

# UNDERSTANDING NIGHTMARES

## Suggestions for coping

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We Need Not Walk Alone, 2016

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### Trauma may cause more nightmares

Nightmares, especially those concerning your loved one, can be very disturbing. Let's look at some facts and suggestions.

1. The average person has 1-2 nightmares per year. However, people who have experienced trauma in their life (such as death) may have more nightmares because the brain is trying to gradually incorporate the information into the memory.
2. Most researchers categorize bad dreams as either REM (rapid eye movement) anxiety dreams, or night terrors.
3. REM anxiety dreams consist of detailed anxiety-producing content. The dreamer awakens remembering an upsetting story of a set of events. You may have had a dream that repeated the death of your loved one all over again, or your dream may have involved you discovering some supposed horrible fact of the death. Perhaps you dreamed your loved one, you, or some third party behaved in a negative manner. If you dream something negative, it does not mean that this is what

you really wanted. Your brain can create all kinds of bizarre, unsettling, and incomprehensible stories—all for senseless reasons. Remember, when you sleep, your brain is bathed in chemicals that help to create stories that defy logic. And if anyone can interpret a dream, it is you by asking yourself the question: What is my brain trying to tell me? And if no answer comes, then chalk it up to your brain going on its own incomprehensible tangent. Don't let anyone else try to interpret your dream for you.

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**The rule is: If the dreamer  
can't figure it out, no one can.**

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4. Night terrors most often occur within a couple hours after falling asleep and take place in Stage 4 (the deepest level of sleep). The dreamer remembers little, if any, detail. If something is remembered, it is typically a single frightening event, such as "I was choking," or "There was something heavy on my chest." A scream may precede the awakening and the person is disoriented for

several minutes afterward. Most experts consider night terrors to be a physically caused problem in which, for unknown reasons, the person's autonomic nervous (fight or flight) system becomes activated.

5. Starting or stopping medications as well as alcohol use can cause an increase in a person's nightmare frequency. This fact further supports the contention that dreams are stimulated by random chemical reactions to the brain.

### TWO SUGGESTIONS FOR COPING

- ◇ Talk about it. Find a caring person who will let you get it off your chest. Keeping it inside gives the nightmare more power. Gain control of it by talking it out.
- ◇ Write out the dream as you remember it. Then turn over the paper and rewrite the story the way you'd like it to be. Just before going to sleep sit on your bed and rehearse it a few times. Continue this for a few days and the dream should begin to change.

No matter how frightening or disturbing the dream, it is important that you get it "outside of your head" by talking it out or writing it down.

For example, let's say that you dreamed your loved one said something terrible to you.

First, tell someone. Next, write out every detail and then create a new version. In this example, you might write that the dream end with this person suddenly smiling and saying, "Just kidding. You know I love you and miss you and from where I am now, I feel nothing but love." You might complete the story by saying, "Then we hugged for the longest time and it felt wonderful."

If you have children who have had nightmares, especially about their deceased brother or sister, or parent, the following advice may help:

- ◇ Upon entering the room of a child who has just had a nightmare, turn on a lamp rather than an overhead light. The more light our eyes take in, the more difficult it is to return to sleep.
- ◇ As you approach your child try to get him or her back to sleep. If this doesn't work, hold your child and encourage the telling of the nightmare.
- ◇ Listen without interruption, encouraging the story to be told from start to finish.
- ◇ As the child shares the dream, acknowledge how frightening the it must have been and assure your child that he or she is safe. Do this several times during the dream-telling.
- ◇ Review the dream the next morning using the same technique whether or not your child told you the dream the night before. This "in the light of the day" review makes the nightmare feel less scary.
- ◇ Most parents find it helpful to allow the child to keep on a night light for a few days or weeks following a nightmare episode.

The grief reactions you or your family are experiencing may sometimes come out in the form of dreams or nightmares. By following these suggestions, you should be able to take some control of this process. If this doesn't work and your life continues to be disrupted from these night disturbances, you may want to get some help from a counselor or therapist.