

DREAM FACTS

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People often ask me about dreams. Here is a quick list of facts.

1. There are four stages of sleep (although some experts say we have three) beginning with the lightest (stage 1) and progressing to the deepest (stage 4). REM (rapid eye movement) sleep occurs during stage 1. We cycle through the four stages a few times each night going from 1 through 4 back to 4-3-2-1. As we move back into stage 1, we experience REM sleep.
2. Everyone dreams 4-6 dreams per night usually during REM sleep, lasting up to a total of two hours out of an eight-hour segment.
3. Most people do not remember their dreams, partly because dreams are not typically stored in our long-term memory.
4. It is not clear why some people seem to be better at remembering their dreams. It may be that these people are more likely to awaken while in the REM dream state - which increases the likelihood of remembering.



When you sleep, your brain is bathed in a chemical different from your waking state. Therefore, your brain can create all sorts of odd, strange, creative, and incomprehensible scenarios.

5. Most of the remaining time period in which a person is not in REM sleep (called non-REM) may contain random dream fragments but it more often contains thinking activity that is much different from normal waking thought production.

Many sleep experts theorize that it is during this period that our brain is tinkering away at our daily problems.



6. Dreamlets (I like that word) are fragmented dreams lasting only seconds at a time. If you've ever awakened from a dreamlet, you likely said to yourself something like, "What was THAT?" These flights of fantasy are typically so bizarre that they are nearly impossible to put into words.
7. There is no agreed-upon method for interpreting dreams. You might come across a so-called "Dream Interpretation" booklet in the grocery store or your cousin might have read Freud. Don't let someone else interpret your dreams for you. No one can tell you what your brain may not be able to interpret.
8. If you have a dream that you cannot interpret, here are the two best questions to ask yourself:

"What do I think my brain is saying to me?"

"What comes to me as I think about this dream?"

If your response is, "I don't know" then let it go. If there is sense to be made, it is the dreamer's interpretation, not anyone else's. And if the dreamer can't make sense of it, then nobody can.

9. While it is difficult to "will" yourself to have a particular dream, such as a dream about your loved one who died, here are suggestions that may help:
 - ◆ As you lie in bed waiting to fall asleep, tell yourself that you're going to have a particular dream and that you will remember it. This technique is only sometimes effective.
 - ◆ To increase the likelihood of remembering your dreams, find a way to sleep for a longer period of time than you typically do. This is because REM sleep increases in the last couple hours of sleep. (If you are late for work, just tell your boss as you walk in the door, "Oh, sorry about this, I was working on remembering my dreams.")
 - ◆ Keep a pad and pen on your nightstand. When you awaken from a dream in the middle of the night, lie still for a full 20 seconds and try to recall the dream. Don't move. Then, immediately write as much as you can remember. Do not rely on your memory. Dreams are often quickly forgotten. For example, have you ever awakened from a dream in the middle of the night and said, "I'll remember this tomorrow" only to find that you'd forgotten most of it? Do not rely on your memory (surely you discovered that long ago).

Because our brains are programmed to make sense of what is presented to us, our dreams often originate in our brain as residual events from the previous day such as people we saw, thoughts we had, something from television or the internet, or from something we did.

When we dream, it is often our brain's effort to grab various random events, thoughts, and sensations and attempt to organize them in the form of a story.



Let's look at some general dream categories when we dream of a loved one who died:

1. I dreamed he was alive, but I wasn't surprised.
 - ◆ He was doing something but didn't notice me.
 - ◆ He interacted with me.
2. I dreamed he was alive, and I was surprised—I couldn't believe it.
 - ◆ He did not interact with me.
 - ◆ He interacted with me, but didn't mention anything about being alive.
 - ◆ He interacted with me and talked about being alive or about his death.
3. I dreamed he was dead and, in my dream, I was surprised.
 - ◆ His death was repeated all over again.
 - ◆ It was his death, but somehow it was different from what actually happened.
 - ◆ I was very upset.
 - ◆ I was somewhat upset.
 - ◆ I was mildly upset or not upset at all.
1. I dreamed he was dead and I wasn't surprised (same as 3a-3e).

According to research by Cookson (1990), Barrett (1991-92), and Ryan (1996) some common dream themes related to death are:

1. Advice dreams—the person returns to offer advice.
2. Leave-taking—the person returns to say one last goodbye.
3. State-of-death—the person describes their after-life state.
4. Conflict-laden—the dream brings up guilt in the dreamer.
5. Reviewing the relationship—the dream brings up old memories when the person was alive.

6. Redirecting their lives—the person makes the dreamer think about the life he or she is presently living.
7. Changed relationship—the dream makes the dreamer realize a changed relationship with the person who died.

If you have a negative dream, please understand that most experts feel that the dream was not something you *wanted* to happen. Some people have reported having had a dream in which their loved one did not look quite right or refused to communicate with them or said or did something negative. What we dream is *not* necessarily “a wish our heart makes.”

Virtually all dream experts believe that having an upsetting dream about your loved one is some random story your brain made up. **It is not necessarily what you wanted.** Why would our brain do this to us?

The answer that made the most sense to me came from neurophysiologist J. Allan Hobson who put it something like this:

When you sleep, your brain is bathed in a chemical different from your waking state. Therefore, your brain can create all sorts of odd, strange, creative, and incomprehensible scenarios.

Some people have told me that their dream felt like their loved one had actually contacted them. If this happens to you, don't let anyone tell you otherwise. An effective way to capture the essence of a pleasant dream is to talk it into your phone voice recorder or repeat it in front of your video camera. Doing so soon after the dream seems to provide an effective way to revisit the experience. Talking it out in story form seems to do a better job of capturing the feelings and events in the dream than simply writing about it.

Many people report disappointment that they have not have had a dream about their loved one. While we cannot control exactly what we dream, one way to increase the likelihood of dreaming about your loved one, as mentioned above, is to repeat to yourself as your head hits the pillow, “I am going to have a nice dream about (their name). Yes, I am.”

While this method isn't a guarantee, it has worked for some people. Try it.

Although dreaming is still a mysterious process, I hope this article has given you a couple tools to help your dreams work for you.

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