Bad dreams cause bad moods [1]

Dear Alice,

I have been having very disturbing dreams about a past relationship which ended over three years ago. These dreams affect my moods during the day and give me a depressed feeling. I am currently on an anti-depressant and in therapy which have helped with this situation, but the dreams are lingering and creating more anxiety for me. Any suggestions?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It is true, dream weaver, that your nightly dreams may affect your mood. Rather than waking up refreshed, a troubled dreamer may wake up feeling as if s/he has been in battle all night long. Moreover, these abstract, disorienting dreams can contribute to anxiety. People who are clinically depressed may dream three to four times more than the average dreamer. In order for you to break free from your bad dream-bad mood cycle, it is important to identify the cause of these dreams. While anxiety and stress are the most common causes of nightmares, other catalysts include:

Important life events: Dreaming about specific things can be an indicator of things in your life that have yet to be resolved. You also mentioned that your dreams are often about a past relationship. Can you think of anything in the relationship that is still affecting you? What about things about the relationship that still trouble you? Recording what your dreams are about can help you and your therapist focus on what is troubling you most.

Medication, including antidepressants: A common treatment of depression today are SSRIs (selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors), which increase serotonin levels and elevate moods. However, SSRIs may also increase nightmares and bizarre dreams. When looking for treatment options for depression, it is recommended to tell your health care provider about your bad dreams, because certain medications may make your symptoms worse. Speaking with your health care provider can help you decide which medication is best for you. Columbia students can make an appointment through Open Communicator [2] or by calling Medical Services [3] at 212-854-2284.

Alcohol and other drugs: Both excessive alcohol consumption and abrupt alcohol withdrawal can lead to strange or disturbing night visions. In addition, recent withdrawal from a drug, such as sleeping pills, can influence your dreams and/or quality of sleep.

Kudos to you for seeking out the help you need! If your bad dreams are frequent and affect
your everyday moods, it is highly recommended to speak with a counselor and health care provider. Seeing a therapist or psychologist may allow you to talk about what is on your mind, and help you work through your emotions that contribute to your dreams. Columbia students may make an appointment to see a professional counselor at Counseling and Psychological Services [4]. In addition to seeking professional help, it can be beneficial to:

- Follow a regular fitness routine, with aerobic exercise if possible. You will find that you will be able to fall asleep faster, sleep more deeply, and wake up feeling more refreshed.
- Learn techniques to reduce muscle tension (relaxation therapy), which will help reduce your anxiety.
- Practice good sleep hygiene. Go to bed at the same time each night, and wake up at the same time each morning. Avoid long-term use of tranquilizers, as well as caffeine and other stimulants. Also, try not to eat just before bed, which raises your body’s metabolism and brain activity.
- Ask for support from friends and relatives. Your social network can provide a vast amount of support.

While it may be challenging to overcome them, nightmares should not stop you from getting quality sleep or keeping up with your daily activities. Continuing on a path to healing can help you turn your nightly stress into a good night’s rest.

Sweet dreams!

Alice!

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