

What dreams are made of

Plagued by dreams of crumbling teeth or school exams? Chantelle Pattemore asks the professionals what our dreams can (and can't) tell us.

Imagine spending around six years of your lifetime doing just one thing – but not being able to remember most of it. Sounds crazy, right? But this is exactly what happens when it comes to our dreams.

We often wake up none the wiser of the images that whizzed through our mind's eye the previous night – but this doesn't mean they're unimportant. Over the years, researchers have offered all sorts of explanations for why we dream. Yet, despite numerous studies, the purpose of dreams remains not fully understood, says Dr Katherine Hall, sleep psychologist at Happy Beds (happybeds.co.uk).

The stuff of dreams

One theory as to why we dream relates to memory consolidation. When we remember a dream, we often find it relates to a thing or person we've encountered recently – and scientists believe it's because dreaming is a way for our brains to organise and store these moments away. 'Dreaming strengthens one's memory and aids in informational recall,' Dr Hall explains.

Dreaming may also have a therapeutic function, providing us with an opportunity to unconsciously process the goings-on in our lives. 'During sleep, the brain operates at a more emotional level, allowing individuals to confront and process emotional dramas in their lives,' Dr Hall reveals. 'This process involves making connections regarding feelings that the conscious self might not establish.' ►

Some have also theorised that our dreams are a way to 'prepare us' for real-life scenarios. For instance, 'some researchers propose that dreaming may enhance social cognition by simulating social scenarios and interactions', explains Dr Hall. 'This simulation could potentially contribute to improved social skills and understanding in waking life.' Meanwhile, others believe dreams can enhance our natural fight-or-flight instincts. 'By training the brain to practise responses to threatening situations during dreams, individuals may be better equipped to handle similar situations without necessarily having to physically react,' Dr Hall states.

The advent of psychoanalysis in the 1890s introduced the idea that our dreams might represent impulses and feelings hidden in our unconscious mind. Sigmund Freud, the movement's founder, proposed that dreams reflect desires - with a particular focus on sexual urges - that are pushed down by our conscious minds when we're awake for fear of embarrassment or anxiety. On the other hand, psychiatrist Carl Jung believed dreams act as the connection between our conscious and unconscious minds, and can be interpreted symbolically according to a person's emotions and environment.

Finally, there's the possibility that dreams don't mean that much at all. '[One] theory is that dreams are epiphenomenal, which means that they have no purpose of their own but are just a weird and wonderful side-effect of all of the clever things our brains are doing during the night,' explains Dr Nicola Cann, sleep psychologist and founder of The Family Sleep Consultant (thefamilysleepconsultant.com).

Nights to remember

If we don't often remember our dreams, there's no need to panic. 'It's important to know that the frequency of dream recall varies widely among individuals, and this diversity is entirely normal,' says Dr Hall. 'Dream recall is influenced by an array of factors, including stress levels, sleep patterns and individual differences in brain activity during sleep.'

Dr Cann adds that when we dream can also influence the likelihood of recall. 'Most dreaming happens during REM sleep,' she explains. 'We tend to remember the dreams we have towards the end of the night, because it's in our last sleep cycle that we get the most REM sleep.' Indeed, in one study, 80% of participants who woke up during the REM sleep phase could remember their dreams.

If we do remember our dreams, this is good news, says Charlie Morley, dream expert (charliemorley.com) and author of *Wake Up to Sleep*. 'Firstly, you become more familiar with your dream landscape, which means you're more likely to develop your self-awareness,' he says. 'Secondly, the subconscious mind



sends us helpful dreams – and, by recalling our dreams, our subconscious recognises that we’re listening.’

Charlie explains that recalling and working with our dreams allows us to develop ‘a friendly relationship, a kind of rapport, a conversation between conscious and unconscious. If we can listen in to what our dreams are saying, they will inevitably and invariably tell us something we didn’t already know.’

Various approaches can aid dream recall, such as keeping a dream journal. ‘As soon as you get up in the morning, stay still with your eyes closed and allow those memories to surface, then write them down immediately,’ suggests Theresa Cheung, dream expert and bestselling author of *The Dream Dictionary from A to Z* (theresacheung.com). ‘If there’s no memory, write down how you feel – because, as well as symbols, the language of dreams is emotion.’

Simply intending to remember a dream may also help, says Charlie. ‘Set an intention to recall your dreams before you start dreaming,’ he says. As you’re getting ready for bed or nodding off, he suggests, try mentally repeating a phrase such as ‘I will remember what I dream about’.

Sleep, dream, repeat

When we are able to recall dreams, some find the same one cropping up again and again. In fact, up to 75% of us experience recurring dreams at some point. Repeating dreams are typically more negative in nature, frequently centred around themes such as failure or being chased. This is perhaps unsurprising as research shows stress has a big influence on dream repetition: those who have recurring dreams have been found in studies to have lower overall psychological wellbeing.

‘Because dreams are largely thought to be about making sense of our waking

‘Those who have recurring dreams have been found in studies to have lower overall psychological wellbeing’

environments, there are some predictable patterns to the dreams people experience,’ shares Dr Cann. ‘For example, teens are more likely to repeatedly dream about being naked in public. These dreams represent the developmental stages they are at, and how they’re currently making sense of the world – [with] teens more worried about social situations.’

Dr Cann adds that other factors aside from stress, such as cultural experiences and outlooks, can influence the likelihood of dreams and particular themes recurring. ‘For example, people who live in Australia, where snakes are common, dream about snakes far more often than people in Singapore, where people rarely see snakes,’ she reveals. Additionally, ‘a recent study found that rainbows are a common dream topic for people in Bhutan, where the people are known for scoring high on measures of wellbeing and happiness.’

Theresa explains that recurring dreams may also be a way of our psyche trying to get across a specific message that we’ve not paid attention to previously. As such, ‘you need to do some reflection, thinking, brainstorming and working out why your nocturnal intuition is repeatedly sending you this night vision’, she states. ‘Once you spend time reflecting on that dream and really understand why it keeps recurring, trust me, that dream will not return.’ ▶

What affects our dreams?

Dreams span a huge variety of themes and, similarly, lots of different things can impact the images we see during shut-eye. Dr Hall reveals that common influences on dream content and recall include:

- Stress, from everyday worries to chronic concerns such as post-traumatic stress disorder
- Sleep disorders, including sleep apnea and insomnia
- Mental health disorders, including depression and anxiety
- Physical health concerns, including heart disease and cancer
- Hormonal changes
- Medications
- Vitamin B6 intake

And what about the old adage that cheese causes bad dreams? Cheese has been linked to vivid dreams thanks to its tryptophan and tyramine content, Dr Hall reveals. 'Tryptophan [is] an amino acid that can be converted into serotonin, a neurotransmitter associated with mood and sleep,' she says. 'Tyramine, on the other hand, is a substance that can affect blood pressure and may theoretically influence sleep patterns.'

A good chunk of cheddar isn't the only food affiliated with dreaming. 'Spicy foods, such as curries, have been associated with causing nightmares due to their impact on body temperature and brain activity during sleep,' Dr Hall says. Meanwhile, 'studies have shown that the sugar and caffeine in chocolate and sweet foods can make it difficult to fall asleep, which then makes you more likely to have nightmares.'

Ultimately, however, it's best to take links between food and dreaming with a pinch of salt. 'There isn't enough scientific evidence to prove that certain foods can affect dreaming,' Dr Hall states. 'While certain substances in food may have physiological effects on the body, the extent to which they directly influence the content or nature of dreams remains an area where more research is needed.'



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The bigger picture

With 704 million Google search results (and counting) for 'dream interpretation', we're not alone in wondering what our night time visions might be trying to tell us. However, dream analysis isn't a one-size-fits-all scenario, and it's essential to understand that dreams are very personal, notes Theresa. 'You have to go through all the associations until something strikes and you get that eureka moment.'

When deciphering a dream, always go for the positive interpretation, Theresa states. 'There is

no such thing as a negative dream, because dreams are your higher self, your soul, your spirit, your intuition talking to you. If it sends you a shocking or disturbing image, it is because it wants you to remember it and consider what you are thinking, feeling and doing in your waking life to trigger these associations.'

Despite the personalisation of dreams, Theresa notes that certain themes are more common than others – and particular meanings are often tied to them.

PREGNANCY

While this dream can be experienced by those who want to get pregnant (or are), it's often encountered by those who have no current desire to have children, reveals Theresa. 'Pregnancy is a powerful symbol for new beginnings and new creativity being born within you – something that you need to carefully nurture,' she says.

Another interpretation revolves around giving your inner child some TLC. The dream is your mind conveying that 'there's a part of you that urgently needs to be nurtured and unconditionally loved', Theresa adds.

BACK AT SCHOOL

Theresa says that school-related dreams often revolve around dreaded exams or forgetting your locker combination. This is typically a reflection of work stresses, she says. 'Think about what's going on currently in your work. This dream suggests that, right now, something in your life is being seriously tested and you're putting pressure on yourself.'

SNAKES

Studies show around half of us fear these slithery serpents, so dreaming about them can be somewhat unsettling. Yet this dream has more positive connotations, shares Theresa. 'Snakes are a powerful symbol of transformation and the importance of shedding

old skins,' she says.

'You need to let go of some mindset, habit, relationship or situation that no longer is relevant to you. You need, like a snake, to shed that skin and move on.'

TEETH CRUMBLING OR FALLING OUT

This is all about communication, Theresa says, as 'in the animal world, animals communicate with their teeth first and foremost.' She suggests asking yourself if there's something you should

have said but didn't, and then looking at why you might have avoided doing so.

Dreaming about losing teeth can also relate to concerns about appearance, states Theresa. 'Your dreaming mind really doesn't like it when you're overly concerned about the opinions of others,' she says. 'It will come and haunt you with all sorts of anxiety dreams if concern about how others perceive you is a factor in your waking life.' 🐍

