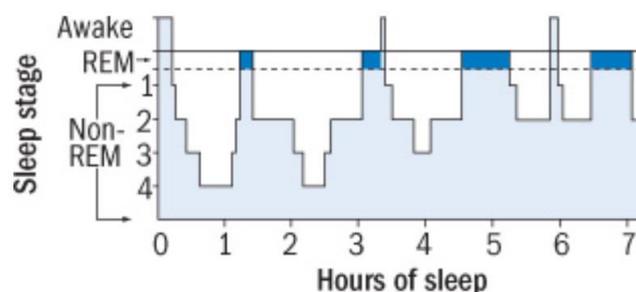


MANAGING / STOPPING NIGHTMARES

Nightmares or vivid terrifying dreams are commonly reported by veterans with PTSD. Some veterans also report night terrors. Both these can cause significant sleep disturbances that may result in people waking up in the middle of the night and it may also lead to fear of falling asleep in some.

Normally, our day- to- day life experiences are 'processed' by the brain and stored away in an area called the hippocampus. When we experience a trauma, however, memories of the trauma aren't processed properly and stored away like ordinary memories. In highly stressful conditions, it is this malfunction that causes trauma memories to be 're-experienced' in the form of flashbacks, nightmares and night terrors. Nightmares are, therefore, the brain's attempts to make sense of traumatic experiences. They are a normal response to abnormal experiences.

To treat nightmares and night terrors it is important to understand the difference between the two conditions. Nightmares happen most often during the final third of the night, when sleep cycles contain more REM sleep and generally don't involve motor activity. Nightmares are often at least partially remembered and people who have just had a nightmare often wakeup feeling alert and aware of their surroundings. Poor sleep hygiene, stress, traumatic events, and sleep disruptions caused by other sleep disorders such as periodic limb movement , restless legs syndrome or obstructive sleep apnea may cause or contribute to the nightmares.



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Night terrors, on the other hand, are caused by overarousal of the central nervous system during transitions between deep NREM sleep and lighter REM sleep. Apart from PTSD, certain other conditions make night terrors more likely. These include sleep deprivation, excessive consumption of caffeine, sleeping in an unfamiliar or uncomfortable environment, fever and illness. While the strategies to manage nightmares and night terror are comprehensively explained within the Sleep section on our website (<https://www.combatstress.org.uk/help-sleep-during-covid-19>) two particular approaches to manage or to stop nightmares respectively in the section below.

Imagery Rehearsal Therapy (IRT). This technique is a cognitive-behavioural approach that aims at reducing the number and intensity of nightmares. It helps the brain learn a new way of dealing with the terrifying nightmares. If you have multiple recurring nightmares, select just one at a time to work on and use IRT every night until it has been resolved. When that nightmare has been resolved, you can repeat the process for other nightmares. If you find the process difficult, it can be done with the help of a therapist or a trusted person. IRT involves four steps:

1. Writing down the narrative or the central element of the nightmare. One is asked to focus on the most frightening aspect of the dream in as much detail as one can remember and writing it down along with what led up to the dramatic ending.
2. Rewriting the script creating a new positive ending for the nightmare. Care is taken to make the new ending peaceful. The nightmares involve strong emotions such as anger and fear. The point of a new ending is to “tame” the emotions, not to vent them in violence and revenge.
3. Rehearsing the new version of the dream in imagination each night just before going to sleep from beginning to end. This is done as close to falling asleep as possible without any other activity in between.
4. Immediately after the rehearsal, practising a brief relaxation exercise can be helpful. This procedure can be repeated every time a nightmare is experienced, new script can be created and the technique tried for a minimum of period of 10 nights with the same script.

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Example: A woman was chased by a man one night going home. She had a recurring nightmare of being pursued by a dark figure. In the nightmare she ran and ran, and each time she always woke up, sweating and gasping for breath, at the same point. Using IRT she decided, as a new ending, to stop running and confront the figure. In a subsequent dream, when the pursuing figure appeared, she turned to him and said, "Who are you and what do you want"? The man replied, "you dropped this, and I have been trying to give it back to you". He handed the packet. "It's your purse, you dropped" he said. She woke up and the nightmare stopped occurring after a while.

The Dream Completion Technique (DCT): This technique focuses on stopping nightmares and explains that nightmares and other sleep disturbances are simply dreams that have become 'stuck' and keep repeating. It has also introduced a novel concept of 'dream shelf' that is empty and claims that one can kick start the dream by placing a new dream idea on the 'shelf' that feel good at gut level. It is vital that the new idea generates a sense of power and control. For DCT to work, the new dream idea must also be completely uncensored, unconstrained and creative and in its emotional intensity equal or greater to that of the distressing dream.

DCT involves creating a new dream idea at the point of the most recent dream where waking occurred by asking, 'What do I want to happen next that feels good'. One is to write it down and imagine the idea just before going to sleep thinking 'This is what I want to happen in my dream'. If the first dream idea doesn't work, one is required to come up with another idea for the empty 'dream shelf'.

Many Veterans complain that they cannot remember the content of their nightmare and wake up feeling anxious, frightened and sweaty. Using DCT one can create the new dream idea from either the emotion or sensation felt on waking by asking oneself, 'What do I want to happen next' and 'How do I want to get rid of this feeling/sensation'. If one experiences Jumbled dreams, it is advised to work with the last dream fragment remembered.

To practice this technique, see examples of nightmares and dream ideas and worksheet.

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Grounding after Nightmare: Nightmares are often a way for individuals who have had traumatic difficult experiences, to start to make sense of what happened to them. However, they can still be very frightening. Grounding techniques can be particularly useful after a bad dream or nightmare to help dispel the feelings one is left with and to enable people to feel safe. See some ideas below. Add more ideas to the list.

1. If you have had a nightmare and have woken up, stay still in bed and lie quietly. Remind yourself that what you just experienced was a nightmare, and that you are safe right now.
2. Remind yourself to breathe calmly and slowly. Again, put your hand on the area above your belly button, and feel it go up and down as you take breaths in and out. Try counting to 5 as you breathe in through your nose, and again as you breathe out through your mouth.
3. Some people find it helpful to stay in bed for 15-20 minutes using the techniques outlined above, as they find they can go back to sleep. If you do not fall back to sleep, wait a while before you get up. Breaking up your sleep can sometimes make you feel more worried and can also become a habit, which impacts on your sleep the following night. If after this time you still do not feel tired, get up.
4. If you do get up, do something calming such as making a warm drink or having a bath. Try to avoid having caffeine or cigarettes. Some people find it helpful to listen to relaxing music or read a magazine to distract themselves from thinking about their dream. Try to avoid watching TV or reading a book.
5. When you begin to feel tired again, go back to bed and lie calmly. Remind yourself that you are safe. It is helpful to breathe calmly and slowly to help you to go back to sleep.

Other Grounding Strategies Using Your Mind

- Play a categories game with yourself. Think of all the TV shows, foods, animals, songs or any other category that you can. Think of your favourite of each of these too.

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- Say kind statements to yourself. For example, “You are a kind person who is having a difficult time right now. But you are strong and will get through this.”
- Say coping statements to yourself. For example, “I can deal with this” or “These difficult feelings will pass.”
- Picture people that you care about (friends, family) or look at photographs of them.
- Think about things you are looking forward to in the next week or month.

Examples of Nightmares & Dream Ideas & worksheet

Being shot at. “On return from Afghanistan, I had dreams of being chased by armed insurgents most nights which really affected me, even though it never happened. **My dream idea** involved my love for photography, so I made all the guns SLR cameras, and now we are a paparazzi pack chasing a celebrity for the perfect photo”.

Being chased. “In my dream I was being chased by some very dangerous prisoners down my local high street. I woke up at the point they jumped on me. My wife was scared because I was thrashing around so much. **The dream idea** that worked was that I was being tackled in a rugby game, but I dragged them over the try line and scored. The crowd went mad and it felt great”.

Ship being attacked. “I was a machine gunner on the deck of a ship trying to shoot down a plane that was dropping bombs on us – it was very frightening. I would often dream about it waking up in a terrible sweat. **The new dream idea** I created was to grab the plane out of the sky and fling it away. I haven’t woken since!”

Cannot remember dream. “I woke up regularly lashing out but couldn’t remember my dreams. **My new dream idea** was to I imagine I was the Incredible Hulk throwing everyone off me in an uncontrollable rage, which felt good”.

Waking up sweating. “I wake up sweating buckets, but don’t remember any dream content. When I went to sleep, I imagined myself in a massive wind tunnel, blasting the sweat off me, and my sleep got better”.

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In the section below please record your dream idea and the outcome of using it.

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<i>Date</i>	My Dream Idea	Tried it Yes/ No	Comment: <i>Example: Had restful sleep. Nightmare stopped.</i>

Shaheen Shibli, Clinical Psychologist

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