

Understanding Nightmares

And what to do about them







About this guide

This short guide explains why nightmares occur and how to manage them. Depending on their cause, nightmares may be resolved quickly or need assistance from a professional. You will also find actions and steps you can take to reduce nightmares.

Why do we have nightmares?

Nightmares usually happen during periods of sleep called REM, which stands for rapid eye movement. REM sleep is when most dreaming takes place. Research shows that during REM sleep, emotions we have not been able to act on while awake are expressed, to help calm our brains down.

This is why we will have anxious dreams when we feel anxious about a future event, dreams about frustrations when we have unresolved frustrations or dreams which feel pleasant if we are looking forward to a happy event. Dreaming safely expresses the emotions we have not been able to act on, calming us down so that we can think clearly when we wake up.

This is also why we have nightmares. If we are frightened that something unpleasant will happen in the future, we will have dreams which feel frightening. Understanding this helps us in two ways:

1. We can reassure ourselves and others by explaining that nightmares happen when the brain is trying to calm itself down
2. To reduce nightmares, we need to address whatever is causing us to feel frightened when we are awake

Calming down fears

We all have a need for security, to feel that we and the people we care about are safe, and to feel that we have some control over our lives. Fear and anxiety are natural reactions when our needs for security and control are unmet.

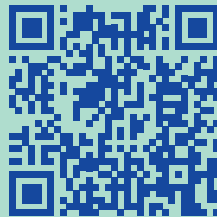
Sometimes the barrier to feeling safe or having control over our lives might be obvious. The barrier might be financial difficulties, the risk of losing our job or our home, or bullying at school or in the workplace.

But fear and anxiety can also make it harder to identify what is getting in the way of us meeting our need for security. It can also prevent us from using our imagination for problem solving, instead of worrying, thinking about solutions, or asking for help.

So, a first step to calming the fear and anxiety which can cause nightmares is to learn and practice relaxation exercises. A simple technique which works for children and adults alike, is 7/11 or diaphragmatic breathing. Put simply, this means giving attention to our breathing, slowing it down and making the out-breath longer. Once we feel calmer, we are better able to identify unmet needs and find better ways to meet them.



Learn more about emotional needs at suffolkmind.org.uk/enr



Demonstrations on how to do 7/11 breathing can be found at on our YouTube channel [@SuffolkMind1](https://www.youtube.com/@SuffolkMind1)

Storytelling

Storytelling is a powerful way of reframing fear for children. Here is a traditional story we use in our EARLY Minds program for primary schools to help children overcome worrying.

The lion who saw himself in water

There was once a lion who was king of the jungle. One year, it had become very hot, and the jungle's rivers and streams had dried up. This left no water for the animals who lived in the jungle to drink. The lion was very thirsty, so he was forced to leave the jungle in search of water.

The lion crossed the grassland of the savannah, but still could not find water. Then he reached the desert, and by now was desperately thirsty. Suddenly, the lion reached the top of a sand dune and looked down to see an oasis surrounded by animals drinking water. The lion rushed down to have a drink but when he got to the water's edge, he saw a terrifying, desperate looking lion staring back at him.

The lion was very scared and crawled away from the oasis. But he became so thirsty that he decided he would have to risk going back to the water to have a drink. When he ran and jumped into the oasis, splashing water everywhere, the terrifying, desperate lion disappeared. Finally, the lion was able to drink the water and learn that what we fear is not always real.

If nightmares persist after you have done what you can to calm down fears and address unmet needs for security and control, it may be that harmful conditioning is the cause. This means a part of our brain called the amygdala, which serves as our 'security officer' is on red alert and looking out for things which might be a threat to our safety. The security officer can also hijack our thinking and imagination for worrying about the worst-case scenario.

When the security officer overrides our thinking processes, it can trigger fear, anxiety, intrusive thoughts, memories, flashbacks of times when we felt threatened, and difficulty getting to sleep. These are some of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress, as are the nightmares which occur as REM sleep tries to calm the security officer down. If nightmares are caused by harmful conditioning, like trauma or post-traumatic stress, it is important to seek professional treatment.

Nightmares and mental health

If they persist over time, nightmares can be harmful to our mental health. When someone is affected by high levels of anxiety, they may be more likely to experience nightmares. If nightmares wake someone up, they can stop dreaming from expressing waking fears to calm the brain down. Those fears and anxieties can then linger and negatively affect the person.

As well as being a symptom of post-traumatic stress, reoccurring nightmares also affect about half of people with a borderline personality disorder diagnosis. Reoccurring nightmares are also a risk factor for self-harm and suicide. This is why it is vitally important that people seek help with reoccurring nightmares.

Treating trauma

We all have a need for security. Some treatments for trauma seek to reduce negative thinking, identify and plan how to avoid triggers. These kinds of approaches usually fall under the umbrella term CBT, which stands for cognitive behavioural therapy.

Other treatments like EMDR, EFT and Rewind combine distraction and relaxation to change the way we feel about events from the past. Skilled practitioners may also help us use our imagination to change the story of a nightmare and give it a happier ending. You might hear these kinds of approaches called guided imagery or imagery rehearsal therapy.





**Nightmares happen when the brain
is trying to calm itself down.**



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