



Rewriting Nightmares: Imagery Rehearsal for Better Sleep

An explainer and imagery rehearsal worksheet · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)
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At a glance

- Recurring nightmares are common after stress or trauma, and they can disrupt sleep and mood.
- Imagery Rehearsal Therapy (IRT) teaches you to rewrite a nightmare and rehearse the new version while awake.
- It is one of the best-supported treatments for chronic nightmares.

Why nightmares repeat

After a frightening or stressful experience, nightmares can become a learned habit. The brain replays the same script night after night. Fear of having a nightmare can also make it harder to fall asleep, creating a cycle of poor sleep and more distress.

How imagery rehearsal works

1. Choose one recurring nightmare. Start with a less intense one.
2. Write it down briefly, without dwelling on the most upsetting details.
3. Change the dream in any way you like. It can be small or dramatic.
4. Write out the new version in detail.
5. Rehearse the new dream in your imagination for 10–20 minutes each day.
6. Over a few weeks, notice changes in how often and how intensely the nightmare comes.

A gentle note: If your nightmares are connected to trauma, you don't need to write out the traumatic details. Focus on the new version. If this work feels overwhelming, pause and consider doing it with a therapist.

What the research says

A randomized trial found that imagery rehearsal therapy significantly reduced nightmares and improved sleep and PTSD symptoms in sexual assault survivors (Krakow et al., 2001).

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends imagery rehearsal therapy for the treatment of nightmare disorder (Morgenthaler et al., 2018).

Tool: My Imagery Rehearsal Worksheet

1. The nightmare (a brief summary, without the most upsetting details):

2. How I'd like to feel in the new dream (safe, strong, calm, free):

3. My new dream, written in detail (what I see, hear, feel, and do):

Rehearsal and sleep log

Day	Rehearsed (minutes)	Nightmare? (Y/N)	Intensity (0–10) / notes
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thu			
Fri			
Sat			
Sun			

Strategies to try

- **Protect your wind-down.** Avoid upsetting shows or news before bed.
- **Keep a consistent sleep schedule.** Regular wake times help stabilize sleep.
- **Ground when you wake.** Turn on a soft light, name where you are and the date, and breathe slowly.
- **Be patient.** Many people notice improvement within a few weeks of daily rehearsal.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Start with a "practice" dream.** Begin with a less intense nightmare, not your most distressing one, to learn the skill.
- **Change anything.** The new ending doesn't need to be realistic. You can add a superhero, shrink the threat, turn it into a cartoon, or make yourself strong.
- **Rehearse in the daytime.** Rehearse the new dream for 10–20 minutes during the day, not just at bedtime, so the new story becomes familiar.
- **Add a sensory anchor.** Include something soothing in your new dream, like a scent, a warm colour, or a safe person's voice. Use that same cue when you wake.
- **Keep a "landing kit."** Keep water, a soft light, and a grounding object by your bed for waking up after a nightmare.

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

What feelings does my recurring nightmare leave me with?

What do I most need to feel in my sleep: safety, strength, comfort?

What helps me feel safe at night?

What changed after I began rehearsing a new dream?

When to reach out for support

If nightmares happen often, are linked to trauma, or affect your daytime functioning, please talk with a therapist or doctor. Trauma-focused therapy and nightmare treatments can help a great deal.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Krakow, B., et al. (2001). Imagery rehearsal therapy for chronic nightmares in sexual assault survivors with posttraumatic stress disorder: A randomized controlled trial. *JAMA*, 286(5), 537–545.

Morgenthaler, T. I., et al. (2018). Position paper for the treatment of nightmare disorder in adults: An American Academy of Sleep Medicine position paper. *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine*, 14(6), 1041–1055.

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