REM sleep occurs roughly every 90 to 100 minutes during the night and can last as long as 45 minutes. Dreams occurring during this phase are vivid and most likely to be remembered, especially if woken during this stage.

Dreams can be extremely powerful and sometimes upsetting as they appear to harbour meaning about our deepest secrets, fears and desires. It seems that our dreams combine concerns in our lives, or things that we are worrying over, and build them into a metaphorical story in order for us to act out these concerns. To create these 'stories' the brain incorporates events, people and objects encountered throughout the day. For example, if you have a small argument with a colleague, this may transpose into a physical fight with a relative (someone you had encountered that day). It does not mean there is any problem between you and that relative. Also, if you are anxious about something, this may manifest into a nightmare of being chased, or some other stressful, scary situation. About three quarters of dreams are negative and reflect emotional concerns.

WHY DO WE DREAM?

There are various theories as to why people dream, but there are no definite answers. What is certain is that we need to dream. Experiments that have deprived people of dreaming (by waking them up before REM sleep or by using dream-suppressing drugs) have resulted in lots of problems such as hallucinations and an inability to concentrate.

One theory suggests that we simulate threatening events in dreams so that if we meet these events in real life, we are better prepared to deal with them. Another theory is that dreaming occurs when our brain is sorting out our memories, consolidating information, learning and discarding unimportant information. In this sense, dreaming is an accidental by-product of brain activity as the brain sifts through information gathered during the day.

Recently, one psychologist suggested that emotionally arousing expectations that are not acted out when we are awake are de-aroused during dreaming. One of the most common ways to create unexpressed emotional

arousal is to ruminate.

As thinking is an activity only within the mind, there is no way to express the emotion. This theory states that dreaming is the mechanism by which these emotions are expressed, and therefore not circulating in our heads the next day. If this theory is correct, it has implications for understanding depression.

DREAMS, DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY

It is known that depressed people have excessive REM sleep. This may be due to depressive thinking styles causing more negative emotional arousal and therefore more dreaming to clear the brain for the next day. However, dreaming is hard work; it's not a restful activity. In fact, it is called 'paradoxical sleep' because brain wave patterns are similar to those when completely awake. As far as your brain is concerned, your dream is real. Adrenaline and other stress hormones will be active in the body. Therefore, if you are over-dreaming, you are not resting, but flooding your body with stress hormones. (This is why people usually wake up before 'dying' in a dream. The body believes the dream is real and releases a rush of adrenaline which wakes us up). Over-dreaming in people who are depressed (whether due to negative ruminations or not) results in restless sleep and a feeling of exhaustion upon waking. Although this theory was developed in relation to depression, it also has consequences for anxiety as the same negative thought processes are present. Therefore, thinking anxious thoughts throughout the day may result in a nightmare.

CHALLENGING DREAMS

If you feel that dreams are causing you to feel exhausted, worried or depressed, it may be that they are aggravated by negative ruminations. Therapy is great for changing negative thought patterns, particularly cognitive therapy which promotes changing unhelpful anxiety- and depression-inducing thoughts. There are drugs which suppress dreaming, but, as mentioned above, these can cause their own problems as dreaming is important to us. Even animals dream!

Finally, it is important to remember that dreams are just dreams. Although, they can have lasting impacts on mood and energy levels, you can be confident that they are not real and nothing has changed because of them. Try not to over-interpret dreams because you may

extract a meaning that is not there. Also, the less you try to remember the details of dreams and go over them in your head, the less likely you will be to remember subsequent dreams.

MORE INFORMATION

1. Our First Psychology centres can help you. To find out more or to arrange an initial session contact us at your local centre:

ABERDEEN: info@aberdeenpsychology.co.uk,
tel: 01224-452848, www.aberdeenpsychology.co.uk

BORDERS: info@borderspsychology.co.uk,
tel: 01896-800-400, www.borderspsychology.co.uk

EDINBURGH: info@edinburghtherapy.co.uk,
tel: 0131-668-1440, www.edinburghtherapy.co.uk

GLASGOW: info@glasgowpsychology.co.uk,
tel: 0141-404-5411, www.glasgowpsychology.co.uk

2. Alternatively you may wish to speak to your GP who should be able to refer you to someone suitable.

3. See our links on our websites for details of organisations who may be able to provide assistance or information.