# A screenshot of a cell phone Description automatically generated

# **Image Rehearsal Therapy\* for Nightmares**

# **Hi there!**

Here is your guide to helping with your difficult dreams and nightmares.

This exercise is typically done with a therapist that walks you through the process. However, you can totally do this without a therapist with complete success. But please, make me a promise: be kind to you while doing it, no matter the outcome. Be encouraging to yourself for simply getting to this point. And do the best you can without over doing it. You may have to push yourself a little, but under no circumstances should you force yourself to do any part of this. Remember to be kind and encouraging to yourself. This is the road to getting better.

# **Okay, let’s begin**.

First, let me explain why this therapy is effective:

Our brain has neurons that connect in specific sequences and pathways. Some of these pathways are thoughts. Like, when I hear the garage door open I know my fiancé is home from work. I have a response and urge to greet him. I’ve done this over and over so that would be considered a pathway. When I was sick, I couldn’t greet him and this felt really unnatural because it wasn’t what I normally do. Notice that I said it felt unnatural because it’s not what I normally do.

What you are doing with this therapy is re-working those pathways to form new ones. Pathways that will help you to feel less stress during your nightmares. But it will feel unnatural at first. You are in total control the whole time – no weird hypnotism here – just writing. The writing exercises may feel really awkward in the beginning and that’s by design. It’s to break up your automatic response that has become a habit. Now you will be getting your brain and reactions to loosen up some and allow you to relax. It’s a creative therapy and can actually be fun. But it doesn’t need to be fun for you to benefit from it. However, you react to it is fine.

Note: if you don’t like to write, you can instead say it out loud (if you are alone) or silently with a lot of focus in your mind (if you don’t have privacy).

# **Here we go.**

# Image Rehearsal Therapy (IRT) for Nightmares

To start off, think of a dream you have had that wasn’t a nightmare, but was instead only a little uncomfortable. Like the ones where you trip or step off the edge of a sidewalk, but nothing really bad happens in the dream. Or maybe a dream where you forgot something or found yourself with no pants on in the middle of a class. That kind of dream. Not a tragedy. A low level, but still somewhat uncomfortable dream. Write it out here:

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Okay, great. Now re-imagine the dream in a different way in which it turns out great. Like in the dream example mentioned above, when you trip, instead of falling, you roll into a pile of money and now you are rich. Really use your imagination, like a kid would. Don’t use logic, use playful imagination instead. The more imaginative and outlandish you can be, the better.

If this seems really difficult to do, I get it. It seems like I’m asking you to be silly when this is a serious problem we are trying to fix. And I don’t want you to think that I am not taking it very serious. This therapy has been working for a lot of people for many years AND a lot of my clients have benefitted from it. So it may seem like silly play here, but it’s calculated play. We are getting the neurons in your brain to develop new pathways in which your stress response will be less likely to be triggered. Write your newly imagined dream here:

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Okay, how was this? Rank your confidence in being able to re-write with imagination your dream: \_\_\_\_\_\_

1 – no confidence

2 – a very small amount of confidence

3 – some mild confidence

4 – somewhat confident

5 – confident, I can do it

If you are able to rank yourself at a 1, 2, or 3, then redo the above exercise over and over with only slightly uncomfortable dreams until you are at a level four. You can use the back of this paper to write down additional dreams and re-imagined dreams.

If you are able to rank yourself a 4 or 5, then do the following exercise:

As best you can, write down a difficult bad dream or nightmare.

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Good job. You are likely feeling uncomfortable right now. Normally, this discomfort would be explored and discussed, but for this particular therapy, we actually want to only briefly acknowledge the discomfort and then gently push on to the next exercise. So right now, briefly say to yourself, “I feel this discomfort. I feel all of it. Now I’m going to work towards healing, I’m going to try to move forward from this.” Keep reading, keep your eye on finishing. You are almost there. You are doing great.

Now using your imagination, change up the dream. Remember, don’t use logic. You could use your imagination to fly or have special powers. People who die in the dream can live or come back to life or turn into a beautiful tree, absolutely anything can happen. People who have injured you can turn into something very small. A massive catastrophe can be re-imagined as a gateway experience to another, incredible world for those we lost. It’s limitless what you can imagine.

This takes work because you are having to re-write pathways and we often have a lot of resistance to doing this. Maybe we feel it isn’t honorable or right, maybe we feel it’s ridiculous. Maybe it feels like I don’t get how bad your experience is. But I do get it. And I want the best for you. Please keep going forward. Use your imagination to dream up a new dream.

However, don’t be too pushy with yourself. You can put this down and come back another day when it might seem more acceptable, like tomorrow, or when you’ve had a rest.

# **Your Re-imagined Dream**

When and if you are ready, write down your re-imagined dream, keeping it much more positive than the actual dream.

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Alright. Great job. Now, write your re-imagined dream again below. This helps to re-route those pathways. If you aren’t doing the writing, then please re-say the re-imagined dream.

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And one more time, write the dream again (or say it).

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# **One Last Step**

Okay, excellent. Tonight, when you fall asleep, silently say the re-imagined dream to yourself over and over. If you notice a reduction in stress during the nightmares or a reduction in all nightmares then congratulate yourself for this. It’s a big deal and you did it. Enjoy this accomplishment.

If you are not seeing results, then continue re-writing or re-saying the re-imagined dreams, really trying to tap your imagination and playfulness. Be a friend to yourself here, even though you aren’t seeing results. For some of my clients, it took a few months before they were able to see results. Continue to listen to the podcasts, particularly to the mindfulness sections. That can help loosen things up. It’s important to continue to encourage your efforts. Congratulate and encourage yourself for your sincere efforts.

\*Image Rehearsal Therapy was developed by Barry Krakow in the 1990’s. Exposure, Relaxation, Rescripting Therapy (ERRT) was first developed by Joanne Davis.

If in a crisis, call 800-273-8255. Working with a Licensed Therapist is always recommended. This material is designed for you to take to your therapist OR for you to have valuable, helpful information if you would prefer to work independent from a therapist. Julia Vanover, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker is the author of this material.