Nightmares

Most people have dreams when they sleep, although they may not always remember them when they wake. Dreams are usually related to things that have happened during the day or in recent times. They are the subconscious mind's way of making sense of events that have already occurred. Often these dreams don’t bother people, and sometimes they have no recollection of them at all. Sometimes though, they might have ‘bad dreams’ or nightmares.

Nightmares occur for a number of reasons, mainly to do with something that is causing that person to be worried, upset or anxious. Nightmares are mostly related to fears. It is not unusual for someone who has experienced a traumatic event, to then experience nightmares for some time afterwards (often about the traumatic event itself). This is one way that your mind might respond to what you have gone through.

Nightmares often occur when the person is trying to block out the experience. Avoiding thoughts about the event and then experiencing nightmares about it, can be very distressing for people who thought they had ‘blocked it out’. For some people who have blocked out the event to the point of having little memory of it, experiencing nightmares can be frightening and confusing as they don’t understand why they are occurring.

When nightmares relating to a traumatic event begin to occur, it is a sign that your mind is telling you that you are ready to deal with it, that perhaps now is a good time to start to talk about it. To some, these nightmares can feel as though they are re-living the abuse, and that they are extremely painful. Some people are so fearful of having these nightmares that they have difficulty sleeping, maybe even trying to avoid sleep.

If you experience nightmares, there are some things you can do to help you deal with them. Even though nightmares occur when you are sleeping, preparing yourself can help you to feel safer. This information sheet lists some strategies you may use to help you deal with nightmares. It might help to talk about these strategies with a trusted person or your counsellor, to decide what suits you best. Also included is a nightmare worksheet to help orientate you when you wake and, with practice, may help to reduce the occurrence of nightmares.

Strategies for dealing with nightmares

- Try to relax. Although this may seem difficult, trying to relax reduces the stress of a nightmare and usually means it will pass more quickly.
- Concentrate on breathing deeply and slowly. Sometimes when people are stressed they forget to breathe, and they freeze up. When this happens it is easier for the flashback to take hold of you. Focusing on breathing helps to free you from ‘freezing up’ and also provides a distraction from the flashback.
- Remind yourself that it was just a dream. The traumatic event is not happening now, and even though the nightmare may be scary and painful, it was a dream and did not just happen.
- Turn on a light or a lamp. This helps to orientate you and chase away the shadows in the room that can be frightening after waking from a nightmare.
- Sleep with a night light or a lamp on
- Seek out a support person, someone you feel safe with, who can sit with you while you calm down.
- Imagine a safe place. This can be anywhere or anything that helps you feel safe. You could use a photograph, draw or write it down before a nightmare occurs, so that you can have it ready and refer to it.
- Remember positive encouragements from your support people. Imagine the person is there with you, encouraging you. Think of what they would say to you to help you feel stronger.
- Hold onto a soft toy or an object that helps you feel safe/comforted
- Write about or draw the nightmare and change the ending to protect you from the traumatic event. At the point where the dream becomes the nightmares, rewrite the events so that you don’t get hurt. Over time, rewriting the actual dream might eventually result in dreaming the new version instead.
- Talk to someone you trust. This could be a friend, family member or your counsellor. Tell them about the new version of the nightmare that you have rewritten, this may help to reinforce the ‘new’ dream in your mind.
Nightmare protocol*

This worksheet can be used before sleep to help orientate you when waking from a nightmare, and, with practice, may help to reduce the occurrence of nightmares.

Say the following sentences (filling in the blanks) before you go to sleep, and follow the instructions.

Today I have been really scared of ______________________________________________________
(name the trauma, no details)

so I might have a nightmare and wake up feeling _______________________________________
(name the emotion)

and my heart might beat fast, and I might be shaking or crying.

If that happens, I will tell myself that it is because I am remembering _______________________

Then I will turn on the light and look around at my room. I will name the things in my room that I can see.

And I will tell myself that I just had a nightmare, and that _________________________________

is not happening right now.
*Adapted from Rothschild, B (2000). The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment. New York: W.W.Norton