

Understanding and coping with Nightmares

When we are asleep, events that have happened in our lives may replay in our dreams. Many people who have experienced trauma describe that dreams can be very vivid and feel real, as if they are re-experiencing events that have happened in the past. Nightmares can be very frightening and intrusive and cause feelings of fear, anxiety, helplessness or panic. Sometimes people may cry out or hit out in their sleep.

Nightmares may also lead to decreased sleep quality and feeling fearful of going to sleep at night. This can result in sleep deprivation or sleep avoidance, so the body and mind do not get adequate rest and then have a significant impact on how people function during the day.

What can help?

- Strategies to support you to sleep better overall mean that it is less likely for you to wake during a nightmare and therefore less likely to recall these as vividly. Try to maintain a bedtime routine where you go to sleep and wake up at the same time each day. Focus on ensuring your bedroom is relaxing and peaceful. Do not eat or drink too close to bedtime as this can cause indigestion and affect your sleep. Avoid caffeine, nicotine and alcohol before bed. Exercising during the day can help our bodies feel more tired so we are more likely to sleep deeply at night. See our information leaflet on sleep for some more ideas to help you have a better night's sleep.
- Reorientation on waking from a nightmare. When you wake up, it is important to get your bearings so that you know you were dreaming. It may help for you to get up and turn the light on and splash your face with cold water. You may also want to keep a damp cloth or have strongly smelling scents (eg aromatherapy bottles) by your bed to use when you wake up. Consciously focus on slowing down your breathing. You may wish to use 4,5,6 breathing (in for 4, hold for 5, out for 6).
- Exposure to the content of your nightmares when you are awake may help to reduce how afraid you feel of them. When we feel scared of something, we automatically want to avoid it and try to distract ourselves from thinking about it which can help us to feel safe. However not confronting thoughts or feelings may mean they can then appear in our minds when we have less distractions (eg at night or in our dreams). Thinking through a nightmare the following day can reduce the fear associated with it. It may help to write it down or to talk about it with someone else.
- Nightmare Imagery Re-scripting. This involves recalling your nightmare and then developing a new, more positive scenarios. Write out your dream in detail, including sensory information about what you noticed in the dream (what you see, hear, smell, taste, think, feel etc). You may need to practise relaxation techniques and maintain a focus on slowing your breathing to support you to do this exercise. Develop a different outcome to what happens in the dream. Be as creative and imaginative as you like and choose an outcome that will give you a feeling of peace when you wake up. Write out the new version of your dream and then read through and visualise this repeatedly to encourage your mind to dream this new story when you are asleep. Remember that although they may feel real, dreams are stories that our minds tell us when we are asleep. We cannot change what has happened to us but we can change how they affect us and the stories we tell about them.