

Dreams

What are dreams?

Dreams are a form of mental activity that occurs during sleep. Dreaming activity can vary from very simple thoughts or images, to elaborated stories with vivid color images and intense physical activity.

Dreaming activity takes place throughout a night of sleep. While it has been believed for many years that dreams occurred only during rapid eye movement (REM) sleep (the stage of sleep that occurs every 90 minutes and is characterized by rapid eye movements, intense brain activity and physiological activation), we know now that dreams can be experienced during all stages of sleep but vary in intensity and vividness. For example, dreams can occur at the onset of sleep and during short naps, however they are more detailed and contain more activity when they occur during rapid eye movement sleep, particularly in the latter part of a night's sleep.

Dream recall

Many people do not remember their dreams. However research in the laboratory has demonstrated that almost everybody experiences dreams but, for a number of reasons, many people do not recall their dreams upon awakening. Dream recall can be improved by some simple measures such as changing wake-up times, paying attention to dreams immediately upon awakening and writing them down, or telling them to a partner. Simple interest in dreams and motivation to remember them have also been found to increase dream recall.

What are the sources of dreams?

How dreams are generated is still a debate between sleep and dream researchers. Dreams are principally constructed from daily experiences. In fact, typically, dreams are found to incorporate, in one form or another, events that occurred during the previous day. Recently, research has demonstrated that in elderly persons, dream elements can refer to events dating back 50 to 60 years. Differences in age, gender, cultures and social role have been found to be reflected in dreams. For example, dreams of young children contain more animals than human beings. Women have more verbal interactions in their dreams than men who tend to have more anxiety and physical aggression.

Dreams then appear to be in continuity with waking life. However, two characteristics of dreams limit this observation. Firstly, the representations of waking experience in dreams are very distorted so that in many instances only the dreamer can understand the links. Secondly, most dreams are unpleasant for the dreamer. In fact dreams tend to represent events in a negative fashion which is in contrast with waking life.

Are dreams useful?

Dreams are a natural phenomenon and there is no harm in recalling them. In fact, the distorted representation that dreams use can be useful because sometimes they lead to very creative images and associations. Many artists and writers use dream images and stories to inspire them in their work. However, since most dreams are unpleasant to the dreamer, they can sometimes have a negative impact on mood at wake-up time.

A number of scientists have made significant insight and discoveries following dreams. Because dreams can reflect in one form or another our waking state of mind or our concerns, they are used in psychotherapy. There are also many techniques that have been developed for the use of dreams in everyday life. Paying attention to dreams can help improve self-awareness. However, universal dream symbols found in popular books are the result of unscientific speculations. Each individual has their own manner of dream expression.

Nightmares and night terrors

Some dream experiences are particularly negative and impact waking life. They are divided into two types: nightmares and night terrors. Nightmares are well-elaborated dreams which have a frightful and anxious content. They

tend to occur late in the night and come during episodes of rapid eye movement sleep. Night terrors are characterized by sudden awakening from deep sleep near the beginning of the night. Although they are associated with intense traumatic mental experience, they are typically not remembered. The person wakes up very suddenly with very intense respiration, heart rates and expressions of fear.

Nightmares are a normal occurrence in children. Actually 20 to 50% of children between the ages of 5 to 10 years experience occasional nightmares. They then decrease with age, but may persist through adulthood.

In children, frequent nightmares can have a detrimental impact on functioning. When nightmares do not disappear, it is recommended to encourage children to share their nightmare experience with parents and with professionals. Recent research has demonstrated that simple techniques of dream narration and story transformation are very useful in eliminating nightmares. In adults, frequent nightmares can reflect psychological tension, which can be alleviated with professional help. Techniques have been developed recently to teach individuals to control the appearance of nightmares.

It is well documented that traumatic experiences can trigger intensive recurrent nightmares. These can be associated with the post-traumatic stress syndrome, which is often experienced during wartime or following extremely stressful experiences. Professional help is recommended to alleviate recurring nightmares following trauma.