

An underwater photograph of a person swimming, viewed from below. The water is dark blue and slightly murky, with bubbles and light filtering through from above. The person's legs and feet are visible, extending downwards.

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# A CLINICIAN'S GUIDE TO DREAM THERAPY

Implementing Simple and  
Effective Dreamwork

ROUTLEDGE 

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## 11 Perfect Storms

### Working with Nightmares and Bad Dreams



*A nightmare is the most useful dream.*

Ernest Hartmann

Those who suffer from nightmares, particularly those recurrent, horrifying, trauma-based dreams that frequently tear a person from sleep by the sheer terror they generate would wonder what kind of person Hartmann was to say such a dream is useful. He did not mean such dreams are useful to the dreamer (although they can be under some circumstances). What Hartmann (1999) was referring to is how nightmares are useful to researchers of dreams. For those asking questions about the link between daily life and dreams, it can be a challenge to make such a connection if there is nothing dramatic or unusual, but rather many things going on in a person's life. With a nightmare following a major traumatic event, the link between the dream and the person's waking life becomes clear. For therapists, this link can be very helpful as well – in working with deeply frightening and unforgettable nightmares, especially those that recur, when the symptom picture begins to shift and change, it is easy to track via the changes in the client's dreams.



### De-Escalating the Fear

This is one of the reasons I chose to study the effects of dreamwork treatment on the recurrent nightmares of refugees for my doctoral dissertation: if the treatment used in the study was helpful, the dreams that had plagued the study participants – in most cases repeatedly for many years – would begin to change in a way that would be obvious, not subtle. The good news is that these terrifying recurrent dreams *did* change, and in what appeared to be predictable ways. There was a pattern of de-escalation of fear response in reverse of the typical order of the nervous system's response to threat. The immobility or freeze response is the body's last-ditch effort to manage a traumatic event, and this is often the state that those with post-traumatic nightmares repeatedly experience before the terror of the dream wakes them up. After treating a small group of refugees, what I and the therapists who participated the study found was a pattern of responses that moved steadily toward more empowered reactions: from freeze to flight to fight, and a sense that the empowerment experienced in the dream stayed with them in waking life (Ellis, 2016).

After the dreamer was able to confront the aggressor in their dream, it often ceased to scare them, and the nightmare would not return again in its same form, and in some cases, not at all. This finding is not unique to my study, and in fact there are many, larger studies that support a similar way of working. The nightmares of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) sufferers are not typical dreams, but tend to replicate the actual trauma event. They have been called failed dreams, or not dreams at all but flashbacks during sleep. The work with such dreams can have a helpful effect of changing the person's dreams in a way that moves them more toward typical dreams, which weave past and present and may include bizarre and/or metaphorical features. Such is the case with the dream presented here, which the client defines as a nightmare – although dream researchers define nightmares as dreams with intense negative emotion that wakes the dreamer up. Without the “waking criteria” it is merely a bad dream. However, I work with nightmares and bad dreams similarly and in clinical work, if the client defines it as a nightmare, I accept their definition.

### Grateful Dead Dream Session

CLIENT: *I had a nightmare last night. In the dream I'm at work and "Jack," a man I had a history with who I don't feel safe around comes into my workplace. I know from the second I see him that he's come to kill me. I see him, in very slow motion, pulling a gun out of a brown leather holster. He starts to fire the gun, and I am somehow dodging the bullets. I know he fires 16 rounds, and I don't think he got me ... and then the dream shifts and I'm on a bus going up a mountain. It's a Grateful Dead tour bus, and it's about to make its last stop when I see Jack waiting there. I tell the bus driver if he makes the stop the man is going to get on the bus and kill me. Everyone around me urges the driver not to open the door and he doesn't, so I'm safe. We get to the top of the mountain, and as we're going back down I see Jack, and see how we've foiled his plan.*

- T: Wow, that's a great dream. One thing I'm curious about is how you're feeling in the dream. It sounds like such a scary situation ...
- C: Yes, he lives in my town and he's a dangerous man. I went to work the other day and he was there, he knows where I work. So it makes sense I'm having this nightmare because if he were going to do something violent he would know where to find me.
- T: Can you tell me a bit about the history you have with him?
- C: She describes the history of emotional and verbal abuse, drug use and unpredictability. Her friends stopped to visit her, saw what was happening, and took the dreamer away from this volatile situation. “We packed up my stuff and I left with them and never looked back. But recently he moved back to my town. I had not seen him since. He didn't know I lived here but now he knows where I work. I fear becoming a target for him again.”
- T: So this is a very current, relevant dream. The connection to your life is clear, an expression of your worry. I'm wondering about this number 16. I wonder if anything significant happened for you at 16.
- C: I lost my virginity when I was 16. That was the year I felt free for the first time. I got my license. I waited till 16 to have sex with my sweetheart. I could see myself apart from my family, had a job, was going to school, and I had a very lovely boyfriend. It was the last time my life felt idyllic and safe. All my subsequent relationships have felt unsafe and I haven't been serious with anyone. I can still remember the safety of that relationship, and since then, I have not felt that way with anyone in the context of a relationship. I can feel it somatically right now.
- T: So interesting that those things are together, the 16 rounds, the feeling of being triggered, and that this was the last time you felt really safe in relationship. I'd like you to get a felt sense of that safety, with your high school sweetheart. Just immerse yourself in the feeling of that ... tell me where in your body you most feel that sense of safety. Let yourself sink into this feeling of being 16 and in love with this person you feel safe with.
- C: I can feel that. Like a radiating, my energetic body, my entire body feels it, I can feel a current shift in my body.
- T: I can feel that too, and hear it in your voice. So that radiating current shift that is throughout your whole body, keep that with you when we go through this because it seems like a gift from the dream. Just keep going in the dream. You're on a bus now and going up a mountain, can you tell me about that?
- C: It doesn't feel like an actual memory, but I have been doing research about the Grateful Dead. It was like I was on a tour with a bunch of people who were like-minded fans. That was also something that made me a possible target, him knowing what my interests are. But the people on the bus were really loving and supportive. I don't know any of them, but in the dream I did. And I felt really safe.
- T: So there's the concern of being tracked, and the not knowing. The feeling I would like you to pick up on is this feeling of like-minded people and the sense of community around the Grateful Dead, which is interesting considering you have just been shot at. Because it feels like it could be a joke in your dream.



- a bit of dream humour (laughter). It also seems to be about this camaraderie and safety, and the dream bringing this to you in a few ways: the like-minded people and being safe. Feel that?
- C: I do, I really do.
- T: Then you see Jack at the last stop and know if he gets on the bus he'll kill you ... but he doesn't.
- C: Yeah, nobody lets that happen.
- T: You have the driver and the Grateful Dead fans all really being protective and keeping you safe.
- C: What do you think about the bus?
- T: Vehicles can be metaphors for relationship. So the bus could potentially be a metaphor for your relationship with groups. I don't usually like to take direct advice from dreams but something in this might be saying you could surround yourself with like-minded people. I don't know how this is in your life right now. Setting Jack aside – which is a current situation that's very real and I don't want to minimize it – this could be a dream about going from isolation to being in community and finding safety in that. Or returning to the feeling of that love relationship from high school where a sense of safety was very much a given. This dream could be commenting on your relationship situation and asking you to find your people.
- C: That's what I want to do.
- T: You can actually follow this feeling, the one you have with you that's bringing you a sense of safety, reminding you where to find it.
- C: What the 16 shots do is reunite me with the sense of community, they get me to shift into a place that is supportive and nurturing of me and not destructive.
- T: Yes, that's right where the dream does this dramatic scene shift. And you don't think he gets you – he shoots at you 16 times but misses, like the classic action movie where they shoot the hero and never seem to actually hit the target. And then again, he may have succeeded, in the logic of this dream, a way you're grateful for this death, which isn't literal, but you are in the Grateful Dead bus. It's like, oh good, that's done. That could be another way to read it that shifts you... it seems like it just happens, an abrupt shift. One thing I might suggest is to say more about the end here, where he doesn't get on the bus, but you see him there as you drive back down...
- C: He was waiting for the bus to make this stop, but when the bus didn't stop, it threw a kink in his plan. He was wearing a Grateful Dead shirt. He was trying to seem like one of us. We were protected by the bus. So maybe it's like my community or how I'm trying to shift into a feeling of safety. There is something in there about the false impressions I have of people before I get to know them. Especially with Jack, I had very wrong impressions of him, and that's happened in the last couple of relationships I've been in where the guy seems like one thing at the beginning but then... I have to look beyond the façade.
- T: So maybe to help you with that, if you feel ok to try this, just imagine into Jack, that version of him on the side of the road, where his plans have been foiled because the bus didn't stop for him and just to get a feeling into the

- character of the dream Jack, not the actual one. Just notice how that is held in your body. (pause) We won't stay long because I can see it's not comfortable, but what can you tell me from there?
- C: There's like a hollowness, where it feels really cloudy and like I could vomit. There's this murky ... I almost feel dizzy right now. Wherever that character is, it's sick.
- T: It's sick, feels empty ... so just step outside of that, you can leave it behind, I just wanted you to sample it. And then put yourself back in the end of the dream where you're on the bus going back down the hill, leaving him behind, you see him on the side there, and just let the dream play forward from there, where you're on the bus with your allies and friends and leaving Jack there on the side of the road.
- C: I can feel the release of the tension I've been holding. Like I don't have to worry about him anymore. I can really be present.
- T: So if the release is like a breath, draw it out longer, really feel that release. Just let your whole body exhale and let the tension go until it's all drained away. Take some time with it.
- C: (long silence) It feels good.
- T: This feels like a natural stopping place – does it feel okay to leave it here?
- C: (assent, pause). I can't believe the analogies you were able to draw. That's what's so exciting about dreamwork, just getting another perspective and then seeing it, thinking oh my god, of course. It's hard to do on your own.
- T: Most of us have a blind spot with own dreams. I know I do. With a dream like this, it is partly symbolic and there's a lot in it outside of your life situation. But with your life situation and Jack, it's hard to set that aside. I can see how all that you would see in this dream is what you *already* see; it's too hard to step outside of it. But I'm not in your life so it's easier for me. I can see all the other things. I actually see this as a very hopeful dream. Usually a nightmare will not have that last part – they usually stop earlier, right in the scariest place. I often get people to dream the dream on to get to a safer place. But your dream continues on to a place where you *are* safe and it's basically showing you that when you are in the company of other like-minded people, you are safe. I'm reminded of when you were with Jack, and your friends came and took you away. It's a clear example of how your friends keep you safe. It may be underscoring that part and helping you feel into the places in your past where you have been safe as well. It feels like gift, not just to show you the situation but also the way out of it.
- C: Yes I see that now. I feel much better having moved through all that.

In a follow-up session two weeks later, the client said that the dreamwork had taken the charge out of her life situation, and out of her body. The sense of feeling safer had stayed with her. She had a follow-up dream about Jack a week later. *While she was talking to a friend about the difficult times she had when she was with him, he approached her and started to yell at her. In her dream, she said, "You can't yell at me for talking through this experience, it's my right." He agreed and said he was sorry. She had not been triggered since the dreamwork, and in her subsequent dream she was*



able to stand up to the man she had been so afraid of, and he apologized. The following is an excerpt of the follow-up conversation:

- T: Could you say a little bit about how the nightmare dreamwork has evolved?  
 C: Prior to working that dream I felt really anxious. The dream had taken place at my work, and because I had seen him at my job, there was fear entering into that space. After the dreamwork, the fear had really dissipated. There was a shift where I wasn't worried or afraid. I didn't hurry walking into the door. I'm not afraid if he walks by or if he comes in. I'm not holding a charge anymore. And then having the dream the other night where he appeared, I was nervous in the dream at first. But I stood up to him and then he backed off and apologized and that re-dissipated the charge. The work we did strengthened the part of me that feels like I can stand up to him and confront him, or anyone. I feel better supported too. The part of the dream about the bus and support of community was really helpful too.

### **Finding Help as a Form of Resourcing**

This progression toward less fear and greater empowerment within the dream and in waking life is common to many forms of nightmare dreamwork. What I concluded after an intensive study of nightmares is that there is a strong link between physiological activation and the nature of a person's dreams. People with an anxious temperament, or those whose nervous systems can't settle after trauma, will have dreams that reflect this base-level anxiety. If one of the functions of dreaming is to dissipate emotional charge, then it makes sense that those whose bodies are carrying a lot of fear will have nightmares, which can be seen as the body's attempt to bring up and dissipate the fear. The problem is that the physiological fear response can be so intense, it wakes the dreamer up right in the scariest place in the dream. Then the dream can't do its job, and in fact it has the opposite of the desired effect because it disrupts sleep and stirs up fear without resolving it. This is where the idea of dreaming the dream forward can be so helpful. This idea originates with Jung, but has been picked up by numerous other dreamwork methods. In the above example, had the dream stopped at the place where the client was being shot at, I would have suggested she dream the dream forward from there. In this case, however, the dream itself shifted and carried the dreamer forward to a place of safety in the company of like-minded people. Much of what I was doing in the beginning of the session was helping the dreamer to locate and embody the sense of safety, using the resource the dream was providing because from there, exploring the aggressor in the dream, and dreaming the dream forward seemed to be more likely to be constructive.

There are a variety of ways to approach the creation of a new dream ending, and the choice depends on both the therapist's philosophical approach, as well as the nature of the client and their trauma-related dreams. My Jungian-oriented, and client-centered leanings incline me to suggest the dreamer enter into the dreamscape as fully as possible to let the dream continue in a way that resembles actual dreaming, where the dreamer does not control the content directly but

allows it to unfold. There is some evidence that the process works better when the new dream direction is left open, rather than changed to something positive. Krakow and Zadra (2006) speculated that the open-ended instruction "leaves open a psychological window through which the patient may intuitively glimpse multilayered solutions to other emotional conflicts." I think the new dream ending must feel authentic to be deeply experienced, and to move the business of the dream forward in the direction it was intended to go. An ending that's surprising is an indication of the authenticity of the process.

### **Working with PTSD Nightmares**

Other methods may involve more direct participation of the dreamer, asking what they would like to have happen. A modified version of this process, called Imagery Rehearsal Therapy (IRT), asks the dreamer to use a similar process with any dream, not necessarily their nightmare, and to change the dream in any way they want to. They are then asked to repeatedly rehearse the new ending. In several studies, IRT has been shown to significantly reduce the symptoms of PTSD (e.g., Krakow, Hollifield, et al., 2001; Krakow et al., 2000). On the strength of this evidence the American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends IRT as the main non-pharmaceutical intervention for the treatment of PTSD nightmares. IRT is not the first nor the only nightmare treatment that invites dreamers to enter and alter their frightening dreams, but it is the method that has amassed the strongest evidence base.

I had been using Jung's idea of dreaming the dream onward for many years, and discovered IRT as I was doing the literature review for my nightmare study. It was encouraging to find such relevant and supportive evidence, and in my study, I attempted to advance the understanding of what was happening in the process of revisiting and allowing nightmares to continue. I inquired into exactly how PTSD nightmares change, how specific symptoms are affected, and what might be the mechanism of action. My original intention was to conduct quantitative research with refugees who had been referred to the Vancouver Association for the Survivors of Torture (VAST) for help with their trauma. The clinical director, Mariana Martinez-Vieyra, told me that nightmares were the single most challenging symptom for her clients, and she was willing to collaborate with me on a study to see if working with their dreams could reduce their symptoms.

Unexpectedly, a few months into the study, after training the therapists, recruiting participants and completing just a few of the cases, the Canadian federal government withdrew the funding they had been providing to VAST. It was so disappointing that this wonderful little agency that had been operating mostly with volunteers for 25 years was forced to close its doors. My study was also one of the casualties. Fortunately, I had recorded all the sessions that had been completed and had many hours of session transcripts, enough data for a qualitative study of the course of treatment for five of the participants. The data included progressive dream series and enough information to inquire into how these nightmares changed as a result of experientially re-entering and allowing the dreams to continue.



The results of the study were published in *Dreaming* (Ellis, 2016). To implement the study, I developed an abbreviated focusing-oriented dreamwork treatment protocol that included safety measures and ways to empower and resource clients as they worked with their recurring nightmares. My sense is that working directly with the nightmares was effective because I viewed these dreams as the body's repeated attempts to revisit and come to terms with the trauma that the dreams depicted. I found that after treatment, the participants' dreams, which had been largely unchanging, began to shift in specific ways: the identity of the dream aggressor started to shift to become less like the aggressor in the original trauma. The dream ego (or the "I" in the dream) became progressively more empowered, moving forward on a continuum from freeze to flight to fight as dreamers began to speak up, ask for help and/or take action. Temporal and setting changes generally shifted from being stuck in the exact time and place of the trauma to weave in elements from current life. This reflects more normal dreaming and the memory consolidation processes which seem to be inherent in effective dreams. As the dreamers became more empowered in their dreams, they woke up less afraid and there was a positive effect on daytime functioning. On average, post-traumatic stress symptoms, especially re-experiencing and avoidance symptoms, were reduced by half.

What is it that causes this helpful effect? It had not occurred to the dreamers in my study to manipulate their dream imagery, but doing so was generally empowering for them. It gave them a constructive action they could take when they awoke from a nightmare and subsequently, in their actual dreaming, they seemed to be more inclined to seize the same kind of power. The more empowered the response is, the less frightening and the more healing the dream is likely to be, and the less likely it is to recur. Such activity might be construed as a form of dream training similar to the way lucid dreamers develop dreaming skills to cultivate consciousness awareness and/or control of their dreaming. The difference in lucid dreaming is that the new dream ending happens within the dream rather than afterward – and this also has been shown to be effective for working with nightmares.

### **Exposure and Mastery: Proposed Mechanisms of Action**

A thorough review of the mechanisms of action in nightmare therapy, resulting in reduced nightmare frequency and distress, favors dreamwork while awake. Rousseau and Belleville (2018) reviewed all studies of nightmare treatment using dreamwork, and also conducted a thematic analysis to determine the mechanisms of action most commonly cited. They found that an increased sense of mastery was the most popular hypothesis, but proposed that the main mechanism of action is more likely exposure to the fear, followed by incorporation of incompatible dream elements while awake, and then in dreaming. This process then leads to an increased sense of mastery, and reduced arousal and avoidance. They suggest clinicians should target mastery, change in beliefs around nightmares, and decreasing arousal and avoidance in treating recurrent PTSD nightmares.

My conclusions, although based on a much smaller sample, are similar. I found that increased control and empowerment, first while working with the dream in the waking state, and then while dreaming, can stop the cycle of fear for PTSD sufferers. If a person can remain calm enough to complete the dream while awake, this may translate into the ability to remain calm enough in the dreaming state itself so that they are not startled awake, and their dream can finish. The dreamer could (and some did) also take the ability to calm themselves from their dreaming into their waking life either working with the nightmares that do still occur or working with other difficult daytime situations. They tend to sleep better, be less afraid to fall asleep, and more able to calm themselves, if needed, upon waking. These are the kinds of changes that occurred, to varying degrees, with the participants in my study. One of the participants described how the process helped him to gain power over his nightmares: "I have control on the dream, not the dream on me."

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