

Dealing with Frequent Nightmares

Objective

To identify the possible causes of your frequent nightmares and to see if positive imagery rehearsal can help reduce their occurrence.

You Should Know

While we think of frequent nightmares as a problem that occurs mostly with children, between 2-8 percent of adults also say that they suffer from nightmares. This can include frequently waking up during the night, usually during the second half of the sleeping period, or during naps, and recalling with vivid detail a disturbing or frightening dream. These dreams often involve scary images or themes that threaten one's survival or safety. The awakenings generally occur during the second half of the sleep period.

There are various reasons that some adults have more frequent nightmares, including physical problems like sleep apnea and psychological problems like PTSD. We also know that certain medications, including anti-depressants and medication for high blood pressure, can trigger nightmares. Other substances such as alcohol or recreational drugs can also cause frequent nightmares. If you are currently taking medication or using substances, consult a physician to determine if nightmares might be a side effect. If you experience delusions or hallucinations during the day, it is also an indication that you should get a full evaluation by a qualified psychiatrist to address your frequent nightmares.

Nightmares can reflect unresolved or current stresses that occur during the day. They can also reflect recent or past trauma, in which the person relives the event in their sleep, perhaps as a way for the mind to understand or come to terms with the trauma. Frequent nightmares can become habitual. That is, anything that the mind does over and over can become reinforced and strengthened, making it hard to break the pattern. The experience of ongoing nightmares can lead not only to disrupted sleep but to low energy, moodiness, depression, anxiety, and poor performance at school or at work.

What to Do

On the lines below, indicate the overall frequency of your nightmares to the best of your ability—every night? 3-6 x/week? Weekly? Bi-weekly? Monthly?

Indicate the overall severity of your nightmares to the best of your ability.

0 = mild, 3 = moderate, 5 = severe: _____

not terrifying. Also, focus on one nightmare at a time until it's resolved. Continue the practice for at least a week *after* each recurring nightmare goes away.

What nightmare would you like to work on to start? Describe it.

Create a different ending to the story of your nightmare. Below, rewrite your dream! Be sure to make the ending calm, peaceful, positive, or neutral, as opposed to another violent or negative ending.

Before you fall asleep every night, rehearse or visualize the same dream with your new ending. Record your experiences below. You may repeat this process with additional nightmares.

Reflections on This Exercise

1. You might want to create a chart or journal or sketch pad to keep track of your ongoing IRT work or other work you are doing to deal with frequent nightmares. Write your ideas here.

2. Which of the nightmares you are working with were the easiest to resolve or diminish in intensity or frequency?

3. Whom can you talk to about the nightmares that might be more difficult to resolve on your own? Write down the names of friends, trusted advisors, or mental health professionals who might help.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?
