

**Have you ever wondered why we dream? Do you know how to interpret the meaning of your dreams? Read about the purpose of dreams and what you can learn from them.**

Can you remember a time when you woke up from a fantastic, scary or weird dream? Maybe you had to turn on the light and calm down. Maybe you tried to hold on to it because the dream was so interesting you wanted to relive it. Probably, in either case, the details were mostly forgotten before breakfast. But are dreams just dreams or are they trying to tell you something?

### Do dreams predict the future?

Throughout history and across cultures, dreams have been associated with prophecy. People thought dreams were messages from the gods, sent to give us knowledge or insight. Even today, many people can recall a time they dreamed about an event, place or person and then, later, the dream came true in real life. But if most people have four to six dreams every night after the age of ten, that's as many as 2,000 dreams per year. So, by the time they reach 80 years old the average person might have had 140,000 dreams. Even if we forget 95–99 per cent of our dreams, that's still a few thousand remembered dreams across a lifetime.

It's not too difficult to believe that, by coincidence, a dream event is followed by a real-life event that's similar to it, especially if the subject of the dream is something that happens often in everyday life. Dreams of a phone call from an old friend or the death of someone close, for example, are more likely to be the result of coincidence than prophecy. And, of course, we probably choose to forget all the times we dream about such events but they don't happen.

### Are dreams just recycled thoughts?

Around the 18th and 19th centuries two main ideas about dreams became popular. One was the idea that the things we see in our dreams represent things hidden from our conscious mind. Freud believed that if we understand what dreams are telling us, we can understand our hidden feelings and the problems they cause. However, the other theory was the opposite. It said that dreams are just a collection of random activity in the brain while it's organising memories and events from the day. When we wake up, we try to make sense of these random images and feelings and put them into some sort of story.

### Are dreams messages from our brains?

But perhaps the truth about dreams lies somewhere in the middle of these two ideas. Maybe dreams are the result of our mind organising the thoughts we have during the day, but they appear in dreams with symbolic meaning. When we're awake, our thoughts mostly appear in our minds as words, like conversations we have with ourselves. But when we're asleep, the part of our brain that controls language becomes less active while the part that controls emotions becomes more active. So, the theory says, we experience our thoughts as emotions and symbols instead of words with clear meanings.

What this means is that if you can interpret the symbols in your dreams, you have a window into things in your subconscious. Your dreams might show you all kinds of insights into things that you didn't realise you were thinking about. Common dreams like being able to fly or falling, your teeth falling out or having no

clothes on in a public place probably mean something similar in most people. But the key to understanding exactly what they mean to you is to connect them to the events and feelings in your daily life.

### How can you understand the messages?

One way to help you do this is to keep a dream diary. First thing in the morning, and any time you wake up during the night, write down whatever you can remember about your dreams. It's important to use pen and paper, not your phone or computer as the light might wake you up and speed the disappearance of your dreams. You'll get the most details if you've woken in the middle of a dream. You have to be quick as the memories will be gone in seconds, so don't even wait until your eyes are fully open. Some days your writing will be almost illegible, others it will be nonsense. Sometimes, you probably won't even remember waking up and your notes can seem like some strange letter someone left for you during the night. Over the period of a week you'll be surprised how much you've written down.

Now you can start connecting your dreams to the events and feelings in your daily life. Writing them down will mean you start to remember more details about the dream, so think about the people and place where the dream happened as they might add to the meaning too. How were you feeling in the dream when the events happened? A dream about having no clothes on in public might mean you are anxious about something you have to do, or not feeling confident in a specific situation or with certain people.

### Can you control your dreams?

Some people think writing your dreams down can open your mind to lucid dreaming. Lucid dreams are dreams where you're not only aware you're dreaming but you can make decisions to affect the events of your dreams. So, maybe you can turn a nightmare into a safe-feeling dream, or you can direct the plot of your dream like a film director. Then, instead of just working out the meaning of your dreams, you'll be creating them, though you might want to continue having some dreams that allow your subconscious to tell you what's on your mind!

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