



How Do Nightmares Affect You?

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Jenna was running as hard as she could. She was being chased by a frightening mob. Hands grabbed at her from behind. Finally she stumbled and was caught in their grips...

Robert was climbing a sheer cliff. He kept looking down in fear at the thousand-foot drop to the bottom. In an instant, he lost his footing and started falling straight down...

Billy was fighting a fierce dragon with bright red eyes. It got closer and closer until finally it grasped him in its claws and opened its mouth to bite...

Jill felt trapped in a dark, tight crevice. Fear overwhelmed her as, no matter how much she struggled, she couldn't escape...

Each of these was a nightmare. Each ended at the height of a fearful moment when the person awoke. These represent four common nightmare themes: 1) being chased, 2) falling, 3) being attacked by a monster—especially common among children, and 4) being stuck.

What Are Nightmares?

Everyone knows what nightmares are. We all know when we've had one. But scientists have yet to develop a single, thorough definition that explains these frightening episodes that happen in our sleep.

Those who have studied nightmares have gathered a lot of information however. First of all, a nightmare is a dream. It is usually a frightening dream that causes a sudden awakening in sleep. Upon waking, the dreamer experiences intense fear or anxiety and has an immediate recall for what's going on in the dream. The dreamer becomes alert and usually experiences increased heartbeat and rapid breathing, so returning to sleep is often difficult. Typically the dreamer can describe the plot in detail.

This explanation holds true for most but not all nightmares. For example, some people don't awaken suddenly from their nightmares. The nightmare lingers and when the dreamer finally does waken, he or she may have only a groggy recall of the plot.

Also, there are other variations of dreams that could be called "nightmares" because they cause a painful emotional response that awakens the dreamer, but the emotional response is not fear. The response may be one of sadness, guilt or anger.

For example, people sometimes dream about loved ones who have recently died and waken in overwhelming sadness. Sometimes people dream about a person who has recently done them wrong and awaken in intense anger. And sometimes people have dreams in which they have done something wrong themselves and awaken with feelings of embarrassment or guilt.

Also there are two sleep disorders similar to nightmares. They are "night terrors" and "REM behavioral disorder."

Night terrors are nocturnal episodes of extreme anxiety or panic in which the person moves all over the bed and may scream or yell. These are not nightmares, as they do not occur in REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. Typically people experiencing these wake everyone near them but don't awaken themselves. This sleep disorder is most common in children aged 4 to 12.

REM behavioral disorder usually happens in middle-aged men. It is characterized by vivid, violent, action-filled nightmares in which the dreamers physically act out the images by flailing or punching, often hurting anyone sleeping next to them. This sleep disorder is not common and those who have it rarely have an associated mental health disorder.

Routine nightmares, like other dreams, usually happen in the latter half of the night. That's the time when REM sleep predominates.

Nightmares and Mental Health

People experience more frequent nightmares at times when they're feeling stressed, anxious, or upset. Our dream sleep often reflects what's happening in our daily lives.

Also nightmares occur more often in people with PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder). Those with this disorder experience ongoing anxiety due to a harrowing, past event such as fighting in a war or being the victim of physical or sexual abuse. In this case, the nightmares are usually about the traumatic event from the past. It's as if the PTSD sufferer reprocesses the stressful event over and over in their dreams.

Nevertheless, the presence of nightmares by itself doesn't mean that someone has a mental health problem. But if nightmares cause a heightened emotional state that persists for more than a half-hour, particularly if it bothers the person for a large part of the day, then this could be a sign of an underlying mental health problem.

What Can We Do about Nightmares?

Generally, people experiencing nightmares don't require mental health treatment. But treatment can help if nightmares cause anguish throughout the day or if the nightmares cause too much loss of sleep. On the other hand, people experiencing nightmares due to a mental health problem such as PTSD can definitely be helped by ongoing counseling for their mental health problem.

When dealing with nightmares, what works is what people usually do. Upon waking with a "bad dream," we usually make an assessment of our situation. We quickly recognize that we were dreaming and that the content of the dream was not real. Then we feel it's safe to go back to sleep.

Children who awaken with bad dreams might need a parent's help in recognizing that the dream was not real and that there's nothing to fear. Parents can be rational and soothing at the same time.

Rich Bayer, Ph.D., is the CEO of Upper Bay Counseling and Support Services, Inc. and a practicing psychologist.

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