

The Dream Journal

What research tells us about dreaming, and how to listen to your own

Everyone dreams, most nights, whether or not they remember it. Keeping a dream journal is a gentle way to notice what your mind is working on, to see links with your waking life, and to bring material into therapy if you choose to.

01 A night of sleep

Sleep moves in cycles of roughly 90 minutes



02 What the research suggests



Recall depends on when you wake

In sleep labs, people woken from REM report a dream around 8 times in 10; from non-REM, about half the time.

Schredl et al., 2013



Dreams echo waking life

The “continuity” view: our concerns, relationships and emotionally intense experiences often find their way into dreams.

Schredl & Hofmann, 2003



Attention boosts recall

Keeping a dream diary increases recall, especially for people who rarely remember dreams. Distraction on waking makes dreams fade fast.

Schredl, 2002



Sleep and emotion

A leading theory is that REM sleep helps process emotional memories. It is promising, but the evidence is still being debated.

Walker & van der Helm, 2009

How to catch a dream

- 1 **Set an intention** as you fall asleep: “I’d like to remember my dreams.”
- 2 **Keep this journal and a pen** within reach of your bed.
- 3 **On waking, stay still** with eyes closed and gently replay what you can.
- 4 **Write before anything else**, before checking your phone.
- 5 **Fragments count.** A single image or feeling is worth noting.
- 6 **Write in the present tense.** “I am walking through...”

Working with a dream

01

Explore

Describe images and feelings; notice what each reminds you of.

02

Understand

Consider how it might connect to your life right now.

03

Act

Ask what you might change in the dream, or in your day.

Based on Clara Hill’s cognitive-experiential model of dream work. Your own associations matter more than any “dream dictionary”: the same image can mean very different things to different people.

03 Common dream themes

Shared across many people and cultures

Being chased

Falling

School or exams

Being late

Flying

Teeth falling out

Surveys find that themes like these are reported by large numbers of people (Nielsen et al., 2003). Being chased is among the most common. A shared theme can still carry a very personal meaning, so notice what it feels like and brings up *for you*.

When dreams are distressing

Occasional nightmares are common. Frequent or trauma-related nightmares are **treatable**: approaches such as **Imagery Rehearsal Therapy** have good research support (Krakow et al., 2001; Morgenthaler et al., 2018). If a dream relates to trauma, explore it with your therapist rather than on your own.

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