

Nightmares Explained

Every now and then, we may be wakened from our sleep from a terrible nightmare in which we have found ourselves in some dangerous or life-threatening situation, or an unpleasant scenario has played out such as a personal failure or social embarrassment. The imagery in these nightmares tend to feel 'very real', and hence evoke intense fear or other unpleasant emotions, such as sadness, shame, or guilt. These feelings can linger for minutes or even hours after we wake up, and we can find it difficult to return to sleep, or continue to feel bothered during the daytime. While some nightmares seem like they can go on forever, brain scans show that our brains are actively in dream state for only a few seconds!

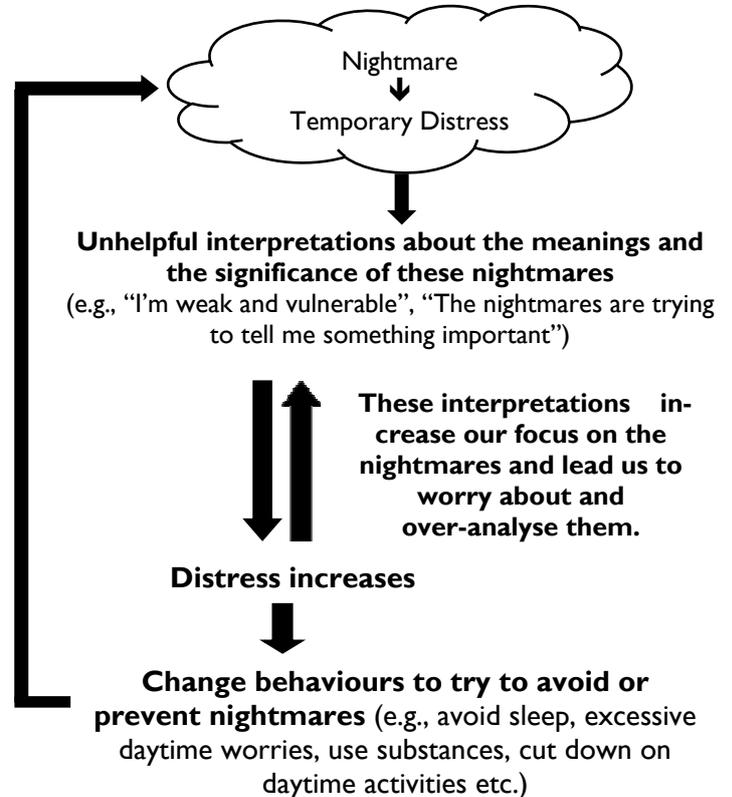
We all have nightmares or upsetting dreams from time to time—about 6% of adults describe having monthly nightmares, and 1-2% experience them regularly. They may have the same dream over and over, or different dreams that share a similar theme (e.g., loss of control). When these nightmares occur frequently, produce high levels of distress, and/or negatively impact on daily life (e.g., unable to concentrate at work or study, feeling depressed or anxious), this may be diagnosed as Nightmare Disorder. While having distressing dreams is one of the symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), frequent nightmares can occur as a standalone problem without a direct link to past traumatic events. Because nightmares can be associated with other conditions and with some medications, it can be helpful to speak with a health professional about these nightmares.

What keeps nightmares going?

Some people can have highly emotional nightmares but are not significantly affected by them, while others may become burdened by these negative dreams and subsequently experience disruptions to our wellbeing or our daily life. We often find that it is not so much the content of the nightmares that is the problem, but how we respond to the nightmares. We may interpret the nightmares to hold meanings about ourselves, others, or the world (e.g., "I'm weak and vulnerable", "The world is dangerous"), and may view the nightmares as uncontrollable ("I can't cope with them"). We can also see these nightmares as powerful or significant in some way (e.g., "My nightmares are trying to tell me something important", "It's a warning that something bad might happen"). Because of these beliefs, we might become more preoccupied about these nightmares, focusing on and over-analyzing them; or we may do things to try and prevent having these nightmares (e.g., avoid sleep, cut down daytime



activities to save energy, distract ourselves, etc.). These actions may bring short-term relief, but can often increase unpleasant emotions, and often do little to reduce or stop the nightmares.



What can I do about my nightmares?

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) has been shown to be an effective approach for targeting nightmares. Specifically, CBT for nightmares aims to help individuals to identify and change some of the unhelpful interpretations that are attached to the nightmares, and in doing so, reduce some of the distress that the nightmares evoke. It also aims to identify and modify behaviours that may be keeping the nightmares going, and introduce more helpful information and habits around how we approach our sleep and the nightmares.

Imagery rescripting (or imagery rehearsal) is another effective strategy for dealing with nightmares. In imagery rescripting, we identify a nightmare that we want to work on, and run through the image in our mind. We then rewind the image and rewrite it in any way that we choose, with the goal of modifying some of the negative meanings and interpretations that are associated with the nightmares. This can often be a daunting process at first, and so people often find it easier to start on it with a therapist. Using imagery rescripting can be a powerful way to take back control of our nightmares, and feel more confident in managing them when they occur.

For more information about imagery rescripting, please refer to the "What is Imagery Rescripting?" handout for more info.