



WELLNESS BLOG

Why do we dream?

The question of why we dream has fascinated scientists and philosophers for thousands of years.

Still, there is no definitive answer.

For about 90 minutes to two hours or more each night, every single person dreams. Dreams are sometimes straightforward in their meaning to the dreamer. On the other hand dreams don't always tell a simple story. The field of dream research becomes even more fascinating when people from different cultures and backgrounds report having similar dreams.

Dreams can range from extraordinarily intense or emotional to very vague, fleeting, confusing, or even boring. While some dreams seem to have a clear story line, others appear to make no sense at all.

More broadly, dreams can provide us with insight about things that are preoccupying us, troubling us or engaging our thoughts and emotions.

Dream Theories

Some theories suggest that we dream to consolidate our memories, to process our emotions, to express our deepest desires and to gain practice in confronting potential dangers. Other theories again suggest that dreaming is essential to mental and emotional well-being. Some scientists also believe that dreams serve no real purpose at all.

Theories of dreaming range from psychiatric disciplines to neurobiology.

Let us have a look at some of these theories.

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Dreams provide unconscious expression

This theory suggests that dreams represent unconscious thoughts, wish fulfilment and motivations. People may suppress their longings and primitive thoughts, such as aggressive and sexual instincts, which may then appear in dreams. Research refers to this as a dream rebound effect, where suppression of something tends to result in dreaming about it.

Dreams: A by-product of mental processing

Many experts believe that dreams play an important role in processing our emotions and stressful experiences. The brain synthesises and interprets our emotions, sensations and memories and then attempts to find meaning in these signals through our dreams.

This model suggests that dreams are a subjective interpretation of these signals generated by the brain during sleep and that our active minds, when we wake, are able to pull together the various images and memory fragments of the dream to create an organised story line.

The memory filter

While we are awake, we accumulate a multitude of data and memories. According to this theory, when we dream, our brains sort, condense and file away all that information. This process shows up as fragments in our sleeping minds as images, impressions, stories that echo all of the activity and thoughts going on in our lives.

Under this theory, your weird or nonsensical dream may be a flash of memories as they are erased or mixed with others that are destined for long-term storage.

Dreams prepare and protect

This theory proposes that we dream to better prepare ourselves and to confront dangers in the real world. For example, a dream in a threat simulation provides the dreamer a safe environment in which to practice important skills. While dreaming, we hone our fight or flight instincts to give us an increased potential for survival and build mental capability for handling such scenarios if they happen for real.

Dreams help to process emotions

Dreams can help us process and cope with our emotions or trauma in the safe space. The part of our brain that is involved with the experiencing of emotions is active during vivid and intense dreaming. There is a strong link between dreaming, memory storage and emotional processing. It also explains why dreams are emotionally vivid when we've had past emotional or traumatic experiences.

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Lucid dreaming

Lucid dreams are dreams in which you have awareness of being in a dream. Often you have some control to direct the dream content. These dreams are relatively rare. Around 50% of people recall having had at least one lucid dream in their lifetime, while just over 10% report having them regularly.

There is a strong link between lucid dreaming and highly creative output. Research has shown that lucid dreamers perform better on creative tasks than those who do not experience lucid dreaming.

How do we interpret the meaning of some dreams?

Dreams are one of the most fascinating and mysterious parts of the human experience. Interpretation of dreams can give us a good indication of what may be currently happening in our subconscious mind.

Falling dreams

All of us have had these dreams. Some psychologist believe that a falling dream indicates that you are hanging on too tightly to a particular situation, or that you need to relax and let go of it. Another explanation suggests that it indicates a situation in your life where you are lacking or losing control and where you are feeling overwhelmed. Each falling dream represents a path to a core part of yourself and by understanding the meaning of your particular falling dream, you may get closer to your core.

Being chased dreams

This is one of the most commonly reported dreams. The reason for these dreams does not come from the fear of actually being chased, but rather what we're running from. These dreams may therefore help us to understand that we may not be addressing something in our waking lives that requires our attention.

Paralysis

The body is in fact encountering a form of paralysis during dreaming, which prevents it from physically performing the actions occurring in their dreams. Therefore, dreaming about paralysis frequently represents the overlap between the REM stage and the waking stage of sleep. Dreaming about paralysis may also indicate that the dreamer feels he / she lacks control over something in their waking life.

House dreams

A house may represent the dreamer's mind. Different levels or rooms may relate to difference aspects of the person and different degrees of consciousness. The basement often represents what has been neglected, or what the person is not aware of in his / her waking life. Bedrooms may again relate to intimate thoughts and feelings.

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Stress dreams

Stressful experiences tend to show up with great frequency in our dreams. Stress dreams may be described in many ways, from sad to scary and also nightmares. Experts do not fully understand how or why specific stressful dream content ends up in our dreams. [People who experience greater levels](#) of worry in their daily lives and people with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) report a higher frequency and intensity of nightmares.

Studies have also shown that people with mental health disorders, such as [anxiety and depression](#), tend to have more distressful dreams. Researchers speculate that stress dreams may be the brain's attempt to help us cope with and make sense of stressful experiences.

Benefits of dreaming

Neuroscientists today are continuing to explore dreams, dream interpretation and are finding many health benefits.

Have you ever fallen asleep, unsure about a decision? Then when you woke up, the answer somehow became clear?

We all know the expression "let me sleep on it", but there is actually scientific evidence to support that we, in fact, learn and process information while we sleep.

According to researchers at Harvard Medical School, if you learn a task and then [sleep](#), you may be 10 times better at that activity than if you had stayed awake, as dreaming helps your brain make sense of new information.

By Elmarie Jensen: [Why do we dream?](#)

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