

Make Friends With Your Nightmares

Nightmares - the kind that wake us with our heart beating wildly and our whole body tensed and ready to do battle with the baddies or run away - are often experienced as very frightening and worrisome. Many want to forget their bad dreams as soon as possible. They don't realize these could be missed opportunities for enrichment in their lives. Analyzing dreams is a potent method not only for managing stress but for our personal development. We may ask ourselves: Did I see or hear something bad that is coming back to haunt me? Is my dream warning me about someone who is out to get me? Did I eat something spoiled for dinner? Or could there be something more that I am not getting here? The truth is, any or all of these and many more possibilities may be true. Dreams are imagery and storyline salads that our deeper self puts up on the screen of our awareness during the night. When we sleep, our conscious mind is resting. This allows our unconscious mind the space to chew on and digest whatever issues we have swallowed but have not yet sorted out during the day. The ingredients in this salad may include - Residues of experiences from the day - Memory associations with those experiences that are sitting in the same file drawer of brain - Feelings similar to those experiences - resonating like taut guitar strings to a similar note from recent events - Sounds our unconscious mind notes while we sleep - Worries and fears about the future There are countless books for interpreting dreams. These may give us some general ideas about our own nightmares, but only we ourselves can say what our particular dreams mean. This is because we have concocted this imagery salad out of the unique ingredients of our individual, personal lives. Example From 'Kate,' a 35 year-old, single parent MBA: "I once woke in a sweat, having dreamed I was driving a car with a steering wheel I could no longer turn." The first step in befriending our nightmares is to write down every detail and nuance we can recall, omitting no pixel of pictures, no nuance of feeling, or soundbyte of words, or intonations exchanged by the characters on that inner stage. "As I started to write, more details emerged. Not only was I approaching a curve, but there was a big truck approaching in the opposite lane. I kept fighting the wheel that wouldn't turn, terrified as my car crossed the yellow line just in front of the truck. I wanted to scream but no words would come out of my mouth. I woke just before impact." Next, we can scan our memories for what might have been a leftover from recent days' experiences that was dropped into the salad. "I felt I was being driven by my financial needs to continue on a career path that I was unhappy to pursue. The atmosphere at the factory was terrible because I was being asked to do jobs that weren't mine, due to several recent staff resignations. I was forced to stay late, compromising my duties as a mom to two young girls. I was having a hard time finding another job I wanted, and worried I could not hold up (might crash) under the stresses." Examining patterns from the past that might be similar, Kate realized: "My father was forced into bankruptcy, due to a poor choice in business partners, when I was in my late teens. This severely disrupted our family and delayed my plans for going to university until I could pay my own way. I felt totally out of control when this happened." Sorting out the meanings of the dream, one can explore alternatives that one might have overlooked in the dream and why these blind spots might exist. "I came to see I had struggled with the steering wheel but never thought of stepping on the brakes. The dream actually helped me understand that when stressed, I often felt panicky and out of control - when actually there often were choices I could make that would be under my control." The nightmare can then suggest new ways we might approach our life situations. "I came to see that I could take a stand for myself and put on the brakes at work. I was lucky that the division manager was an understanding single mom herself and she supported me when I requested shifts in my duties." Kate also found ways she could deal with the heavy feelings of hurt, anger and resentment she carried from her father's bankruptcy. In short, if we don't run away from our nightmares or push them back into the fog of unknowing in our unconscious mind, they can be a rich feast for understanding ourselves better and for discovering creative ways to improve our lives.

About the Author

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