

Nightmares



Introduction

Nightmares are a common problem for trauma survivors. Along with flashbacks and unwanted memories, nightmares are one of the ways in which a trauma survivor may relive the trauma for months or years after the event.

Post-traumatic stress-induced nightmares are generally defined as threatening or frightening dreams that can wake a person up and may be marked by any intense negative emotions, such as fear, anger, or even sadness. These nightmares cause significant distress (both during the dream, and after awakening) and may occur several times a week.

Nightmares are part of the post traumatic symptoms associated with re-experiencing, commonly known as flashbacks. This is when the memory of a trauma is involuntarily recalled, either while awake in the form of flashbacks, or at night in the form of nightmares. These intrusive trauma memories can be remarkably vivid, overwhelmingly emotional, and are experienced as if they were really happening right then and there. They are accompanied by intense feelings of fear and anger, often similar to the emotions that were experienced during the traumatic event itself. The body reacts in a stress response while remembering the event: the person's heart beats fast, they begin to sweat, and painful bodily sensations may arise. The memories may come back repeatedly no matter how much the person does not want to remember. Nightmares wake people up and cause sleep disturbances. Often people are unable or afraid to go back to sleep, so they cause sleep deprivation and issues with insomnia which have health and wellbeing implications.

There is an ongoing debate with no consensus for why we have nightmares. Many experts believe that dreaming is part of the mind's way of processing emotions and consolidating memory. Bad dreams and nightmares, then, may be a component of emotional response to fear and trauma, but more research is needed to definitively explain why nightmares occur. Deirdre Barrett (1996), a psychologist at Harvard University, theorizes that nightmares are helpful to our survival or else they probably would have been done away with by evolution. She states that nightmares act as the brain's way of focusing a person's attention on issues they need to address.

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Treatment for nightmares

Fortunately, there are steps you and your counselor, if you are working with one, can take to lessen the frequency of your nightmares and the effect they are having on your life.

First, behavioral changes and steps you can take on your own that may reduce the nightmare frequency include:



Keep a regular wake-sleep schedule. This means going to sleep and waking up at the same time each day



Engage in regular exercise, which may help alleviate nightmare-causing anxiety and stress



Some form of meditation practice may also be helpful



Practicing good sleep hygiene. This includes making your bedroom a relaxing and peaceful place reserved for sleep, and being cautious about the use of alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine, which can disrupt sleep patterns, and not watching TV or using electronics (e.g., phone, computer) right up to your bedtime. It is best to stop TV viewing and electronics use at least one hour before your bedtime; and avoid dinner and snacks close to bedtime.



Nightmare Protocols

Below are 2 protocols developed by experts to help with nightmares:

Nightmare Protocol 1

Developed by Babette Rothschild (2000)

This is a step by step guide to halting traumatic memories. When you use it for the first time it should be under the guidance of a mental health counselor and practiced in a counseling session. Afterwards you can read the statement before bed (reading out loud is best) and follow the protocol if you are woken up by a nightmare. It takes time to reduce nightmares, but with practice it is possible.

Read the sentences below aloud, filling in the gaps:

1. Today I have been feeling really worried about/scared of _____.
2. So, I might have a nightmare and wake up feeling _____. (name the feeling: e.g. scared, sick, angry, sad)
3. If that happens, I will tell myself that I had the nightmare because I am remembering _____. (Name the event, but no details: e.g. "the bad thing that happened," "the bad person,").
4. I will then turn on the light and look around my room and name 5 things that I see in the room.
5. And I will then tell myself that I just had a nightmare and that _____ (the event) is not happening to me now or anymore.
6. If necessary, I will get up from bed and do something for 10 minutes or more (e.g. have a glass of water; look at, name and touch 5 objects; listen to some calming music; talk to somebody) that will help remind me of where and when I am and that what I am remembering is not happening right now.

7. When I am sufficiently calm I will return to bed.
8. I will repeat this protocol every time I have a nightmare.

Nightmare Protocol 2

From DBT Skills Training Handouts and Worksheets, Second Edition by Marsha M. Linehan.

Step by Step When Nightmares Keep You from Sleeping

	1. Practice relaxation, pleasant imagery, and coping skills first, to be sure you are ready to work on changing your nightmares. Do progressive relaxation, and/or slow deep breathing exercises; listen to music or guided imagery.
	2. Choose a recurring nightmare you would like to work on. This will be your target nightmare. Select a nightmare you can manage now. Put off trauma nightmares until you are ready to work with them.
	3. Write down your target nightmare. Include sensory descriptions (sights, smells, sounds, tastes, etc.). Also include any thoughts, feelings, and assumptions about yourself during the dream.
	4. Choose a changed outcome for the nightmare. The change should occur BEFORE anything traumatic or bad happens to you or others in the nightmare. Essentially, you want to come up with a change that will prevent the bad outcome of the usual nightmare from occurring. Write an ending that will give you a sense of peace when you wake up. Note: Changes in the nightmare can be very unusual and out of the ordinary (e.g., you might become a person with superhuman powers who is able to escape to safety or fight off attackers). Changed outcomes can include changed thoughts, feelings, or assumptions about yourself.
	5. Write down the full nightmare with the changes.
	6. REHEARSE and RELAX each night before going to sleep. Rehearse the changed nightmare by visualizing the entire dream with the changes each night, before practicing relaxation techniques.
	7. REHEARSE and RELAX during the day. Visualize the entire dream with the change, and practice relaxation as often as possible during the day.

References & Further Reading

1. Barrett, D., ed. (1996) Trauma and dreams. Harvard University Press. [MBI, aAR, MSc]
2. Linehan MM. *DBT® Skills Training Manual, Second Edition*. New York, NY: Guilford Press; 2015. [[Google Scholar](#)]
3. ROTHSCCHILD, B. (2000). The body remembers: The psychophysiology of trauma and trauma treatment. New York: Norton