

## Introduction

# Have you ever dreamt of being chased, falling, or having your teeth fall out? Read on for what these common dreams mean and what to do about them.

**W**hy would anyone *want* nightmares or anxiety dreams? If you're a part of more than half the population, which has experienced an anxiety dream or nightmare within the last month, then this may even be what you *wish* you could get rid of, right? This unfortunate view of "bad" dreams as things to avoid is precisely the reason for the above title and for this article. Such an avoidance approach is much like putting a Band-Aid on a car's blinking oil light because it seems annoying. Of course fifty miles later, it would be greatly preferable to have understood the warning. Though perhaps not obvious, the simple fact is that almost all nightmares and especially recurring dreams provide an extremely valuable service to the dreamer. If we block them, we are likely missing their immediate benefit; if we remember but ignore them, we may well be missing the vital message that they are trying to bring us about our life.

Almost everyone has experienced one or more dreams that contain anxiety or outright fear. For some people, such unpleasant dreams or nightmares recur repeatedly. For others, the content changes while the theme remains the same, such as scenes of falling, or of being pursued or attacked, late or unprepared for a presentation or an exam, stuck in slow motion, unable to move or scream, or naked in public, to name a few common themes. Such anxiety dreams are associated with lack of progress by the dreamer to recognize and solve related conflicts in life.

Though it has been scientifically proven that we all dream every night, fear of nightmares and other anxieties or misguided beliefs about dreams and the unconscious can even block dream recall. This can usually be overcome by learning about the useful nature of dreams and by recognizing that the majority of nightmares, like a bitter but quite necessary medicine, represent opportunities for personal healing through much-needed emotional release. They are often indirectly or directly warning us about current

behavior patterns, life trends, or psychological imbalances that need to be remedied if we don't want such unpleasant dreams to repeat, or worsen. Sometimes, such imbalances resolve themselves to a degree as the dream percolates into waking thought and we unknowingly respond and make adjustments in our life. Yet if we block, deny or ignore such messages from the subconscious for too long, then it has to speak 'louder' to get our attention—often by bringing related events into our waking hours. I use the term 'daymares' for such events, which show up as sickness, accidents, relationship difficulties or other unfortunate life circumstances that then force us outright to deal with the issue at hand. Interestingly enough, such events often have repeating themes as well, such as recurring relationship patterns, for example.

Psychologist Ernest Rossi has put forth that an important function of dreaming as *integration*, the combining of separate psychological structures into a more balanced and comprehensive personality. Renown psychologist Carl Jung observed that portions of our whole personality which we knowingly or unknowingly judge become disowned, and are frequently projected outward in dreams, taking the form of aggressors, devils, monsters, intimidating animals or natural events, and so on. Jung referred to these symbolic figures as "the shadow". Whether we become aware of such shadow elements through nightmares or daymares, re-accepting these judged and disowned portions of ourselves is the message and the awaiting gift.

So we truly *are* lucky to have such nightmares, since they provide a natural 'pressure-release' therapy for the psyche. They may even provide what amounts to an early cure if we listen to, make an effort to understand, and then act upon the valuable insights such dreams try to bring us. *The goal is still to put an end to nightmares and recurring dreams, but by evolving them into more beneficial scenarios, and not by blocking, ignoring or denying them.*

# Resolving Nightmares

Occasionally, diet and especially medications can trigger anxiety dreams or nightmares, and the latter can even block normal dream recall. The anxiety dreams can be due to physiological reactions or also because intake of such items disturbs normal sleep patterns. An example is a large dinner of Chinese food not too long before bedtime followed by a nightmare during the night. Though there is less to be gained in trying to understand or work with the specific dreams on such occasions, the message is usually the same—the poor dietary habits or drugs are causing some serious physiological and psychological disturbances and need to be looked at and shifted if at all possible.

Fortunately, non-pharmaceutical treatments exist for anxiety and recurring dreams that are remarkably effective. Some of the most useful techniques include dream re-scripting, dream lucidity, guided imagery and mainstream therapies such as gestalt, psychosynthesis, focusing, or other such methods.

Current research on the lucid dreaming approach (where one recognizes during a dream that one is dreaming, hence gaining a degree of conscious control) is being done by doctors at Montreal's Sacré-Coeur Hospital Dream and Nightmare Laboratory

and elsewhere. The approach is demonstrated by this woman's dream:

*"After many recurring nightmares where I'm pursued by some terrifying figure, I learned of lucid dreaming and had the following dream: 'I'm in a frantic car chase with the pursuer right behind me. Swerving into a parking lot, I bolt out of the car and run with him hot on my heels. Suddenly, the scene seems familiar and I realize that I'm dreaming though the lot and trees still seem more real than ever. Drawing upon every ounce of courage that I have, I swirl to face my pursuer, repeating to myself that it's only a dream. Still afraid, I scream at him, "You can't hurt me!" He stops, looking surprised. For the first time I see his beautiful, loving eyes. "Hurt You?" he says. "I don't want to hurt you. I've been running after you all this time to tell you that I love you!" With that, he holds out his hands, and as I touch them, he dissolves into me. I awake filled with energy, feeling great for days.' Not only did the nightmare never return, but more importantly, I now find myself much better at facing unpleasant situations at work and in my personal life. Following what I learned in the dream, I'm much better at standing my ground and expressing my feelings when needed and appropriate, whereas before I would usually avoid or run from such situations." (M.R., San Jose, CA)*



# Suggestions for Common Nightmares and Recurring Dreams

**I**t has been extensively demonstrated that various nightmare and recurring dream themes are quite universal, even cross-culturally, *and* that such situations can be transformed into positive and even pleasant experiences. The key to such evolution is a change of perspective, often accompanied by a new emotional response to the situation such as taking on an attitude of acceptance, curiosity and exploration to replace the existing reaction of fear or judgment (as in the dream example above). When these types of dreams are connected with deep traumatic waking events, such as abuse, war, death, etc., the evolution of the dream into a more positive form may understandably take longer and require more waking attention and focus.

Though there is no unerring rule as to what any given dream might be about, a good rule of thumb is to re-experience the feeling of the dream and find out where this same feeling shows up in our waking life. The setting of the dream also often alludes to waking life connections, though perhaps figuratively. This is the rule of associative logic - the dream associates to our life, and sometimes to our past, by a specific feeling.

The following is not intended as a set-in-stone dream dictionary since dreamers and their experiences relating to specific symbols are so individual, nor should the re-scripting exercise necessarily be viewed as an instantaneous solution or cure. However, a great number of people have gotten a great deal of help and insight by learning about universal nightmare and anxiety dream themes that they are also experiencing, and especially by applying the re-scripting exercise accordingly. Here are some of the most common themes with suggestions about what the dreamer might look at in waking life (along with examples of positive outcomes for each scenario):

- **Chase or attack:** the pursuer usually represents a fearful aspect of our shadow, and hence an exaggerated version of a denied or inhibited portion of our own personality that would benefit us if integrated and appropriately expressed (ideal outcome: standing our ground, facing and dialoguing with our pursuer, and eventually, acceptance and embrace once the pursuer becomes transformed).





- **Falling (often towards death, it seems):** am I feeling heavy, unsupported, worried/fearful about something? How can I feel freer, lighter? Also: do I need to be more grounded? (Ideal outcome: feeling safe, floating or flying, able to land safely)
- **Car out of control or crashing:** is life too hectic, out of control? How could I slow down, act more peacefully and “enjoy the ride”? Alternately, is there an upcoming choice (i.e. sharp turn in the road) that I need to slow down in order to make safely? (Ideal outcome: driving safely and at ease and within speed limits, walking/biking peacefully).
- **Unprepared/late for or failing an exam:** am I feeling unprepared for some upcoming event? Unconfident about my performance? Am I worrying needlessly or is this a subconscious warning that I do actually need more preparation in order to feel confident and do a good job? (Ideal outcome: feeling assured about oneself, being prepared, and performing well).
- **Stuck in slow motion, unable to move or make any noise:** where in my life am I feeling stuck, like I’m getting nowhere or unable to voice my true feelings? What can I do to change it? (Ideal outcome: relaxation and acceptance, and eventually, peaceful action and self-expression).

- **Nude or scantily dressed in public (though nobody else seems to notice or mind):** where in life am I feeling unconfident, embarrassed, and unskilled? This type of dream is usually pointing out, when the other characters in the dream often don’t seem to notice, that we are the only one viewing ourself this way, and usually mistakenly so; (ideal outcome: comfortable with oneself as is, confident).
- **Personal injury, dismemberment:** what part of my life—not usually the physical body—have I been neglecting, mistreating, forgetting—i.e. dismembering as opposed to remembering? (Ideal outcome: healing).
- **Trapped, locked in:** where am I feeling trapped in life? How might I open myself up to a new perspective, and explore new courses of action? (Ideal outcome: breaking out, exploration).
- **Drowning, threatening (tidal) waves, or flooding:** am I blocking, denying or feeling overwhelmed by my emotions or feeling vulnerable about a personal relationship? How might I better acknowledge, accept, feel and appropriately express these feelings? (Ideal outcome: swimming, surfing, diving deeply and breathing underwater).
- **Helpless/abandoned/crying baby, monkey, bunny or small animal (sometimes your own young son or daughter):** have I been taking care of my “inner child”? My emotional and creative needs? Maybe I need to laugh more, play outdoors, express my creativity, be more spontaneous, or enjoy more personal warmth, connection, and intimacy? (Ideal outcome: caring for baby or animal, playing, simply having fun, more relaxed time for creative expression).



# Warning Dreams & Premonitions

**T**hough they are generally symbolic of psychological processes, some dreams and nightmares are intended as guidance or warnings on a very practical level. For example, if you were to dream about the brakes failing on your car, it might help to ponder whether you are figuratively having trouble “slowing yourself down” in your life. However, it would also be very wise to check the actual brakes on your automobile in waking life.

Such nightmares or anxiety dreams warn of current behavior trends, courses of action, or decisions that may soon become detrimental unless we change them, as exemplified in this dream by Stanford University pioneer sleep researcher Dr. William Dement:

*“Some years ago I was a heavy cigarette smoker, up to two packs a day. Then one night I had an exceptionally vivid and realistic dream in which I had inoperable cancer of the lung. I remember as though it was yesterday looking at the ominous shadow in my chest X-ray and realizing that the entire right lung was infiltrated. I experienced the incredible anguish of knowing my life was soon to end, that I would never see my children grow up, and that none of this would ever have happened if I had quit cigarettes when I first learned of their carcinogenic potential. I will never forget the surprise, joy, and exquisite relief of waking up. I felt I was reborn. Needless to say, the experience was sufficient to induce the immediate cessation of my cigarette habit.”*

Somehow, dreams have access to information above and beyond the physical senses, both in terms of geography and time. Exactly how this is possible is a very interesting question, both for the individual who has such experiences and for the scientific community in general. Unfortunately, a solely objective and scientific investigative approach often misses many valuable clues about the nature of reality, especially when it comes to the realm of subjective experiences such as dreams. The state of consciousness from where our dream experiences arise is not the same as the “normal” physical waking state (though the waking state even varies a great deal also). Perceptions through dreams or quiet reflection, daydreaming, meditation, and deep states of creativity arise from a realm beyond



our physical one, and hence come from outside our normal framework of time and space. Therefore it is no great surprise and even quite common, especially in dreams, that we can sense through a faculty other than the five external senses, information that within the physical world is either ahead or long past in terms of time, unavailable to us in terms of geographical location, or unknown to us although others in our life are aware of such information. Such awareness is nothing new and has been called many things including hunches, intuition, impulses, insight and so forth. These are simply names for the waking counterparts of the type of perceptions possible in dreams.

*Catholic Bishop Joseph Lanyl dreamed in advance of the assassination of the archduke of Austria, François-Ferdinand de Habsbourg. In vain, he tried to reach the archduke to warn him of the assassination, which occurred June 28, 1914 in Sarajevo—the event that triggered the First World War.*

*A few days before his assassination, American President Abraham Lincoln, who was very attentive to his dreams, dreamt of his own corpse laid out in a room in the white house.*

*A day before the Titanic’s demise, a woman on the infamous ship dreamt of the horrible event that was to occur the next day. She told her husband, who scoffed at her worries and ignored her pleas. However, the dream*



so affected her that she secretly prepared herself the night before and had all her children sleep in their warm clothes in order to be ready at a moment's notice. During the night, when the ship struck the iceberg, she and her children managed to escape and be rescued. Her husband, sadly, went down with the ship.

That it is possible to know about future events not only courts the disbelief of skeptics, but also often scares people who have such precognitive dreams. Since such experiences are actually common, people's apprehension is rather unfortunate, because the cultivation of such dreams can really grow them into a beneficial skill, much like a natural talent in music or writing or dance, and can truly become a helpful gift developed both for the benefit of the dreamer and for those around him or her. The benefit of this type of dreaming, detailed in depth in Dr. Harmon H. Bro's well-written book *Edgar Cayce on Dreams*, is shown by this dreamer's premonition:

*"I had a dream where my father had blood pouring out of an eye from an accident involving the machine he was working with, and I knew he had lost his eye. Upon awakening, I immediately phoned my parents and asked my father what he was planning that day. He said he was going to work in his workshop with his drill and circular*

*saw. Hearing this, I strongly urged him and eventually got him to promise to wear safety goggles while he was working. Then I spoke to my mother, told her the dream, and convinced her to keep a close eye on Dad. That night, Dad phoned in disbelief to tell me that a piece of wood or metal had flown off the saw right at his eye and shattered the safety glasses. He was very grateful and admitted to me that it was truly a miracle that his eye was untouched."* (S.B. Montreal, Qc)

So instead of wishing you sweet dreams, which you've heard many times before, I will go one step further, with your greatest fulfillment in mind, and wish you truly beautiful nightmares.

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**Craig Sim Webb**, Executive Director of the non-profit DREAMS Foundation ([www.dreams.ca](http://www.dreams.ca)), is a physicist and dream and consciousness researcher/author/inventor with pioneering dream and lucid dream research at California's Stanford University and Montreal's Sacre-Coeur Hospital. Craig is an invited expert for major motion pictures, fortune 500 corporations, many hundreds of international TV/radio/print/online media. To find out about [online dream mastery teleclasses](#), private consultations, or [VisionQuest spiritual retreat adventures](#), email: [training@dreams.ca](mailto:training@dreams.ca)

# Practical Exercise

## Re-scripting a Recurring Upsetting Dream

Select a recurring nightmare or upsetting dream which you've *recently* had (especially if it happened this morning!) and either from the recurring dream suggestions above or on your own, re-design a different ending to the dream. Choose something that leaves you feeling empowered, free and confident, and great about the new scenario, instead of the way you felt during or after the actual dream. Before lying down to fall asleep tonight, sit in a comfortable position and relax your body and mind completely for a couple minutes. It may help you to alternately tense and relax different parts of your body, and witness instead of concentrate upon any thoughts, which cross your mind. Let it all go until tomorrow. Then, once you're calm and quiet, mentally visualize

or remember the dream you've selected for this exercise, running through as though you were watching a video. When you come to the point where things begin to turn unpleasant, replace the old ending with the new empowering one you created earlier, and imagine it as vividly as you can, "making it up" as you go if you need to. Make it a special point to experience the new feelings of confidence, freedom and empowerment that your new ending gives you. Make sure to also breathe these new feelings right into any uncomfortable or restricted areas in your body. Then give yourself the clear suggestion that not only are these new feeling and thought patterns now spreading into your waking life, but also that tonight or some time soon you may have just such a dream, which includes the new, more fulfilling ending. You may even suggest to yourself that you will recognize the dream as a dream, while it's happening, in which case you may to some degree consciously direct it as you feel appropriate towards a more uplifting outcome.



*(Most recurring dreams offer the dreamer extremely important messages. If your upsetting dream continues even after trying this exercise, or if you'd like to better understand and apply your dreams in general, considering joining the fun friendly learning atmosphere offered by The DREAMS Foundation online teleclasses.)*