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Chapter 10: Overcoming Nightmares

What Are Nightmares?

I began to try to recognize my dreams as products of my mind, even as I dreamed them. The breakthrough came one night soon after a nightmare. I decided I could not live fully while I let my fears roam about on their own power, so to speak. I entered the dream state determined not to yield. I had read somewhere that a fear could only be dissipated by friendliness and trust. Anger, threats, aggressiveness were out. These reactions were actually fearful reactions. So I made up my mind to be friendly.

The dream evolved, and I barely had time to remind myself to smile before the nightmare began. This time it was an almost childish nightmare, in which my collective fears took the shape of a large, nebulous but very scary monster. I quailed and almost turned tail, but by sheer will (I was really scared) I stayed and let it approach. I said to myself "it's my dream, and if I forget this, I'll have to go through it again," and I smiled as sincerely as I could. What's more, I spoke as calmly as I could, a big step since waking or sleeping terror leaves me speechless. I said something like "I'm not afraid. I want to be friends. You're welcome to my dream!" and almost as soon as I said it, the monster became friendly, delightedly so. I was ecstatic. Needless to say, I awoke quickly, still saying "I did it!" (T.Z., Fresno, California)

I know that I can change a frightening situation in a lucid dream, so I don't let myself get scared or panic. I never run away from things or persons in my dreams anymore. And the strange thing is that in waking life I don't run away either, anymore. I face things head on and don't drag situations out forever. My lucid dreams have changed the way I look at life. People think I've changed through the years, but the fact is that this is the real me coming out. (V.F., Greensboro, North Carolina)

Nightmares are terrifying dreams; dreams in which our worst fears are brought to life in fully convincing detail. Whatever horrors you personally believe to be

the worst things that could happen—these are the most likely subjects of your nightmares. All people, in every age and culture have suffered from these terrors of the night. People's understanding of the origins of nightmares has varied as much as their understanding of dreams. To some cultures, nightmares were the true experiences of the soul as it wandered another world as the body slept. To others, they were the result of the visitation of demons. Indeed, the word *nightmare* comes from the Anglo-Saxon *mare*, for goblin or incubus. (An incubus is a demon who comes in the night to steal the sexual favor of ladies, and has its female counterpart, the succubus.)

In Western culture today, most people are content to say of nightmares that they are "only dreams," meaning they are imaginary and of no consequence. Thus, when a successful business executive awakens with his heart pounding from a dream of being pursued by zombies through the jungle, he is grateful to be able to recite the comforting refrain, "Thank God, it was only a dream," get a glass of water and return to bed. However, when just a few minutes before the stinking corpses with eyes like pits to hell were breathing down his neck, the executive had no doubts about their reality. The zombies may have been imaginary, but the terror was real. So, to lightly dismiss the real terror of horrific dreams as illusory seems like an error that leaves us with no choice but to submit ourselves again and again to the greatest fear we are likely to ever experience.

What gives nightmares their special terror? In dreams, anything is possible. This limitlessness can be wonderful, since it allows us to experience delights of fantasy and pleasure unachievable in waking life. However, turn over the stone, and anything you can imagine that you would not like to experience, however unlikely in waking, can happen as well.

In nightmares we are alone. The terrifying worlds we create in our minds are populated with our fears. We may dream that we are accompanied by friends, but if we doubt them they can just as easily turn into fiends. If we run from an axe- wielding maniac, he can find us no matter where we hide. If we stab a devil with a knife, he may not even notice, or the knife may turn to rubber. Our thoughts betray us; if we think, I only hope he doesn't have a gun—lo! he has a gun. It is no wonder we are grateful to return from nightmares to the relative sanity and peace of the waking world.

Thus, it is understandable that people in the midst of nightmares who realize they must be dreaming frequently choose to wake up. However, if you become fully lucid in a nightmare, you realize that the nightmare can't really hurt you, and you don't need to "escape" it by awakening. You remember that

you are already safe in bed. It is better, as we will discuss below, to face and overcome the terror while remaining in the dream.

Nightmare Causes and Cures

Studies of frequencies of nightmares among adults show that one third to one half of all adults experience occasional nightmares. A study of college students found that almost three-quarters of a group of 300 had nightmares at least once a month. In another study, five percent of college freshmen reported having nightmares at least once a week.[1] If this rate applies to the general population, then we might find that more than ten million Americans are plagued by wholly realistic horrifying experiences every week!

Some factors that seem to contribute to nightmare frequency are: illness (especially fever), stress (caused by situations like the difficulties of adolescence, moving, hard times at school or work), troubled relationships and traumatic events, like being mugged or experiencing a serious earthquake. Traumatic events can trigger a long lasting series of recurrent nightmares.

Some drugs and medications can cause an increase in nightmares. The reason for this is that many drugs suppress REM sleep, producing a later effect of REM-rebound. If you go to sleep drunk, you may sleep quite soundly, but dream little, until five or six hours into sleep. Then, the alcohol's effect has mostly worn off and your brain is prepared to make up for the lost REM time. As a result, you will dream more intensely than usual for the last few hours of your sleep time. The intensity is reflected in the emotionality of the dream, which often will be unpleasant.

There are a few drugs which seem to increase nightmares by increasing the activity of some part of the REM system. Among these are l-DOPA, used in the treatment of Parkinsonism, and beta-blockers, used by people with some heart conditions. Since research has shown that lucid dreams tend to occur during periods of intense REM activity, [2] I believe that drugs that cause nightmares may also facilitate lucid dreaming. This is a topic I plan to research in years to come. I think that whether an intense REM period leads to dreams that are pleasantly exciting or terrifying depends on the attitude of the dreamer.

Thus, it is to the dreamer's attitude that I think we should look in seeking a treatment for nightmares. For example, people rarely experience nightmares in the sleep laboratory, because they have a feeling of being observed and cared for. Likewise, children who awaken from nightmares and crawl into bed with their parents feel safe from harm and thus are less likely to have more bad dreams.

I believe the best place to deal with unpleasant dreams is in their own context, in the dream world. We create our nightmares out of the raw material of our own fears. Fears are expectations—why would we fear something we thought would never happen? Expectations affect our waking lives, but even more so, they determine our dream lives. When in your waking life, you walk down a dark street, you fear that someone will threaten you. However, for some dark figure to actually leap out at you with a knife depends on there really being some knife-bearing thug hiding in an alley nearby waiting for a victim. On the contrary, if you dream of walking down a dark street, fearing attack, it is almost inevitable that you will be attacked, because you can readily imagine the desperate criminal waiting for you. But, if you had not thought that the situation was dangerous, there would be no thug, and no attack. Your only real enemy in dreams is your own fear.

Most of us harbor some useless fears. Fear of speaking in public is a common example. In most cases, no harm will result from giving a speech, but this fact does not prevent many people from being as frightened of public speaking as they would be if faced by a life threatening situation. Likewise, to be afraid in a dream, while understandable, is unnecessary. Even when fear is useless, it is still quite unpleasant, and can be debilitating. An obvious way to improve our lives is to rid ourselves of unnecessary fear. How is this done?

Research on behavior modification treatment for phobias shows that it is not enough for a person to know intellectually that the object of their fear is harmless. Snake phobics may "know" perfectly well that garter snakes are harmless, but they will still be afraid to pick one up. The way to learn to overcome fear is to face it—to approach the fearsome object or situation little by little. Each time you encounter the feared thing without harm you learn by experience that it cannot hurt you. This is the kind of approach we propose for overcoming nightmares. Many anecdotes demonstrate that the approach is effective, and can even be used by children.

None of our proposed treatments for nightmares require that you interpret the symbolism of the unpleasant images. Much fruitful work can be accomplished in dreams by working directly with the images. Waking analysis (or

interpretation while in the dream) may help you understand the source of your anxieties, but will not necessarily help you outgrow them. For instance, consider again the fear of snakes. The classical interpretation of snake phobia is that it is a disguised anxiety about sex, especially regarding the male member, and in fact most snake phobics are women. A much more plausible biological explanation is that humans come into the world prepared to easily learn to fear snakes, because avoiding venomous snakes has obvious survival value. However, providing this information doesn't cure the phobia. What does help, as mentioned above, is for the phobic to slowly become accustomed to dealing with snakes. Likewise, dealing directly with dream fears, learning they cannot harm us, can help us to overcome them.

The Uses of Anxiety

According to Freud, nightmares were the result of masochistic wish-fulfillment. The basis of this curious notion was Freud's unshakable conviction that every dream represented the fulfillment of a wish. "I do not know why the dream should not be as varied as thought during the waking state..." [3] wrote Freud, tongue-in-cheek. For his own part, he continued, "I should have nothing against it...There is only a trifling obstacle in the way of this more convenient conception of the dream; it does not happen to reflect reality." If for Freud, every dream was nothing but the fulfillment of a wish, the same thing must be true for nightmares: the victims of nightmares must secretly wish to be humiliated, tortured or persecuted.

I do not see every dream as necessarily the expression of a wish; nor do I view nightmares as masochistic wish fulfillment but rather as the result of maladaptive reactions. The anxiety experienced in nightmares can be seen as an indication of the failure of the dreamer to respond effectively to the dream situation.

Anxiety arises when we encounter a fear-provoking situation against which our habitual patterns of behavior are useless. People who experience anxiety dreams need a new approach for coping with the situations represented in their dreams. This may not be easy to find if the dream results from unresolved conflicts which the dreamer does not want to face in waking life. In severe cases, it may be difficult to treat the nightmare without treating the personality that gave rise to it. But I believe that this qualification applies mainly to chronically maladjusted personalities. [4]For relatively normal people whose nightmares are not the result of serious personality problems, lucid

dreams can be extremely helpful. However, if you are to benefit from our method of overcoming nightmares, you must be willing to take responsibility for your experiences in general and in particular, for your dreams.

To illustrate how lucidity can help you work through anxiety- provoking situations, consider the following analogy. The non-lucid dreamer is like a small child who is terrified of the dark; the child really believes there are monsters there. The lucid dreamer would perhaps be like an older child—still afraid of the dark—yet no longer believing that there are really monsters out there; this child might be afraid, but would know that there was nothing to be afraid of, and could master the fear.

Anxiety is a state of uneasiness composed of two emotions: fear and uncertainty. It results from the simultaneous occurrence of two conditions: one is fear in regard to some (possibly ill-defined) situation we find threatening; the other is an uncertainty about how to avoid an unfavorable outcome. In other words, we experience anxiety when we are afraid of something, and have nothing in our behavioral repertoire that will help us overcome or evade it. Anxiety may serve a biological function: it prompts us to scan our situations more carefully and re-evaluate possible courses of action—in search of an overlooked solution to the situation- -in short, to become more conscious. [5]

When we experience anxiety in our dreams, the most adaptive response would be to become lucid and face the situation in a creative manner. In fact, anxiety does seem to spontaneously result in lucidity fairly frequently (for example, in a quarter of the 62 lucid dreams I had in the first year of my records). [6] It may even be the case that anxiety in dreams would always lead to lucidity if we were instructed about this possibility. With practice, dream anxiety can become a reliable dreamsign, no more dangerous than a scarecrow, pointing to where you need to do some repair work. There is no cause for fear in dreams....

Facing the Nightmare

In the midst of a lucid dream I saw a series of gray-black pipes. Out of the largest pipe emerged a black widow about the size of a cat. As I watched this black widow, it grew larger and larger. However, as it was growing I was not the least bit afraid and I thought to myself 'I am not afraid' and I made the black widow vanish. I was very proud of my achievement since I had always been terrified of black widows. The earliest nightmare I can remember was

about a large black widow which I couldn't escape. For me, black widows were a very strong symbol of fear itself. (J.W., Sacramento, California)

About twenty years ago I realized that the monster in my nightmares couldn't really hurt me. I told it I wasn't afraid any more and it changed into a toothless, whimpering witch and went away. Yesterday I read the article about your work in Parade magazine, and last night the monster returned. This time, knowing I was dreaming, I enjoyed the intricacy of detail, changing from one revolting, menacing shape to another, second by second. I remembered the black kitten you had described from one of your dreams and I told it to smile. I was stunned as I watched the bulging eyes recede, the snarling mouth try to relax into a smile. It didn't know how. The shark teeth changed into horse teeth and it beamed. It was the silliest damn thing I ever saw, and I woke up laughing my head off. I feel like a 67 year old kid with a new toy. (L.R., Jacksonville Beach, Florida)

"There is no cause for fear," wrote Sufi teacher Jalaludin Rumi seven centuries ago: "It is imagination, blocking you as a wooden bolt holds the door. Burn that bar...." [7] Fear of the unknown is worse than fear of the known, and this seems nowhere more true than in dreams. Thus, one of the most adaptive responses to an unpleasant dream situation is to face it, as can be seen in the following account of a series of nightmares experienced by the 19th Century lucid dream pioneer, the Marquis d'Hervey de Saint-Denys:

I wasn't aware I was dreaming, and I thought I was being pursued by frightful monsters. I was fleeing through an endless series of interconnecting rooms, always experiencing difficulty in opening the dividing doors and closing them behind me, only to hear them opened again by my hideous pursuers, who uttered terrible cries as they came after me. I felt they were gaining on me. I awoke with a start, bathed in sweat.

...I was all the more affected on waking because, when this particular dream came upon me, I always lacked, through some curious twist of fate, that consciousness of my state that I so often had during my dreams. One night, however, when the dream returned for the fourth time, at the moment my persecutors were about to renew their pursuit, a feeling of the truth of the situation was suddenly awakened in my mind; and the desire to combat these illusions gave me the strength to overcome my instinctive terror. Instead of fleeing, and by what must indeed under the circumstances have been an effort of will, I leaned against the wall and resolved to contemplate with the closest attention the phantoms that I had so far only glimpsed rather than seen. The initial shock was, I confess, strong enough; such is the difficulty that

the mind has in defending itself against an illusion that it fears. I fixed my eyes on my principal attacker, who somewhat resembled the grinning, bristling demons which are sculpted in cathedral porticos, and as the desire to observe gained the upper hand over my emotions, I saw the following: the fantastic monster had arrived within several feet of me, whistling and cavorting in a manner which, once it had ceased to frighten me, appeared comic. I noted the claws on one of its paws, of which there were seven, very clearly outlined. The hairs of its eyebrows, a wound it appeared to have on its shoulder and innumerable other details combined in a picture of the greatest precision—one of the clearest visions I have had. Was it the memory of some Gothic bas-relief? In any case, my imagination added both movement and color. The attention I had concentrated on this figure had caused its companions to disappear as if by magic. The figure itself seemed to slow down in its movements, lose its clarity and take on a wooly appearance, until it changed into a kind of floating bundle of rags, similar to the faded costumes that serve as a sign to shops selling disguises at carnival time. Several insignificant images appeared in succession, and then I awoke. [8]

That seemed to be the end of the Marquis' nightmares. Tholey has also reported that when the dream ego looks courageously and openly at hostile dream figures, their appearance often becomes less threatening. [9] On the other hand, when one attempts to make a dream figure disappear, it may become more threatening, as in the following case of Sparrow's:

I am standing in the hallway outside my room. It is night and hence dark where I stand. Dad comes in the front door. I tell him that I am there so as not to frighten him or provoke an attack. I am afraid for no apparent reason.

I look outside through the door and see a dark figure which appears to be a large animal. I point at it in fear. The animal, which is a huge black panther, comes through the doorway. I reach out to it with both hands, extremely afraid. Placing my hands on its head, I say, "You're only a dream." But I am half pleading in my statement and cannot dispel my fear.

I pray for Jesus' presence and protection. But the fear is still with me as I awaken. [10]

Here the dreamer uses his lucidity to try to make his frightful image disappear. There is little difference between this and running from dream monsters. If, upon reflection, Sparrow had recognized that a dream panther could not hurt him, the thought alone should have dissipated his anxiety. Fear is your worst

enemy in dreams; if you allow it to persist it will grow stronger and your self-confidence will diminish.

However, many novice lucid dreamers may at first tend to use their new powers to find more clever ways to escape their fears. This is because of our natural tendency to continue in our current frame of mind. If, in a dream in which you are fleeing from harm, you realize you are dreaming, you will still tend to continue escaping, even though you should now know that there is nothing to flee from. During the first six months of my personal record of lucid dreaming, I occasionally suffered from this sort of mental inertia until the following dream inspired a permanent change in my lucid dreaming behavior:

I was escaping down the side of a skyscraper, climbing like a lizard. It occurred to me that I could better escape by flying away, and as I did so, I realized that I was dreaming. By the time I reached the ground, the dream and my lucidity faded. The next thing I knew I was sitting in the audience of a lecture hall, privileged to be hearing Idries Shah (an eminent Sufi teacher) comment on my dream. "It was good that Stephen realized he was dreaming and could fly," Shah observed with a bemused tone, "but unfortunate that he didn't see that since it was a dream, there was no need to escape."

I would have had to be deaf not to get the message. After this dream lecture, I resolved to never use my lucidity to avoid unpleasant situations. But, I wasn't going to be content to passively avoid conflicts by doing nothing. I made a firm resolution regarding my lucid dreaming behavior: anytime I realized I was dreaming, I was required to ask myself the following two questions: 1) Am I now or have I been running away from anything in the dream? 2) Is there now or has there been any conflict in the dream? If the answer was yes to either, then I was honorbound to do everything I could to face whatever I was avoiding and to resolve any conflict. I have easily remembered this principle in almost every subsequent lucid dream and have attempted to resolve conflicts and face my fears whenever it was called for.

"Escaping" from a nightmare by awakening only suppresses your conscious awareness of the anxiety-provoking imagery. You may feel a certain relief, but like the prisoner who digs through his prison wall and finds himself in the cell next door, you haven't really escaped. Moreover, aware of it or not, you are left with an unresolved conflict which will doubtless come back to haunt you some other night. In addition, you may have an unpleasant and unhealthy emotional state with which to start your day.

If, on the other hand, you choose to stay in the nightmare rather than waking from it, you can resolve the conflict in a way that brings you increased self-confidence and improved mental health. Then when you wake up you will feel that you have freed some extra energy with which to begin your day with new confidence.

Lucid dreaming gives us the power to banish the terror of nightmares and at the same time to strengthen our courage—if we master our fear sufficiently to recognize our most disturbing images as our own creations and face them.

Sleep Paralysis

My first experience of this terror of being awake but not in control of my body was when I was young, sick with a fever, and in my mother's bedroom. I saw a black shadow pass the window, enter the room and try to take the covers off of me. Inside I was screaming and frantic, outside I knew that nothing was happening. I was dreadfully scared of people coming in through that window, and this somehow helped me realize that it was a black shadowy figure, not a person. I fought it off and woke up. In the past year I have had a repeat of that dream complete with the feeling of flesh on my shoulder—I was terrified. Also recently, in another such dream, something awful was trying to kill me. I remembered something my husband had told me he'd done in the same situation when he was dreaming, so I turned and faced the "thing," and essentially challenged it to go ahead and kill me asserting that I was not afraid. I felt strongly that it could not hurt me if I put out my strength and began summoning up an image of goodness and purity (God) and praying. The "thing" was defeated and I woke up feeling very good.(K.S., Etobicoke, Ontario)

The experience of sleep paralysis can be terrifying, as in the example above. In a typical case, a person awakens, but then finds he cannot move. It may feel like a great weight is holding him down and making it difficult to breath. Hallucinations may appear, often loud buzzing noises, vibrations in the body, or people and threatening figures nearby. The dreamer may feel things touch his body, body distortions, or "electricity" running around inside him. As the experience progresses, the surroundings may begin to change, or the person may feel he is leaving his body—either by floating up or by sinking through the bed. Quite often, the dreamer knows the experience is a dream, but finds it very difficult to awaken.

The probable cause of sleep paralysis is that the mind awakens, but the body remains in the paralysis state of REM sleep. At first, the dreamer actually perceives the environment around him, but as the REM process takes over again, strange things begin to occur. Anxiety seems to be a natural concomitant of this physiological condition, and it is worsened by the dreamer's feeling that he is awake, his belief that these peculiar things are really happening, and the sensation of being unable to move. If the dreamer goes more completely into REM sleep, he loses the awareness of his body which causes him to feel paralyzed. At this point, he may experience the sensation of "leaving his body," as his mental body image is freed from the constraints of perceptual input from his actual body. [11]

Sleep paralysis experiences are likely to be the cause of some of the strangest night phenomena, such as visitations by demons, incubi, and succubi, and out-of-body experiences. They don't need to be terrifying, however, if you reflect as they are happening that they are dreams and that none of the bizarre events are dangerous. People in these states commonly try to cry out for others to awaken them, or to force themselves to move in order to awaken. This usually only makes matters worse, however, since it increases their feelings of anxiety. Anxiety itself may help to perpetuate the condition. A better approach is to 1) remember it is a dream and therefore harmless, and 2) relax, and go with the experience. Adopt an attitude of intrepid curiosity. Dreams that proceed from paralysis experiences are often quite intense and wonderful.

Practicum for Overcoming Nightmares

I was on top of a mountain at the edge of a cliff. I seemed to be a prisoner of two guys who had a dog and a lion with them. I felt they were going to throw me off the cliff, so I rushed them and knocked the two guys off the cliff along with the lion but I went over too, into the water. I was alright and now my hands were free. I swam to the side and started to climb up the mountain but the lion was in front of me and he was angry because I pushed him into the water. He would not let me up so I tried to scare him by throwing water and rocks at him. He just got angrier. He started to get closer to me and I moved back into the water. He started to roar, and jumped in after me, but I jumped to the rocks. Now I was on my back and knew I couldn't get away, so I faced him, and as he attacked I said, "Come on." I put my hands out and suddenly I realized I was dreaming. In mid-attack his expression changed from rage to

friendly and playful. When he landed on me I hugged him and we play wrestled and rolled. I kissed him and he licked me. I felt really great that I was lucid and playing with a lion. Then he rolled over and turned into a naked black woman. She was beautiful with large nipples on her breasts. I started to play with her, and was getting excited, but I had this feeling that getting back to the top of the cliff was more important, so I said, let's go back. As we started I woke up. (D.T., Lindenwold, New Jersey)

I had a fear of death, but cured it through a lucid dream. I was walking through a Hell-like environment and realized that this could not be, as I was asleep in my bed. At that instant, I was stabbed in the back. 'Feeling' the pain, I decided to see what 'dying' would be like. I felt myself in a catatonic state. I willed my dream 'soul' to depart from my dream 'body.' It was a strange feeling to see my dream 'body' beneath me. I also had a sense of all-pervading peace and calm. I said to myself that if this is what dying is like, it isn't so bad. From that day forward, I have had no fear of dying. I even remain calm in life-threatening situations. (K.D., Lauderhill, Florida)

Anyone who ever suffers from nightmares can benefit from using lucidity as a response to severe anxiety in dreams. Readers who have nightmares frequently will be able to put the advice we provide here to use right away. But others would do well to study these materials and have them ready in mind for the next time they find themselves in a frightening dream.

A few differing approaches to dealing with unpleasant dream experiences appear in the literature. They can all be assisted by lucidity, because when lucid we are sure of our context (dreaming) and know that waking world rules don't apply. One of the first proposed systems for overcoming nightmares was that attributed to the Senoi people of Malaysia by Kilton Stewart in his paper "Dream Theory in Malaya." [12] Patricia Garfield brought Stewart's ideas to the public in her inspiring book *Creative Dreaming*. [13] The basic principle of the Senoi system is to confront and conquer danger. This means that if you encounter an attacker or an uncooperative dream figure, you should aggressively attack and subdue it. If necessary, you are advised to destroy the figure, and thereby release a positive force. Once you have subdued the dream figure, you must force it to give you a valuable gift—something you can use in your waking life. Another suggestion is that you enlist friendly and cooperative dream characters to help you overcome the threatening character.

People have reported positive, empowering results with the "confront and conquer" approach. However, as Paul Tholey has found, attacking unfriendly

characters may not be the most productive way to handle them. The reason for this will be discussed in detail in Chapter 11, but in brief, the idea is that hostile dream figures may represent aspects of our own personalities that we wish to disown. If we try to crush the symbolic appearances of these characteristics in dreams, we may be symbolically rejecting and attempting to destroy parts of ourselves.

Another idea associated with the Senoi is valuable to keep in mind regarding nightmares. Falling is a very common theme in anxiety dreams. The Senoi system proposes that when you dream of falling, you shouldn't wake yourself up, but go with it, relax and land gently. Think that you will land in a pleasant and interesting place, especially one that offers you a useful insight or experience. As a next step, it is suggested that in future dreams when you are falling, you should try to fly, and fly somewhere intriguing and worthwhile. In this way, you can turn a frightening, negative experience into one that is fun and useful.

Tholey, who has researched the efficacy of various attitudes towards hostile dream characters, concludes that a conciliatory approach is most likely to result in a positive experience for the dreamer. [14] His conciliatory method is based on the practice of engaging in dialogs with dream characters (see exercise below). He found that when dreamers tried to reconcile with hostile figures that the figures often transformed from "lower order into higher order creatures," meaning from beasts or mythological beings into humans, and that these transformations "often allowed the subjects to immediately understand the meaning of the dream." Furthermore, conciliatory behavior towards threatening figures would generally cause them to look and act in a more friendly manner. For example, Tholey himself dreamt:

I became lucid, while being chased by a tiger, and wanted to flee. I then pulled myself back together, stood my ground, and asked, "Who are you?" The tiger was taken aback but transformed into my father and answered, "I am your father and will now tell you what you are to do!" In contrast to my earlier dreams, I did not attempt to beat him but tried to get involved in a dialogue with him. I told him that he could not order me around. I rejected his threats and insults. On the other hand, I had to admit that some of my father's criticism was justified, and I decided to change my behavior accordingly. At that moment my father became friendly, and we shook hands. I asked him if he could help me, and he encouraged me to go my own way alone. My father then seemed to slip into my own body, and I remained alone in the dream. [15]

To have a good dream dialog, you should treat the dream figure as being your equal, as in the example. The following questions may open up fruitful lines of dialog with dream figures:

"Who are you?"
"Who am I?"
"Why are you here?"
"Why are you acting the way you are?"
"What do you have to tell me?"
"Why is such-and-such happening in this dream?"
"What do you think or feel about such and such?"
"What do you want from me? What do you want me to do?"
"What questions would you ask of me?"
"What do I most need to know?"
"Can you help me?"
"Can I help you?"

EXERCISE: DIALOGING WITH DREAM CHARACTERS

1. Practice imaginary dialogs in the waking state.
Choose a recent dream in which you had an unpleasant encounter with a dream figure. Get a piece of paper and pen to write down the conversation you imagine. Imagine yourself talking to the dream character; visualize the character before you. Begin a dialog by asking questions. You may choose a question from the list above or substitute any personally relevant question. Write down your questions, and the responses you get from the character. Try not to let critical thoughts interrupt the flow, such as "this is silly," or "I'm just making this up," or "That's not true." Listen, and interact. You can evaluate later. Terminate the dialog when it runs out of energy or when you achieve a useful resolution. Then evaluate the conversation and ask yourself what you did right and what you would do differently next time. Once you are successful with this, try the same exercise on another dream.

2. Set your intention.
Set a goal for yourself that the next time you have a disturbing encounter with a dream character you will become lucid and engage the character in dialog.

3. Dialog with problem dream figures.
When you encounter anyone with whom you feel conflict, ask yourself whether or not you are dreaming. If you find that you are dreaming, continue as follows: Stay and face the character, and begin a dialog with one of the

opening questions from the list below. Listen to the character's responses, and try to address his, her, or its problems as well as your own. See if you can come to an agreement or make friends. Continue the dialog until you reach a comfortable resolution. Then, be sure to awaken while you still remember the conversation clearly, and write it down.

4. Evaluate the dialog.
Ask yourself if you achieved the best result you could. If you feel you did not, think about how you could improve your results next time. You could use Step 1 to relive the dialog to attain a more satisfying result.

(Adapted from Kaplan-Williams [16] and Tholey [17])

In contrast to the positive results of conciliatory dialog, Tholey found that when dreamers attacked dream characters either verbally or physically, the dream figures often regressed in form, for instance from a mother, to a witch, then to a beast. We might assume that the other characters in our dream worlds are more helpful as friendly humans than as subdued animals, so the aggressive approach may not be the best choice most of the time.

I say most of the time, because in some instances it may not be advisable to open yourself to a dream attacker. The circumstances which might make this true are in cases of dreams which replay real life events in which one was abused by someone—say, a rapist or child molester. In such cases, a more satisfying resolution may result from the Senoi approach of overcoming, destroying, and transforming the dream attacker. However, in many instances, Tholey's research has shown that aggressive attacks on dream characters can result in feelings of anxiety or guilt, and the subsequent emergence of dream "avengers." So, I would advise avoiding such behavior unless it truly seems to best option.

I have a few suggestions to add to these ideas for how to resolve nightmare situations. One is an extension of the "confront and conquer" approach. Though I cannot wholly recommend conquering dream characters, the intention to confront all danger in dreams is fully in accordance with my conception of a constructive dream-life. Remember that nothing can hurt you in dreams, and consider if there is any reason why you should not allow yourself to experience the things you are trying to avoid in the dream. An excellent example of enduring the dreamed danger is provided by Garfield:

I was in a subway like the London tube system. I came to an escalator. The first three or four steps weren't going. I figured I had to walk up. After I got up the first few steps, I found that it was working. I looked up toward the top and saw all this yellow machinery above the escalator. I realized that if I kept on going, I would be smashed by the machinery. I became frightened, and started to wake up. Then I said to myself, "No, I have to keep on going. I have to face it. Patty says I can't wake up." My heart began pounding and my palms sweating as I was carried nearer and nearer. I said, "This is bad for my heart," but I kept on going. Nothing happened. Somehow I passed it and everything was all right. [18]

In another case, a woman dreamt she had difficulty avoiding being struck by cars as she crossed a busy street. As she had an unusually intense fear of traffic in waking life, upon becoming lucid, she decided to directly confront her fear and leapt into the path of an oncoming pickup truck. She described that she felt the truck pass through her and then she, in an ethereal form, rose heavenwards, feeling elevated and amused.

This "let it happen" to you approach may not be best when dealing with dream characters, however. In Tholey's research, "Defenseless behavior almost always led to unpleasant experiences of fear or discouragement." [19]Hostile dream figures would tend to grow in size and strength relative to the dreamer. The reason for this may be that dream characters often are projections of ourselves, and by giving in to their attacks, we may be allowing untransformed negative energies within us to overpower our better aspects.

Chapter 11 discusses this idea in greater depth and proposes another method for placating hostile dream figures: You simply open your heart and accept them as part of yourself. This may not require any words at all, and can have an astonishingly positive effect.

Prescriptions for Nightmares

The following is a list of some of the more common nightmare themes, with suggested methods of transforming the dream to achieve a positive outcome. Make yourself a goal that whenever you next find yourself in a nightmare, you will become lucid, and overcome your fear. If the nightmare features one of the following themes, try the suggested responses.

1. Theme: Being pursued
Response: Stop running. Turn to face the pursuer. This is in itself may cause the pursuer to disappear or become harmless. If not, try starting a conciliatory dialog with the character or animal.

2. Theme: Being attacked
Response: Don't give in meekly to the attack or flee. Show your readiness to defend yourself and then try to engage the attacker in a conciliatory dialog. Alternatively, find acceptance and love in yourself and extend this towards the threatening figure (see Chapter 11).

3. Theme: Falling
Response: Relax and allow yourself to land. The "old wives' tale" is false—you will not really die if you hit the ground. Alternatively, you can transform falling into flying.

4. Theme: Paralysis
Response: When you feel trapped, stuck or paralyzed, relax. Don't allow anxiety to overcome your rationality. Tell yourself you are dreaming and the dream will soon end. Let yourself go along with any images that appear or things that happen to your body. None of it will hurt you. Adopt an attitude of interest and curiosity about what happens.

5. Theme: Being unprepared for an examination or speech
Response: First of all, you don't need to continue with this theme at all. You can leave the exam or lecture room. However, you might enhance your self-confidence in such situations by creatively answering the test questions or giving a spontaneous talk on whatever topic suits you. Be sure to enjoy yourself. When you wake up, you may want to ask yourself whether you should actually prepare for a similar situation.

6. Theme: Being naked in public
Response: Who cares in a dream? Have fun with the idea. Some find being naked in a lucid dream erotically exciting. If you wish, have everyone else in the dream remove their clothes. Remember, modesty is a public convention, and dreams are private experiences.

RECURRENT NIGHTMARES

After waking up from the nightmare, I would go back to sleep while thinking of a point in the dream before it went bad. I would go back to that point and re-dream the dream, changing it, recreating it so that it would turn out well and end up as a good dream. (J.G., Kirkland, Washington)

From a friend I received the advice that to just "stand there" in a dream could change its course. At that time I was having frequent terrifying dreams. I would wake up screaming for help—thus ending the dream. And, of course, the overtones of helpless fear carried over into the day. So before I went to sleep I began to say to myself that whatever happened in my dreams, I was simply going to stand there and meet the danger and just see what the dream would do about that.

An example of what happened is the elevator dream. I was stuck in an elevator. It wouldn't go up or down and I couldn't get out. Finally, I climbed out the top and while I was on the roof of the elevator, it began to go up very quickly and I would have been crushed against the top of the elevator shaft. Instead of screaming for help, I simply responded as an observer and recognizing that this was a dream, I said to the dream that I was going to sit there on the elevator. "Now, how will you handle that?" The elevator stopped short of the top. No harm was done. Not only that, the dream was no longer out of control. Until that time the elevator dream had been recurring. It never returned. (V. W., Lincoln, Nebraska)

Since I was three years old, twice a month, I have had nightmares about tidal waves engulfing me; the details varied but the feeling was always the same: terror and helplessness. Until...in a half-awake state I determined to have a lucid dream about diving into a big wave. I did it! With my heart beating wildly, I ran toward the stormy sea, chanting that it's just a dream. I dove in headfirst. For a fearful moment I felt water in my lungs, but then began to enjoy the sensation of bobbing about in the powerful currents and waves ... after several (very pleasant) minutes of this, I washed up on shore.

I had one other lucid dream about facing the wave and enjoying being underwater. Since then, I have had no more nightmares of tidal waves. (L.G., San Francisco, California)

When thinking about a nightmare becomes so painful that we avoid it, it is not surprising that it recurs. However, even the most terrible images become less frightening when we examine them. I believe Saint-Denys sheds light on the mechanism of recurrent nightmares, in the following comment on his living gargoyle dream, quoted earlier in this chapter:

I don't know the origin of the dream. Probably some pathological cause brought it on the first time; but afterwards, when it was repeated on several occasions in the space of six weeks, it was clearly brought back solely by the impressions it had made on me and by my instinctive fear of seeing it again. If I happened, when dreaming, to find myself in a closed room, the memory of this horrible dream was immediately revived; I would glance towards the door, the thought of what I was afraid of seeing was enough to produce the sudden appearance of the same terrors, in the same form as before. [20]

I believe nightmares become recurrent by the following process: in the first place, the dreamer awakens from a nightmare in a state of intense anxiety and fear; naturally, he or she hopes that it will never happen again. The wish to avoid at all costs the events of the nightmare insures that they will be remembered. Later, something in the person's waking life associated with the original dream causes the person to dream about a situation similar to the original nightmare. The dreamer recognizes, perhaps unconsciously, the similarity, and thus expects the same thing to happen. Thus, expectation causes the dream to follow the first plot, and the more the dream recurs, the more likely it is to recur in the same form. Looking at recurrent nightmares in this way suggests a simple treatment: the dreamer can imagine a new conclusion for the dream to weaken the expectation that it has only one possible outcome.

Veteran dreamworker Strephon Kaplan-Williams describes a technique for re-dreaming the end of a nightmare; he calls it "dream re-entry." The technique can be practiced with any dream that you feel unsatisfied with the outcome of, but it seems especially apt for recurrent nightmares, in which you are stuck time after time with the same set of disturbing events.

Dream re-entry is practiced in the waking state. Dreamworkers begin by selecting dreams to relive, and then come up with alternative ways of acting in the dreams to influence the progression of the events towards more favorable or useful outcomes. Then they relive the dream in imagination, with the new action. They continue to visualize being in the dream until they see the result of their alternative behavior. Williams offers an example of dream re-entry from his own experience. He had dreamt: "I am in this house and there is something scary to confront. I don't want to do it and am all alone. I'm quite afraid. I wake up." He resolves to re-enter the dream and face the fear. In this case, he actually fell asleep as he was practicing the re-entry process, which added to the intensity of his experience:

This time I make myself enter the bathroom where the source of my fears seems to be. I am so afraid, so afraid that the flow of images stops. But through sheer will I make myself enter the bathroom ready for anything. I think of taking my machete and thrashing around with it if I am attacked. But I decide against this because I want to confront my fear by willing myself to stay with the situation no matter what.... I am ready to face that which could overwhelm me and exist with it rather than try to defeat it.

...When I do [enter the bathroom], there seems to be a hulking luminescent figure there. It does not attack me but changes into a dwarf-like figure, long arms, roundish head, like Yoda. We face each other. I have stayed with the situation. No attack comes. My fear goes away when I experience what is there behind the door, and has been there so many years going back to childhood. What has been there behind every door and scary place is fear itself and my inability to fully deal with it. [21]

Several years ago, I used a similar approach with someone suffering from recurrent nightmares. A man telephoned me asking for help. He feared going to sleep, because he might have "that terrible dream" again. In his dream, he told me, he would find himself in a room in which the walls were closing in threatening to crush him. He would desperately try to open the door, which would always be locked.

I asked him to imagine he was back in the dream, knowing it was a dream. What else could he do? At first he was unable to think of anything else that could possibly happen, so I modeled what I was asking him to do. I imagined I was in the same dream and I visualized the walls closing in. However, the moment I found the door locked, it occurred to me to reach into my pocket where I found the key, with which I unlocked the door and walked out. I recounted my imaginal solution and asked him to try again. He imagined the dream again—this time he looked around the room and noticed that there was no ceiling and climbed out.

I suggested to him that if this dream should ever recur, he could recognize it as a dream, and remember his solution. I asked him to call me if the dream came back, but he never did. Unfortunately, we cannot be sure about what happened. But, I think that having found some way to cope with that particular (dream) situation, he had no need to dream about it again because he no longer feared it. As I have hypothesized elsewhere, we dream about what we expect to happen, both what we fear and what we hope for. I believe that the approach I have outlined can provide the basis for an effective treatment for recurrent nightmares, and look forward to it being tested clinically.

Some evidence has appeared in psychotherapy literature indicating that rehearsal (i.e., re-dreaming) can help people overcome recurrent nightmares. Geer and Silverman successfully treated an otherwise normal patient who suffered for fifteen years from a recurrent nightmare with five sessions of relaxation followed by seven sessions of mentally re-experiencing the nightmare (rehearsal). [22] The frequency of nightmares decreased only after the third rehearsal session, when the patient was instructed to say to himself "It's just a dream." After the sixth rehearsal session, several weeks later, the nightmare disappeared. Marks described a case in which a recurrent nightmare of fourteen years' duration disappeared after the patient relived the dream three times while awake and then wrote three accounts of the nightmare with triumphant endings. [23] Bishay treated seven cases of nightmares with simple rehearsal of the nightmare and/or rehearsal with an altered ending. [24] A one-year follow-up of five patients in the latter study showed complete relief from nightmares in the four patients who successfully imagined masterful endings, and marked improvement in a patient who was only able to imagine a neutral outcome.

Rehearsal re-dreaming is done while awake. However, a similar technique can be practiced during the recurrent nightmare, if the dreamer is lucid. Instead of imagining how the dream might turn out if the dreamer tried something new, while lucid the dreamer can try the alternative action right there in the nightmare. The resultant resolution should be all the more empowering, because of the enhanced reality of the dream experience. Practicing altering the course of recurrent nightmares both in waking and dreaming may be even more effective. Sometimes, the waking re-dreaming exercise is enough to resolve the problem created in the dream so that it never recurs again. However, if the dream does occur again, then the dreamer should be prepared to become lucid and consciously face the problem. The exercise below incorporates both re-entry techniques.

EXERCISE: RE-DREAMING RECURRENT NIGHTMARES

1. Recall and record the recurrent nightmare.
If you have had a particular nightmare more than once, recall it in as much detail as you can, and write it down. Examine it for points where you could influence the turn of events by doing something differently.

2. Choose a re-entry point and new action.
Choose a specific part of the dream to change, and a specific new action that

you would like to try at that point to alter the course of the dream. Also select the most relevant point before the trouble-spot at which to re-enter the dream. (If it is a long dream, you may wish to begin at the part that immediately precedes the unpleasant events).

3. Relax completely.
Find a time and place where you can be alone and uninterrupted for between ten and twenty minutes. In a comfortable position, close your eyes and relax as described in EXERCISE: PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION.

4. Re-dream the nightmare, seeking resolution.
Beginning at the entry point you chose in Step 2, imagine you are back in the dream. Visualize the dream happening as it did before until you reach the part at which you have chosen to try a new behavior. See yourself doing the new action, and then continue imagining the dream until you discover what effect your alteration has on its outcome.

5. Evaluate your re-dreamed resolution.
When the imagined dream has ended, open your eyes. Write down what happened as if it were a normal dream report. Note how you feel about the new dream resolution. If you are not satisfied, and still feel uncomfortable about the dream, try the exercise again with a new alternative action. Possibly, achieving a comfortable resolution with the waking exercise will be enough to stop the recurrence of the nightmare.

6. If the dream recurs, follow your re-dreamed plan of action.
If the dream occurs again, do in the dream what you visualized during waking re-entry. Remember that the dream cannot harm you and be firmly resolved to carry through with your new behavior.

Children's Nightmares

I learned as a child of five or six to control nightmares. For example, a dinosaur was chasing me, so I inserted a can of spinach into the plot, and upon eating it gained Popeye's strength and "vanquished" my foe. (V.B., Roanoke, Virginia)

I had this lucid dream when I was ten years old: Feeling like a frightened victim, I am high in a stone tower with my younger sister Diane. A witch has tied us up and is about to stuff us into gunny sacks and throw us out the

window to drown in the water far below. My sister is crying and near hysteria. Suddenly my panic turns to lightness and wonder. I laugh. "Diane! This is only a dream! My dream! Let her throw us out the window because I can make us do anything we want!" The witch is now background material, no longer the imposing "control." We laugh as we fall through the air, gunny sacks melting away. The warm, friendly water gently supports us to the shore where we run, giggling, in the grass. For days after that dream I felt an inner strength, a sense that fear is now what I'd let it be up to that point. (B.H., Sebastapol, California)

As a child I participated in and controlled many of my own dreams. My own lucid dreaming started when I was about nine or ten years old. One night I had a dream in which I was being chased by an evil giant. In the dream I suddenly remembered my parents telling me there are no such things as monsters. It was then that I realized I must be dreaming. In the dream I stopped running, turned around and let the giant pick me up. The outcome of the dream was good and I awoke with a pleasant and confident feeling. Over the next two years I developed more skill at lucid dreaming, so much so that bedtime became exciting because of this new world I had discovered where anything was possible and I was the Boss. (R.M., Toronto, Canada)

Many people have reported discovering lucid dreaming as a means of coping with childhood nightmares, as in the cases above. Children tend to have more nightmares than adults, but fortunately, they appear to have little difficulty putting into practice the idea of facing their fears with lucid dreaming.

In her book *Studies in Dreams* published in 1921, Mary Arnold-Forster mentioned having helped children overcome nightmares with lucidity, [25] and I can relate a similar experience myself. Once, when I was making long-distance small-talk with my niece, I asked her about her dreams. Madeleina, then seven years old, burst out with the description of a fearful nightmare. She had dreamt that she had gone swimming, as she often did, in the local reservoir. But this time, she had been threatened and terrified by a shark. I sympathized with her fear and added, matter-of-factly, "but of course you know there aren't really any sharks in Colorado." She replied, "Of course not!" So, I continued: "Well, since you know there aren't really any sharks where you swim, if you ever see one there again, it would be because you were dreaming. And, of course, a dream shark can't really do you any harm. It is only frightening if you don't know that it's a dream. But once you know you're dreaming, you can do whatever you like—you could even make friends with the dream shark, if you wanted to! Why not give it a try?" Madeleina seemed

intrigued. A week later, she telephoned to proudly announce, "Do you know what I did? I rode on the back of the shark!"

Whether or not this approach to children's nightmares always produces such impressive results we do not yet know, but it is certainly worth exploring. If you are a parent with children suffering from nightmares, you should first make sure that they know what a dream is and then tell them about lucid dreaming. For more information on children's nightmares and how to treat them, see Garfield's excellent book *Your Child's Dreams* [26]

That lucid dreaming promises to banish one of the terrors of childhood seems reason enough for all enlightened parents teaching the method to their children. In addition, an important bonus of the lucid dreaming approach to children's nightmares is that it results in an increased sense of mastery and self-confidence as can be seen in all of the examples above. Think of the value of discovering that fear has no more power than you let it have, and that you are the master.

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