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Sweet Dreams Are Made of This

Understand the science behind having happier dreams to reclaim a good night's sleep.

BY JENNIFER KING LINDLEY

Did you spend last night being chased by zombies or taking an exam you never studied for? “The majority of our dreams involve negative emotions,” says Antonio Zadra, PhD, a sleep and dream researcher at the University of Montreal. However, by

understanding what causes disturbing dreams, you can take steps to reduce their frequency and up your chances of waking up with a smile. We bring you the bedtime basics so you can turn your dream for a more peaceful night into a reality.

8 Hacks for Happier Dreams

Trust us, you'll want to use these strategies tonight.

1 TRY DREAM INCUBATION

Invite a dream of your choosing by “obsessing about” the desired subject during the day, suggests Lauri Loewenberg, a dream analyst and author of *Dream on It: Unlock Your Dreams, Change Your Life*. Perhaps you would love a visit with the beloved grandmother you cherished as a child. That day, keep Grandma's picture nearby, talk about her with your sister, wear an heirloom scarf of hers. Right before you drift off, tell yourself, “I want to dream about Grandma tonight,” and play out in your head the way you'd like the dream to go. “There are no guarantees,” says Loewenberg, “but you might find yourself having a wonderful reunion.”

2 PROMPT YOUR SENSES

German researchers found that sleepers exposed to the scent of roses reported sweeter dreams. Spritz your pillow with a scent you find pleasurable, such as lavender, suggests Zadra. “You might not dream you are walking in a garden,” he says. “But your emotional response to the scent may positively influence your dream.”

3 SKIP THE LATE EVENING GLASS OF WINE

One of the most common causes of disrupted dreams is booze too close to bedtime. “At first, alcohol acts as a sedative, putting you to sleep,” explains Rubin Naiman, PhD, a sleep and dream specialist at the University of Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine. “But as your body metabolizes it over the next several hours, REM is suppressed.” You may wake abruptly while a giant lobster is ringing your doorbell.

4 DITCH DAYTIME ANXIETY

“When a patient says she's suddenly troubled by bad dreams, the first thing I ask is what's going on in her waking life,” says Christopher Winter, MD, author of *The Sleep Solution*. It's easier to avoid facing issues by distracting yourself with an overflowing to-do list or another round of Angry Birds. Unresolved, these concerns pop up in dreams. Cope with stress by exercising, talking it out with someone or practicing mindfulness. A 2015 study in *JAMA Internal Medicine* found that mindfulness meditation improved sleep quality.

5 CULTIVATE BEDTIME ZEN

“Whatever you think about right before bed can be incorporated into your dreams,” says clinical sleep specialist Michael Breus, PhD, author of *The Power of When*. Set the stage for a peaceful transition to dreamland. “Don't get into a heated discussion with your spouse about the family budget while you're lying in bed,” he says. Nor is this the time to catch up on *American Horror Story*. Instead, Breus often suggests patients write in a gratitude journal before drifting off. List five things you're grateful for and describe them in detail—those warm feelings might carry over to your dreams.

WHY DO WE DREAM?

Scientists are still debating. One leading theory is that dreams act as a sort of mental housekeeping: They help us process the important and often the more troubling experiences and emotions of our day. “Generally you don't dream about your trip to the store to buy milk. You dream about the big deadline or the fight you had with your spouse,” says Winter. Significant happy events are processed too. Pregnant women have particularly vivid dreams about babies. “It seems clear that whatever preoccupies us during the day finds its way into our dreams at night,” concludes Zadra.

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MAKE YOUR BEDROOM A HAVEN

Our sleeping brains weave physical discomforts and external annoyances into our dream plot lines. (That beeping garbage truck outside your window can turn up as a sinister robot.) So get comfy: Keep your bedroom cool—between 60 and 67 degrees. Also make your room as dark as possible. “Even light from electronics can trickle across your eyelids, disturbing your dream quality,” says Naiman. Use white noise (like a fan) to drown out sounds.



8

REWRITE BAD DREAMS

To treat patients troubled by recurring nightmares, sleep doctors use a technique called image rehearsal therapy. Once you wake up, write down your recurring dream in as much detail as you remember. Now

7

AVOID REM REBOUND

Your body craves REM, so if you don't get enough one night, you make up for it the next. “It's a phenomenon called REM rebound,” explains Naiman. And it can cause intense and disturbing dreams. (Cue your teeth falling out...again). Aim for 7 to 9 hours of shut-eye each night. If possible (hey, we can dream), go to bed early enough so you rise naturally before your alarm to avoid being awakened mid-dream.

rewrite the scary part with a different, happier ending. Perhaps instead of falling from a jagged cliff and crashing into the rocks below you sprout wings and soar joyfully above a glittering ocean. Reread your new script often during the day and before bed. “It may take a few weeks,” says Breus, “but it really does work.”

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE DREAM?

Most dreaming occurs during the rapid eye movement (REM) stage of sleep—so named because our eyes dart back and forth watching those midnight movies that our sleeping brains unspool. During REM, the prefrontal cortex (the logical center of the brain) powers down, while the amygdala (the emotional part) ramps up. The result: Waking rules don't apply and our visions are surreal and symbolic. Your boss might appear as a barking dog. Your childhood home becomes a circus tent. As the night goes on, we spend more of our sleeping time in REM, notes Winter. Dreams get longer and more complex. (That's why a saved-by-the-alarm-clock dream can be a doozy.)

NIGHTMARE SCENARIO

getting back to sleep

It's 3 a.m. You've just escaped the clutches of kidnappers. Remind yourself it was only a dream, then follow our doctors' suggestions.

↓ **Breathe easy**
Inhale as you count to four, hold it for a count of six and exhale to a count of seven, suggests Breus. Repeat for a minute or so to lower your heart rate and induce relaxation.

↓ **Distract yourself**
Visualize doing a favorite activity step by step, like playing a round of golf or baking a loaf of your special pumpkin bread. “Rarely will you get past the fourth hole or put the bread in the oven,” says Winter.

↓ **Shuffle your thoughts**
As you drift off, your train of thought naturally goes off the tracks. Winter says you can mimic this process to derail your worries. Think of something random that starts with the letter A (like an apple) and visualize it for a few seconds. Move on to an unconnected B (boat), C (cat)... It's unlikely you'll get to Zzzzzzzzzz.

↓ **Get up**
If your mind is revving, leave your bed and read for 5 or 10 minutes. Skip *How to Get Along with Difficult People* or *Preventing World War III*. Breus suggests light fiction instead of nonfiction, which may stir up daytime concerns. Use a small book light rather than a glaring overhead one. And as soon as those eyelids droop, get back under the covers.

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Happy Dreams Decoded

It's usually pretty easy to read into the meaning behind bad dreams, but good dreams can be a bit more cryptic. Some common ones:



GOOD DREAM Flying

WHAT IT MIGHT MEAN

Rising above your cares or reaching high goals



GOOD DREAM Swimming underwater in a beautiful location

WHAT IT MIGHT MEAN

A sense of freedom, "bathing" in the positive aspects of yourself



GOOD DREAM Discovering a new room in your house

WHAT IT MIGHT MEAN

Learning something new about yourself



GOOD DREAM Sex

WHAT IT MIGHT MEAN

Sex!



GOOD DREAM Pregnancy

WHAT IT MIGHT MEAN

Very creative, giving birth to a new idea or project



total recall

Are you one of those people who thinks they NEVER dream? "We all dream. You're just not remembering your dreams," says Loewenberg. Light sleepers naturally recollect more because they often wake up in the middle of theirs. Thankfully, dream recall is like a muscle—you can strengthen it with some exercise.



Don't move.

Linger quietly in the exact position you woke up in for a few minutes. "If you leap up instantly and dash for the shower, it's like unplugging from your dream," explains Loewenberg.



Find one detail.

Try to recall any thin thread you can. "You might only remember red lipstick. Ask yourself who was wearing it. What was she doing? How did you feel about her?" says Loewenberg. Other details may quickly follow.



Write it down.

Keeping a bedside journal can help connect you to the dreaming part of your brain. Write down your dreams or sketch them out and give each one a title. Where the Heck are My Airline Tickets?

MARS AND VENUS IN DREAMLAND

Bad dreams differ by gender, according to research at the University of Montreal. Men report more nightmares about natural disasters: floods, earthquakes, wars, plagues of insects. Women dream more of interpersonal conflict—fights with friends, colleagues and family members.

Doctoring Your Dreams

These four situations require a professional. Talk to your physician if:



You might have sleep apnea

This common condition, in which your airway collapses during sleep and breathing is interrupted, can manifest in “choking” dreams. “Patients will say, ‘I dreamed I was swallowing my pillow,’ or ‘I dreamed I was drowning.’ If you’re having difficulty breathing, your brain weaves it into a dream narrative,” says Winter. Because sleep apnea causes frequent waking, you remember more of those dreams too. If this sounds like a typical night, ask your doctor for an evaluation.



You’ve just started a new med

“Drugs for blood pressure, some antidepressants and other medications can all cause vivid, disturbing dreams,” Breus says. Bring up your concern with your prescribing doctor.



You’re frequently disturbed by dreams

When nightmares happen three or more times per week and cause significant distress, they may meet the criteria for a nightmare disorder, notes Lisa Medalie, PsyD, behavioral sleep medicine specialist at the University of Chicago. These disorders can make it difficult or scary to fall asleep and result in exhaustion.



You’ve experienced something traumatic

Recurring nightmares caused by a specific event (such as abuse or a car accident) also require professional help. To find a psychologist, visit psychologytoday.com.