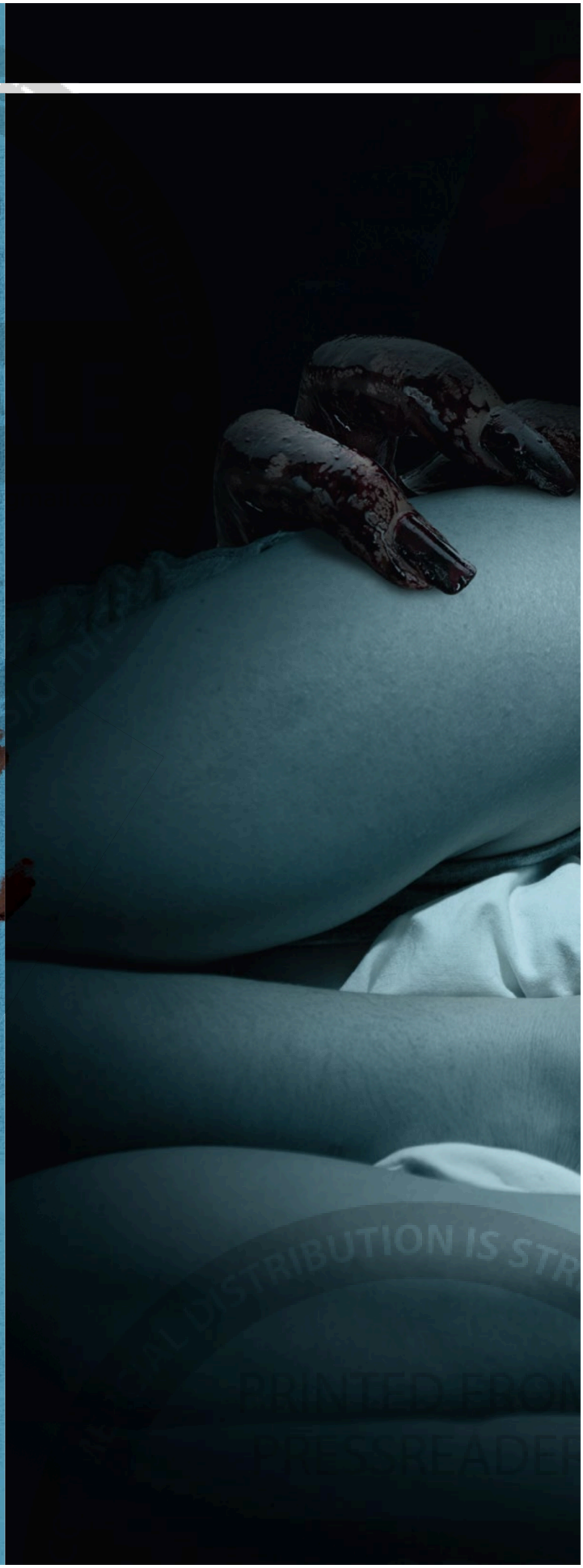
- Dreams

HOW TO AVOID NIGHTMARES (OR AT LEAST USE THEM CONSTRUCTIVELY)

Nightmares can be terrifying, and in the worst cases they can cause anxiety and severe sleep disturbance. But new research indicates that bad dreams can also provide information – including warnings of future illnesses.



By **Gorm Palmgren**



Nightmares are so intense and terrifying that the brain can enter a state of alert, forcing us to wake up.
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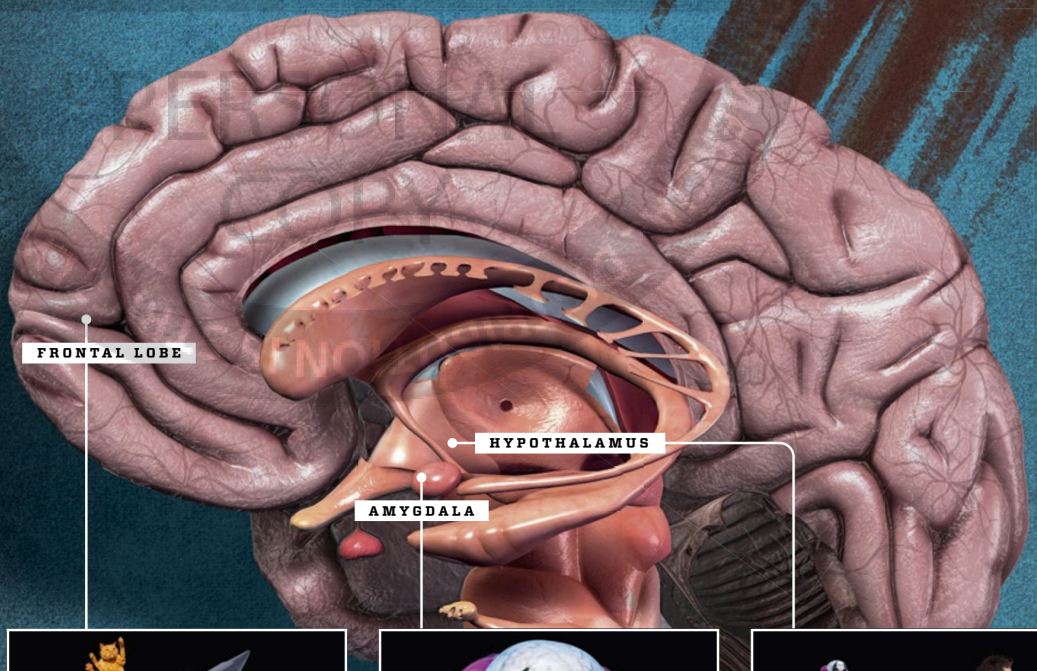
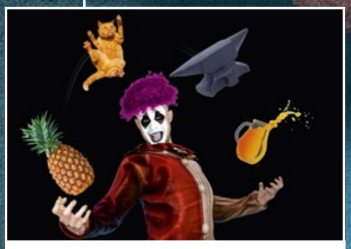
High brain activity causes bad dreams

When the activity of multiple brain regions gets out of control, your sweetest dreams can turn into nightmares that affect both brain and body.





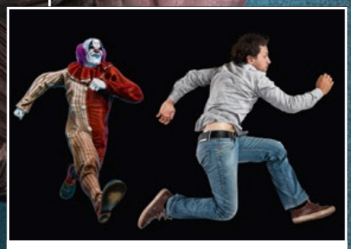
The frontal lobes distort the dream

1 During a nightmare, activity increases in the frontal lobes where our conscious thoughts form. The links weaken between the frontal lobes and the parietal lobe that processes sensory impressions, often making the dream distorted and absurd.



The amygdala emits danger signals

2 The amygdala is an area deep inside the brain involved in identifying potential danger and regulating fear. During a nightmare, the activity in the amygdala increases, and it responds by telling the rest of the brain that we are in danger.



The hypothalamus puts us on alert

3 This hormone-producing gland helps us control our emotional reactions. During a nightmare it makes the adrenal glands produce the stress hormone adrenaline, which puts the body on alert, involving rapid heartbeat and sweaty skin.

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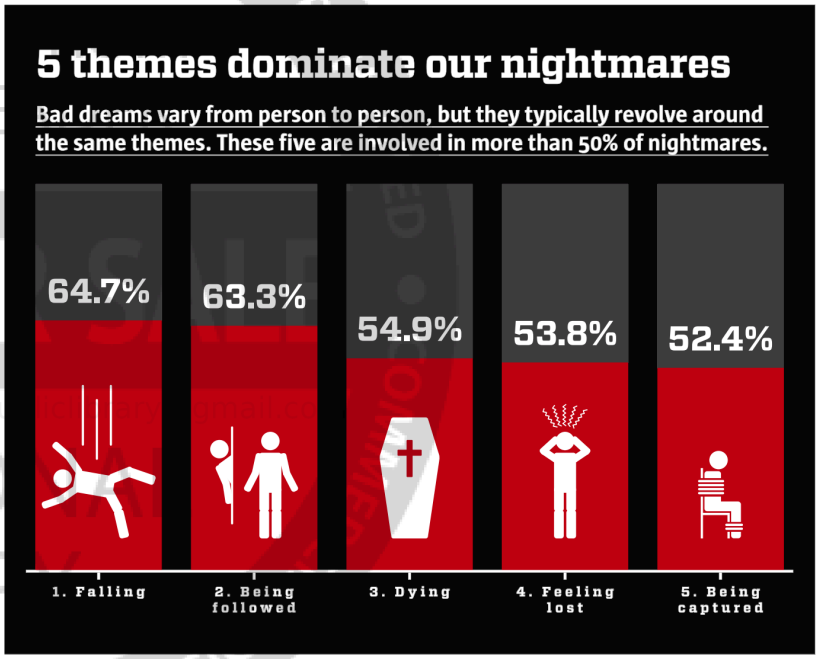
You are in a dense and thorny forest, with no idea which direction will lead out; every way you turn, the forest just gets denser and darker. You hear laughter behind you – evil laughter! You panic, and flee through the thick undergrowth. But the laughter follows, getting closer and closer, until you feel a clammy hand on your shoulder just as as the ground disappears under your feet and you plummet to the bottom of an abyss, knowing you are about to die...

But you don't. Instead, you wake up drenched in sweat; another nightmare. And it was a bad one: you experienced the four scenarios most commonly associated with bad dreams, which are falling, being followed, feeling lost, and dying.

Scientists are only beginning to understand why our sweet dreams sometimes turn into terrifying nightmares. Most of the time, bad dreams – while unpleasant – are nothing to worry about. But in some cases they need to be taken seriously. According to the most recent research, nightmares could even be a warning that disease is developing in your brain.



Fear takes over the brain

The medical definition of a nightmare is an intense, startling dream that wakes the dreamer to full consciousness. They typically occur in the second half of the sleeping period. Fear and anxiety are the most characteristic emotions associated with nightmares, but they can also cause anger and despair.

This definition fits well with the results of a study from 2016, in which 2000 people answered questions about the contents of their nightmares. Falling, being followed, dying, feeling lost, and being captured topped the list, and they form part of at least half of all nightmares. Further down the list are nightmares involving less dangerous but still anxiety-provoking actions such as oversleeping or turning up unprepared for an exam.

According to the study, there are also gender differences. Women typically have 50% more nightmares than men, and are more likely to have nightmares about being abandoned by their partner. Men are more likely to have nightmares about technology that suddenly stops working.

According to other studies, about 85% of adults have had a nightmare in the past year. Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable and have nightmares 2-5 times more often than adults.

The situation is even worse for around 4% of the population, which suffers from nightmares several times a week.

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There may be other variables. At the University of Western Australia, a new study will explore whether and how religion affects our dreams and nightmares.

"Does religion make us less anxious and worried?", asks Dr Ian Dunican from UWA's Centre for Sleep Science. "And when we experience more nightmares, do we have more general anxiety and/or death anxiety?"

What is a nightmare?

A nightmare is essentially a dream; both occur during REM sleep when the brain is almost as active as when awake.

By comparing brain scans of people who often have nightmares to scans of people who never have nightmares, it has been possible to gain insight into how bad dreams occur. The results suggest that things go wrong in three brain areas.

Disruptions of the circuits between different parts of the frontal and parietal lobes point the dreams in a scary direction. At the same time increased activity in the amygdala and hippocampus triggers fear and puts the body into a state of alert.

Doctors also distinguish between two types of nightmares. One occurs independently, with no identifiable cause. The other has a clearer connection to real-life events, as is the case with PTSD, a long-term stress disorder caused by traumatic experiences such as war.

Regardless of how the nightmares are triggered, it is hard to see their purpose. But it's possible that bad dreams may have had a beneficial function earlier in human evolution.

According to psychologist Deirdre Barrett from Harvard University in the US, nightmares may have originated in early human evolution as a nervous system ▶



Three factors trigger nightmares

Scientists do not know the exact cause of nightmares, but the bad dreams are often linked with specific conditions both before and during sleep.

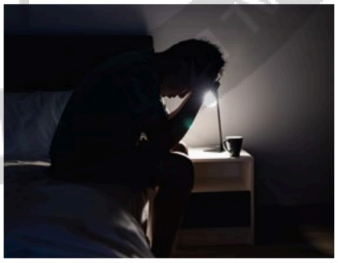
Worries and stress fuel nightmares

1 Financial worries or stress concerning an upcoming event such as an exam or public speaking cause anxiety-fuelled unease. This tense and nervous state can spill over into your dreams and induce nightmares.



Nightmares thrive during poor sleep

2 During periods of very little sleep or poor interrupted sleep, it is normal to dream a lot, and the dreams are often so intense that they develop into nightmares. People suffering from insomnia are particularly likely to experience nightmares.



Medication may raise the risk of bad dreams

3 Parkinson's, ADHD, depression and sleeping drugs influence the brain's nerve signals or disturb REM sleep, which could trigger nightmares. Antihistamines and cholesterol-lowering statins could also increase the risk of nightmares.





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How to avoid nightmares



GUIDE

Bad dreams can be very unpleasant, and if they occur several times a week, nightmares can seriously affect your life. But doctors and researchers have treatments and methods that may allow you to control your nightmares – and perhaps make them disappear altogether.

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POSITIVE THINKING

ASSOCIATE NIGHTMARES WITH SOMETHING GOOD

EFFECT: Turns nightmares into pleasant dreams.



WHY?

People with PTSD or other traumas often have nightmares, but they can relieve their effects by imagery rehearsal therapy, a kind of cognitive therapy in which the person, while awake, learns to rewrite the action of the nightmare so that it takes a different course and becomes a positive experience, instead of a negative one. Scientific studies have shown that the unpleasant nightmares disappear in up to 80% of patients after three months of this type of therapy.

HOW?

If you have several different recurring nightmares, choose the most frequent or scariest one to work on. Then think about how the action can be changed in a positive direction, so the nightmare ends well and becomes a positive dream. For instance, if you dream that you fall from a skyscraper, imagine that at the very last minute, you grab the drainpipe and climb back up. Repeat the new version of the dream to yourself over and over again for up to 20 minutes a day.

CONTROL

BECOME THE DIRECTOR OF YOUR DREAMS



EFFECT: Allows you control dream contents.

WHY?

Lucid dreams differ from other dreams in that you are aware that you are dreaming and can hence influence the action. Instead of being at the mercy of your dreams, you make yourself the director, deciding what happens in your dreams. According to some studies, 19-37% of the population have lucid dreams at least once a month and no fewer than 82% of people have experienced them at least once.

HOW?

You can train yourself to have lucid dreams. Before you fall asleep, tell yourself to remember what you dream and then try to recall as many details as possible from the dream when you wake up. You should also train yourself to be aware of whether you are awake, dreaming, or fantasising. You can do this throughout the day by checking if your reflection looks natural, if the clock is counting seconds, and whether you can breathe even if you hold your nose.

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CONFRONTATION

FACE YOUR FEAR



WHY?

Using a technique known as desensitisation, people can learn to face their fear in a safe and controlled environment, allowing them to gradually manage and eventually overcome the fear. This type of therapy is also used to treat phobias, PTSD, OCD, and other anxiety-related disorders. Scientific studies have documented that the therapy can significantly reduce the frequency of nightmares and, importantly, that the effect can last for the long term.

HOW?

Seek out the situation that is the setting for your recurring nightmare – or if that is not possible, imagine that you are there. For example, it could be a busy intersection where you get hit by a car in your nightmare. Try to relive the nightmare in as much detail as possible, including all sensory impressions, and try to conjure up the fear. If you repeat the exercise regularly, you will, at best, get so used to the situation that fear will disappear — both during the exercises and in the nightmare.

RELAXATION

USE YOUR BODY TO CALM YOUR MIND



WHY?

After a nightmare, the body is in a state of stress, which causes muscle tension; even fear of the next nightmare can make your muscles tense up. But the physical discomfort of bad dreams can be alleviated by learning to completely relax your muscles, a process which also helps calm your mind. According to scientific studies, deep muscle relaxation reduces the number of nightmares in up to 80% of people, and in half of them the nightmares disappear completely.

HOW?

To practise deep muscle relaxation, find a quiet and comfortable space. Lie on the floor or sit in a comfortable chair, loosen your clothes, remove any glasses or contact lenses. Breathe calmly and deeply from your diaphragm, and focus your attention on individual areas of your body, relaxing each. Start with your forehead, jaw, neck, and shoulders and work down to your feet until your entire body is relaxed after about five minutes. Repeat the exercise on a daily basis.

YOUR G.P.

CONSULT YOUR DOCTOR



WHY?

If you have regular nightmares which are causing you distress, raise the issue with your doctor, who will be able to consider the problem based on full knowledge of your wider health. As for drugs, the majority of studies on nightmare medication have been targeted for patients with PTSD; relatively little is known about how such drugs work on more common nightmares. But your doctor may see a wider diagnosis for which treatment could provide a path forward.

HOW?

Nightmares are unpleasant, but rarely downright harmful. Since no medication has a well-documented effect, though often a range of side effects, medical treatment is generally not recommended. However the nightmares may be part of a wider issue which your doctor can identify. So if you do suffer regularly from nightmares, don't necessarily dismiss them as just 'bad dreams'; talk to your doctor about your options.

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