

Why Do We Dream?

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Man has attempted to explain, interpret, and analyze dreams for thousands of years. Philosophers and scientists have created theories of the purpose of dreams. Yet still to this day there is no definitive explanation of why we dream. Mankind can only theorize why our brains entertain us while we sleep. This writer will attempt to explain the purpose of dreaming and its process.

To understand why we dream it is important to understand the process of sleep. Traditional knowledge has been that sleep is a restorative process. Modern day research shows that the brain uses deep sleep to replenish necessary nutrition for the next day. The brain is constantly in use throughout the day and night. Energy is used for every task that a person performs whether it is physical or mental. Therefore, sleep seems to exist primarily for the brain to rest.

Sleep studies have shown that there are four stages of sleep. Starting with stage one sleep which is a light sleep all the way down to stage four which is a deep sleep where the brain usually is able to rest. How much replenishment the brain needs depends on how much brain activity occurs during the day. Thus, how much deep sleep the brain received the previous night and the activity the next day determines the needs the following night.

Rapid eye movement sleep, known as REM sleep, happens throughout the night and is a light stage of sleep. It is during this stage that the brain creates dreams and paralyzes the body. The paralysis occurs so that dreams are not acted out by the person while asleep. These dreams are like miniature movies being shown in the brain that a person either participates in or observes. It is the importance and purpose of dreams that is debatable. Dreams are often

interpreted by symbols that are believed to have a meaning in the waking life. This is especially the view of Freud's philosophy in which he believed the unconscious mind uses dreams to bring attention subjects to the conscious mind. The belief is that issues not being dealt with in the waking life would often appear in dreams. Some of which could be traumatic experiences or deep desires.

Secret desires can often appear in dreams and affect the dreamer when he or she wakes. It is also common to dream about an ongoing issue the conscious mind is challenged with. Sometimes a person will dream about something said person was thinking about before falling asleep, as if perhaps the unconscious mind is continuing the subject. Freudians attempt to use their philosophy to decode dreams and explain what the symbols mean. Psychologists are not the only ones who have attempted to explain dreams. Oracles, self-proclaimed psychics, and astrologers have attempted to predict one's future based on dreams. Perhaps one of the most well known examples is in the Old Testament of the Bible in which Joseph interpreted the dreams of the Pharaoh. Humans have been fascinated by dreams for many thousands of years.

Though there have been many explanations of why we dream, the question this writer asks: what is the purpose of dreaming? The brain obviously creates this fantasy environment in the mind and somehow allows a person to interact with it. It is not a stage of rest for the brain as it is quite active during REM sleep. Therefore, it could be a way for the unconscious part of the mind to deal with difficult subjects or experiences.

It is the belief of this writer that some of what the Freudians believe is true. People tend to avoid issues about themselves which are not becoming of them. Sometimes these issues are themes in a dream. Some forms of trauma even cause an unawareness of deep issues. For

example, a child may become very shy or isolate themselves socially if said child experiences an extreme negative social event. Such an event could be a heart break or loss of a close friend.

Children often do not have the tools to deal with such trauma and therefore the child responds in a way to lessen the stress of such an event.

The problem with interpreting symbols is there is no clear way to challenge the interpretation. Who is to say what each symbol means or whether it is universal in all dreams. It is difficult to prove what a dream means and as such can differ by opinion. What one dream interpreter believes is the correct meaning to a dream may not be agreed upon by another. Therefore it does not seem useful to this writer to focus on what individual symbols mean. It can also be true that one does not agree on what is or is not a symbol.

Instead, this writer surmises that it is better to look at the theme of dreams. Some examples of types of dreams are: sexual, emotional, realistic, unrealistic, and so on. It may be obvious to most people what a sexual dream symbolizes. Sexual dreams, in this writer's opinion, occur because sex is something humans think about constantly throughout the day. It also may be a way for the body to force orgasms, especially in males. Since it is imperative for a species to procreate in order to survive it seems obvious that this type of dream can inspire a human to seek a sexual relationship.

Emotional dreams are what would be defined as sad, happy, funny, or any dream that evokes an emotional experience. This type of dream often occurs when a powerful moment has happened. One example is the reunion of two long lost siblings or could be as simple as seeing relatives on a holiday. These dreams occur because of deep feelings about something during the

waking hours. Physiological changes in mood that create feelings are likely to be attributed to why these types of dreams result.

There are also two main categories of dreams which are those that are realistic and unrealistic. A person while dreaming tends to believe the dream to be reality most of the time, though there are circumstances where a dreamer realizes he or she is in a dream, known as lucid dreams. However, such dreams are usually short lived as there is a tendency for a dreamer to wake up after becoming aware of being in a dream.

Realistic type dreams can represent many things. Dreaming allows the brain to store memories by associating them with previous memories. Therefore sometimes these memories can be used in dreams and sometimes old memories are changed in some way. It is this writer's opinion that these dreams help with memory recall. There are also realistic dreams that are not past memories but made up events. Obviously these dreams can be confused with actual events.

Unrealistic dreams are not believable to the waking person but still can feel real to the dreamer. Generally these dreams have events that don't connect with each other or make little sense. There are a variety of themes ranging from outer space exploration to eating rocks! These dreams tend to be more symbolic and creative.

A few explanations for why we dream have physiological roots. The body is designed to dream. Once REM sleep begins the body becomes paralyzed in order to prevent physical movement related to dreaming. Perhaps the brain requires a period to increase function do as to not stay in slow wave sleep for too long. Therefore this writer surmises that REM sleep is a way for the brain to exercise itself while the person is unconscious.

However, there are other possible uses for REM sleep and dreaming. As mentioned before, Freud believed that the unconscious mind would bring issues up during dreaming. He believed that trauma and important issues that were too dangerous for the conscious mind to deal with were locked away in the unconscious. Dreaming provides an outlet for such issues according to Freud. If true, the unconscious mind protects us from harmful stimuli that could pose a serious threat to our mental health.

Dreaming has roots deep in human history particularly with the development of consciousness of the early humans. Author Derek P. Brereton wrote an article describing what he called Social Mapping Theory. His theory states a “value of dreaming because it sees consciousness, not merely as awareness, but as scenario building that connects the self to the physical and social environment, and that attributes such scenario building to others (Brereton, p 24, 2000).” Brereton feels that dreaming had a purpose for socializing early human communities as well as evolving human consciousness.

Dreaming also helped early humans develop survival strategies and ensure continuation of the species. This theory suggests that dreaming has contributed to the development of modern day human consciousness. Not only that but dreaming could have been essential for development of emotional processes too. Thus even in today’s society, dreaming could play a part in human evolution. Obviously the physiological processes that induce sleep are involved and are believed to be what causes dreams.

Dreaming begins because of neuroelectrical impulses which are spontaneously generated, in cycles throughout the night, by the pontine brainstem (Brereton, p.5). It is believed that the pontine accounts for the evolution of dreaming. This supports a clear identification of the

biological basis of dreaming. The pontine reticular formation assists in the development of the central nervous system. This suggests that in order for the central nervous system to fully develop it may require the body to sleep. Dreams may also help the system to develop. This suggests that REM sleep was designed by nature to be a “simulator” of sorts to help humans determine appropriate survival behavior.

There have been men who have theorized that certain outside stimuli can affect dreams while a person is asleep. For example, a car alarm sounding somewhere outside could give a dreamer an experience of being in school when a fire alarm sounds. Outside sounds have been used in Hollywood to explain dreams of a character once they wake up. This type of dream brings up an interesting point. If outside stimuli can affect a person’s dream, then that would mean a person’s sense of hearing would still be active during sleep. It is questionable whether this could happen during a deep sleep and it is impossible to know for sure whether this has occurred without scientific research. Suffice to say there is some debate about the subject. It would make more sense if this could occur during a light sleep, such when REM sleep occurs.

Some have suggested that these types of dreams occur when half-asleep. Though to this writer it would seem that is unlikely. Based on personal experience, half-sleep is still conscious enough to recognize real world objects. That being said, any dream like feeling would just be remnants from the last dream in REM sleep and therefore quickly fades as waking finishes. Therefore this writer does not believe that outside stimuli would have such an effect on dreaming while only half-asleep. That being said, it is still possible that outside stimuli could have an effect on a person dreaming. Not enough is known about how dreaming effects the body and what can effect dreaming.

While dreams are often entertaining when asleep, sometimes they are not so. Nightmares are dreams which are scary or frightening. Nightmares tend to represent a fear that has not manifested in the waking life. There are of course nightmares that seem to have no specific meaning. For example, one can have a nightmare involving clowns but have no irrational fear of clowns.

During the times when witchcraft accusations ran rampant, nightmares were believed to be the effect of dark magic or witchcraft. Many people claimed to have been under the power of a witch for the duration of a nightmare while others suggested that nightmares were forms of guilt for being a witch. Nightmares at times would occur during sleep paralysis which is a disorder where a person begins to enter or leaves REM sleep being fully conscious of the world around them but unable to move. Such episodes of sleep paralysis tend to last mostly for about ten minutes but can last up to thirty (Davies, p.3). Sleep paralysis had also been believed to be caused by witchcraft.

It is obvious that witchcraft is no longer believed to cause nightmare or sleep paralysis. Neurologists, psychologists, and psychiatrists have spent much time studying the experiences of what European societies believed to be witchcraft (Davies, p.3). The general consensus is that the causes of nightmare and sleep paralysis were from gastric disturbances leading either to noxious undigested vapors rising to the head and irritating the nervous system, or alternatively caused a distension of the stomach, which impeded circulation and led to stagnation of the blood (Davies, p4). Perhaps there is something to the idea of not eating just before bed! Feelings of happiness may tend to create joyful or entertaining dreams while depression might lead to sad dreams. It may then be possible to learn ways to create an environment to encourage certain dreams over others or perhaps to lead to a dreamless sleep. Science as always continues to

unlock the mysteries of life and it is entirely possible that someday humans may learn to control what they dream.

Humans for many years have attempted to explain, interpret, and analyze dreams. Philosophers and scientists continue to this very day debate about the purpose of dreams. The more dreams and sleep are studied; a clearer picture can be painted. This writer believes he has a good idea of how and why we dream. Hopefully the process of dreaming will become clearer to mankind as time passes.

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