

HEALTHY MINDS
A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS
Elliott B. Sewell, MAE, LPCC, NCC

Dreams



While we sleep there is a certain stage where brain activity resembles wakeful consciousness, according to electroencephalograms (EEG) which is also associated with rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. The average person actually spends about six years dreaming during a lifetime, or about two hours a night. During this time, there is little stimulation of motor neurons preventing us from making movements that would cause injury. It is not fully understood why we dream, but it is known that certain natural body chemicals may be involved. This REM sleep, furthermore, occurs in various species of mammals and birds as well.

There are many theories about the function of dreams, which I will sum up. Perhaps the various external stimuli that we experience while sleeping become part of the dream in order to keep us asleep; perhaps our repressed thoughts that would otherwise shock or embarrass us emerge as dream fantasy; perhaps dreams are like the cleaning-up processes of computers ridding our minds of extraneous trash while we sleep; perhaps the dream is trying to tell us something hidden in our thoughts; perhaps dreams are just random thoughts, most of which we reject but sometimes come upon something very useful; perhaps dreams are used to regulate our moods; one theorist (Hartmann) says that dreams may function like psychotherapy, allowing the dreamer to make associations in a “safe place”; another theorist says that dreaming may lower stress levels by meeting emotional expectations on an unconscious level; another similar theory says that we test out various emotional plans while sleeping and select the best ones to use during our waking hours; other theories suggest that dreams can help heal physical damage and wear-and-tear by send out signals to the “repair nerves”; Karl Jung said that dreams create a balance for one-sided thoughts we hold while awake; Sigmund Freud said that bad dreams allow the brain to overcome negative emotions because of troubling experiences.

Although Freud’s theories are certainly not the newest (he died in 1939), his studies and writings about dreams have formed an important basis of our understanding. He said that everything that we did was not a chance occurrence but often came from our unconscious mind. In our modern world, many of our primitive instincts and urges are repressed, and work their way to the surface in ways that are not so obvious.

One way occurs in slips of the tongue (Freudian slips); others in the kind of “humor” that we use. Here I want to discuss the way our hidden urges and thoughts come out in our dreams, which are directly connected to our unconscious mind, according to Freud, and often in indirect or symbolic ways. Our unconscious mind suppresses these instincts, thoughts and desires (which he called the id) because of cultural taboos that we have incorporated into our mind (the superego). During sleep, our “defenses” are down and we unconsciously act or express these desires. Thus it is wish fulfillment that is the

motivating force for dreams: wish for more power, more control, resolution of unsatisfying romantic relationships, and other thoughts that are repressed during the waking stage. It is a way of fulfilling those matters during which have not been otherwise been satisfied.

Freud's method for understanding the hidden meaning of our dreams is a method of decoding using five methods. Displacement means that our desire for a person or object is symbolized by someone or something else (it is displaced).

Projection occurs when one's own repressed desires are replaced in the dream (projected upon) another person.

Symbolization is when your hidden urges are acted out in a metaphoric or symbolic way, or when certain objects or processes represent something else (like a car might represent your freedom of movement, as might flying dreams, or former residences might symbolize unresolved issues from the past, or a tornado might symbolize a whirlwind of confusion in your mind). Freud believed that sex was one of the prime concerns of our dreams, but other issues and worries also were driving forces. He also believed that certain objects in the dream, according to their form and shape represented male (cigars, knives, clubs) or female (caves, bowls, tunnels) genitalia.

Condensation is a way of hiding desires or emotions by reducing them to a very brief moment in the dream, where the symbolic image is not very obvious.

Rationalization is often the last stage of dreaming where the mind reorganizes the dream into a form that is more understandable.

We must take into mind that Freud lived during a period of history when there was much suppression of sexual matters and other personal issues, ones that affected not only others, but the great doctor himself. Though times have changed in many ways, many of us still live in an atmosphere of repression where we are taught to wipe certain "evil" thoughts concerning anger, jealousy, and sexual desire out of our conscious minds. Nevertheless, these thoughts can't be willed away and they move to our unconscious minds where they may later reemerge as dreams. These dreams are not always straightforward and easy to understand, but when examined carefully may open up a window into our soul, or at least into our hidden personal or troubling thoughts.

TIP OF THE WEEK: Some warning signs of mental health problems should be noted. If they are troubling and persistent you might wish to contact a qualified mental health provider: if you have lost pleasure in life; feel guilty or worthless; withdraw from people; cry a great deal for no reason; get easily angry or irritated; if you lose interest in formerly pleasurable activities or hobbies; if your energy level drops a great deal; if you feel agitated or have racing thoughts; if you want to harm yourself or others; if you believe that others are out to get you; if you hear voices or see images that others don't; if you are feeling lots of anxiety, if you are depressed a great deal of the time, or; if you have trouble getting sleep at night. Sometimes there are just issues that need to be

discussed with someone whom you trust and in whom you have confidence. Sometimes you may need help in finding solutions to real pressing problems (economic, social, relationship, etc.). Sometimes a change in lifestyle can make a big difference. The bottom line is: your life is a gift of unknown duration; every moment is precious; every moment lost in anger, agitation, self-pity, unhappiness, and other forms of negativity cannot be redeemed. It is time to maximize the enjoyment of your life, preferably from being able to deal with your problems through understanding and changing your behavior (rather than through medication [prescriptive] or through self-medication [alcohol or illicit drugs]).