

Understanding Dreams

What are dreams?

Dreams are images and stories that appear to all of us as we sleep, much like the thoughts and daydreams that we have during the day. Everyone dreams. The dreams we are likely to remember happen during periods of rapid-eye-movement (REM) sleep, which we have several times each night.

What are the major characteristics of dreams?

- Most dreams have in them several people familiar to the dreamer.
- Most dreams have as their setting a building, home, or recreational area. Few take place at work.
- You may have strong feelings like fear or anger in your dreams.
- Dreams feel very real to the dreamer, who may be watching them or acting in them.
- Things that happened the previous day often show up in dreams.

Why is it useful to understand dreams?

Dreams can reveal thoughts that we are not usually aware of. Some therapists believe that remembering our dreams can be useful in understanding ourselves better and coming up with ways to solve problems.

Dreams can tell us about hidden parts of ourselves. For example, a man nearing retirement dreams about going to the office and finding it completely empty. In the dream, he feels angry and sad. Before he had the dream, he thought he had only happy feelings about retirement. Afterward, he realized retirement felt like a loss as well. Many times dreams help us deal with feelings such as dread, fear, confusion, anger, or sadness.

Many psychotherapists agree with the following ideas about dreams:

- The content of a dream may be related to the waking life of the dreamer.
- Dreams may have important meaning.
- Dreams may help resolve conflicts about what we feel or what we want to do.
- Dreams help us stay asleep.

Why do some people forget their dreams?

Some people remember more dreams than others. Some people keep a dream journal and write in it each morning. Some people have trouble remembering dreams because they do not think they are important and do not pay attention to them. Others try to forget their dreams because they fear that remembering them might leave them with disturbing feelings. Or they worry that the angry or sad feelings the dreams stir up might linger on during their waking hours. Some

people feel embarrassed about their dreams and would prefer not to think about them.

How can dreams best be understood?

In order to understand and learn from dreams, look at the thoughts and feelings behind what happens. The settings, actions, and people in your dreams are personal to you. Your mind gives you symbols to look at what is happening in your waking life in new ways. To increase your chances of understanding a dream, follow these steps:

- When you wake up, try to remember if you dreamed. Immediately write down the details of any dream you can remember.
- Go over each part of the dream and write down any details you forgot to include the first time.
- Relax and try to think of anything the dream reminds you of. This may be a memory from years ago or it may be something that happened recently.
- Write down the memory or event that the dream reminds you of. What happened, where did it happen, how did you feel, who else was there?
- Read over what you have written about the dream as many times as you wish, thinking about its message to you. Consider its relationship to other dreams you may have had recently, even dreams you may have had during the same night.
- Allow the dream to speak for itself. If you try too hard to understand it, you will no longer be relaxed.

Sometimes understanding the meaning of a dream may come only after several days, or after you have had another dream that is clearer.

What is a lucid dream?

In some dreams, the dreamer is aware that she or he is dreaming, and may even attempt to influence what happens in the dream. These are called lucid dreams. People who dream in this way are more likely to recall their dreams.

When can dreams signal a problem?

It may be time to consult a therapist or healthcare provider when:

- You often have nightmares that wake you up. Nightmares can be caused by a major change in your life such as a move or death of a loved one, or by illness, alcohol, or certain medicines.
- You have sleep problems related to your dreams.
- You have a recurring dream that you do not understand.
- You also have symptoms of anxiety or depression, such as loss of appetite, trouble concentrating, or loss of pleasure in usual activities.

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