

# DEFUSING NIGHTMARES

*"Have you ever noticed [...] there is never any third act in a nightmare? They are the work of poor dramatists."*

*- Max Beerbohm*

*Essayist, Parodist and Caricaturist*

**E**vil gremlins, masked psychopaths, satanic witches, mutated zombie brains, little girls climbing out of wells. We'll happily pay good money for one of these popcorn flicks, to feel like we're getting chased by a chainsaw wielding maniac or some other monster. We love to get the crap scared out of us. But when these dark figures show up in our dreams, it gets a little too real.

Nightmares are the dark underbelly of the dream world, bringing out intense feelings of fear, terror, distress or anxiety. And they don't just happen when we're young; about 5-10% of adults have at least one or more nightmares a month.<sup>1</sup> In a study of 439 German students, an average of about two nightmares per month were reported,<sup>2</sup> a statistic backed up by a separate study of Chinese students.<sup>3</sup> Whether you're being chased, attacked, intimidated or find yourself suddenly naked in public, nightmares are always emotionally charged. Even after you wake, your heart is still racing and your stomach is twisted in a tight knot. You may tell yourself, "it was just a dream," but as we know, it isn't. The physical and emotional toll it takes on you is very real.

The town is happy. The people are happy. The sun is out and everything is good in the world. All of a sudden about a half of dozen Mad Max/Devil's Reject - esque thugs come cruising into town. They start trouble and then knock me out. I awaken in a dark and dirty jail cell with the door open. As I leave the jail, I notice that the town is no longer happy. It is full of darkness, misery and pain. It is hell on earth. As I start exploring this nightmare, I begin to stumble across the "happy" people from earlier. But they are no longer happy, because they are dead. When I approach their dead body, I'm instantly sent back to relive the last minute of their life. It always starts with them hiding or running from one of the bad guys. Despite where I/they run to, they always get caught and are brutally murdered. Right before they die, I'm sent back into my own body. This happens over and over again. I end up finding at least 7+ bodies, where I relive their death. The dream ends when the bad guys find me in my body and chase me down. I'm about to be killed and then I wake up.

Jared Zeizel

Among other things, dreams serve as an internal status report. They reflect how we are feeling in our waking life. So it makes sense that stress, illness, troubled relationships or traumatic events can manifest themselves as dark forces come nighttime. If we have been avoiding something in our daily lives, it will soon find a means to get our attention. Nightmares might also be our subconscious' response to physical conditions such as illness, fever, medication, the use of certain drugs (or a rapid withdrawal of them), upcoming life changes, pregnancy, financial concerns or a change in jobs.

Fortunately, it's possible to completely vanquish a nightmare in a lucid dream. Like a bomb squad disarming a dirty bomb, in this chapter we'll teach you how to defuse your nightmares. We'll also bring you in on a little secret, how to use nightmares as a shortcut to becoming lucid. Nocturnal demons can be so frightening that some people consciously commit to forgetting and repressing *all of their dreams*, ignoring these urgent messages. If you are such person, don't you worry. This chapter will give you the simple tools you need.



## INTEGRATION OF OUR "SHADOW ELEMENTS"

Although it might not seem like it, our nightmares are not trying to scare us, they are trying to get across an important message. Carl Jung refers to nightmares as "shadow elements." He believed that they are missing parts of ourselves.<sup>4</sup> Nightmares seem to reflect undesirable aspects of our psyches which we have unconsciously rejected, disowned and denied. Just like a neglected puppy, they just want to be loved and embraced, accepted back into our lives. In Jung's eyes, if we accept our nightmares and integrate them into our psyches, we'll be on the way towards becoming whole and balanced people.<sup>5</sup>

In waking life, we try to overcome our fears. If you were to overcome a fear of heights, for example, the resolution of your phobia would open up more possibilities and a fuller, more rich life experience. Finally you can take that trip to the Grand Canyon. Resolving nightmares works in the same way. By solving the problems of the dream and facing what is plaguing you, the result is more freedom, less internal conflict and a more balanced perspective.

The longer your nightmares stay hidden in your subconscious, the more damage they'll do. You can deal with nightmares during the day by talking about them with your friends and family or by writing them down in your journal. Acknowledging them in your daily life is the first step in treating them, letting the sun fill in the darker shadows. You can also vanquish them at night while lucid. Our dreams might not be the first place our demons show up, but luckily they *can* be the last.

## USING LUCIDITY TO FACE A NIGHTMARE

Stuck in a nightmarish scene, we usually lack a sense of control. Lucid dreaming is an empowering tool to face nightmares and heal through them. In fact, nightmares are a golden gem for the oneironaut, a perfect springboard to trigger lucidity. *Running away from something or being scared for your life*—these situations can actually serve as dream signs. Therefore, next time you find yourself in a hot pursuit or mortally afraid, ask yourself if you're dreaming.

Stephen LaBerge tells us of one such event in his book *Exploring the World of Lucid Dreaming*. He was on the phone with his seven year-old niece when she told him of a scary nightmare: she was swimming in a local reservoir when a shark attacked her. LaBerge, being the maverick lucid dreamer that he is, told his niece that the next time she sees a shark, she'll know that she's inside a dream. Since nothing bad can happen in dreams, she could make friends with the shark. A week later his niece called back: "Do you know what I did? I rode on the back of that shark."<sup>6</sup>

*I am being chased by the guy from the Halloween movies, the guy with the white mask, Michael Myers. I'm aware of his presence in the house. He just seems to keep killing people. It is nighttime, and I think, as long as we can make it to the daytime we'll be alright. But then the daytime comes and he is still chasing us. He doesn't run fast, he is just always there. We shoot him, and we think he is dead... but no, he is not. There is a final standoff on this steel bridge. The last thing I remember is running right at him.*

Derek A.

Sometimes nightmares are run-of-the-mill scary stories, other times there is no actual antagonist, but just a pervasive feeling of anxiety or dread. We've all had the dream where we're late to a class or a tooth falls out or we're naked in public. It's not the subject matter that turns a dream into a nightmare, it's the feeling you get while "trapped" inside the dream.

No matter what kind of nightmare it is, the only way to get rid of it completely is to face it head-on.

Once challenged, your hostile dream figure/feeling will usually lose its power and diminish in size, becoming as gentle as a kitten. According to the Senoi people of Malaysia, *when we confront a nightmare, we conquer it.*<sup>7</sup> Now that it's defused, as a lucid dreamer you can question the once shadowy figure. Normally, dreams speak to us in the language of symbols and metaphors. But if you bluntly ask the nightmare what its purpose is, often it will clearly state with words what it was trying to tell you with metaphors. Chat away with your demons and discover their hidden messages.

I'm walking down a white hallway in some very plain building. Up ahead there are two guys walking towards me. I turn to my right to open the door closest to me. It's locked. The two men are now walking fast towards me. I turn around and start running. The hallway becomes longer to the point where it's nearly two football fields long. As I'm running, I can hear them behind me getting closer. The thought crosses my mind- 'what am I doing?' I continue to run, as a dialogue plays in my head. 'Am I dreaming? Yes! Of course I'm dreaming!' I decide to stop running and face these attackers. Immediately when I turn around they too stop running, and begin walking over to me. I still feel fear in approaching these men. What do they want? I remind myself that I'm in a dream and find acceptance and love in myself. I try to project this compassion towards my pursuers. Immediately, I feel safe and protected. Nothing can harm me. One of the men holds his hand out as if wanting to shake my hand. His hand is on fire. He tells me, 'Don't let your flame go out.' I shake his hand. It feels warm and powerful. I thank him, and the dream ends. I wake up feeling empowered.

Thomas P.

## GOING TOE TO TOE WITH A NIGHTMARE: TIPS FOR FACING YOUR FEARS

In the red corner, weighing in at well over two thousand pounds, the heavyweight champion of nightmares, the beast from the east, the skeleton in your closet, repressed and back for revenge, Misterrrrrrrr... Demon Bearrrrrrr!

And in the blue corner, the mind behind it all, the creator of the dream itself, lucid and ready to tackle, Dreeeeamm explorerrrrrr...! Ding Ding! Here are some tips on how to deliver the KO punch:

### 1. Wherever You Go, There You Are.

In the classic horror movies, the attractive blond who ran upstairs never made it out alive. Don't get clever and think that you can run away from your nightmares. Many people think that they can outsmart their nightmares by flying away or switching dream scenes. Remember the age old wisdom, *wherever you go, there you are*. Even if you flew across the ocean, to another planet or changed the dream completely, your nightmare will often manifest itself wherever you are. Reoccurring nightmares happen when we continuously run from the same fear. If it has an important message to tell you, your subconscious is not going to quit until it has delivered that message.

### 2. Waking up.

Many people feel relieved when they wake themselves up just before a nightmare gets too close. Phew, bullet dodged! So why not just wake yourself up? Imagine for a second that your kitchen stove caught fire and burst into flames. Would it be wise to leave the kitchen and move into the living room, flip the TV on and pretend nothing is wrong? Sooner or later your stove will burn down the entire house. Escaping from parts of yourself that demand to be heard is harmful to both your dream life and your waking life. When we repress these messages, we repress our self-awareness. We're left with an unresolved conflict, like a untreated cough that won't go away. If you ignore the problem, it's likely that your nightmare will come back again with a vengeance. If you become conscious in your dreams, why wouldn't you try to see what the nightmare wants and how you can help it?

### 3. Know you are safe.

That bothersome beast, person or object cannot actually hurt you. In fact, you'll be doing more harm to yourself by running away from it! If your nightmare is acting like a bully and physically threatening you, it's all talk. Just like a dog biting its own tail, what you're really battling is a part of yourself. Love thy nightmare.

### 4. Don't change the dream, change yourself.

When lucid, the goal isn't to control the situation or the nightmare. Attempting to quarantine or kill it will just make it angry. Aggression, according to lucid dreamer Paul Tholey, will often make the nightmarish figure stronger.<sup>8</sup> And it makes sense: you're playing right into its power by thinking that it *has* power. Focus on your own emotions and release positive and loving feelings towards your nightmare. This might sound very difficult, but under the guise of lucid dreaming, and with total awareness, calmly focus on changing *yourself*, not the dream. Watch as that gruesome demon bear transforms into a cute teddy.

### 5. Enlist some reinforcements.

If you don't want to face your fears alone, we don't blame you. Lucky for you, there's plenty of people on your side in the dream world. Call upon an ally or a guide to help you tag-team your (peaceful) confrontation. Perhaps you want Abraham Lincoln to help out, or how about Wolverine? You can conjure a guide with a strong intention or incubation. Or instead of finding a dream character to help, you can use your own superpowers to build up confidence for your confrontation. Imagine a force field of protection around you, increase the size of your dream body, whatever gives you the feeling of power and safety that you need. Go get 'em!

## WRITING THE NEXT CHAPTER

Ever had a reoccurring nightmare? This exercise involves imagining yourself finishing the reoccurring dream but with a different ending. Eventually this practice will filter into your dreams and the next time you have a nightmare you'll become lucid without even trying.

While awake, think back to a nightmare you had and imagine yourself back in the situation you feared. Sit quietly and replay the nightmare in your mind once or twice in the way it actually occurred.

Now, replay it a third time, but this time picture yourself becoming aware that you're dreaming. Imagine the realization suddenly dawning on you in the middle of your nightmare. *I'm dreaming.* Picture yourself calmly facing the source of your fear, asking what it represents. Project love and acceptance to the figure in front of you. It *is* you, so why wouldn't you love it?

## DIALOGUE WITH THE NIGHTMARE

Sometimes defusing a nightmare requires no dialogue at all. Simply face your foe head-on— that could be all the treatment you need. But get curious! Here's your chance to reveal some really interesting stuff about yourself. Ask your nightmarish demon questions like:

- Why are you chasing me?
- What do you want?
- Who are you?
- Why am I in this situation?
- How can I help you?
- What do you represent?
- What do you have to teach me?

## TELL IT TO THE SUN!

The Greeks believed that some dreams foretold the future. After a bad dream, they would purify themselves by bathing in cold water, telling their dream to the sun and even performed sacrifices to protective deities.

The dark figure prowls behind you, tense and brooding. It's been on your tail for weeks. It pounces forward— a throaty howl— then retreats back into the shadows, watching and waiting. When we are plagued by inner turmoil, we feel weakened, blocked and outright crappy. Our minds get stuck in a continual funk of imbalance. Even though it's "just a dream," a nightmare can affect your entire life. Your relationships, your career and your own emotional and physical health become threatened. Use nightmares as a signpost that something needs your care and attention. This journey isn't just fun and games. Facing your nightmare might be a challenge, but this leg of the adventure will lead towards a happier and more integrated you.

## SUMMARY

- ♦ Use your nightmares as triggers for lucidity and get to the bottom of what is plaguing you.
- ♦ The ultimate goal of the nightmarish figure is not to hurt you; it wants to communicate a message and to gain your acceptance. Like a little kid acting out, it just wants to be heard.
- ♦ Ask your nightmare questions and bring to light the repressed demons of your subconscious.
- ♦ Wave your white flag and surrender to the conflict—you will become paradoxically strong. Instead of aggression, face your pursuer with love and humility.
- ♦ The effects of healing a nightmare while it's taking place will carry over into your waking life and enrich you with new energy.