When I dream, I feel unrested [1]

Dear Alice,

I go through phases where, when I sleep, I don't have any dreams (that I remember, at least). I sleep well and I wake up rested. Every few months I go through a week or two when I have nights full of incredibly vivid dreams and I wake up remembering at least five or six of them. Because of all these vivid dreams, I wake up feeling far less rested than I do when I don't dream at all. Is there a particular reason for this? Does dreaming more at night mean your sleep is less restful?

?Vivid Dreamer

Answer

Dear Vivid Dreamer,

Freud said that ?dreams are the royal road to the unconscious,? but he said nothing about how they may be related to feeling rested in the morning. There are many possible explanations for your sleep pattern.

- It could be that your restlessness is causing you to remember more of your dreams.
- It could be that your dreams are contributing to your restlessness (this is the least likely).
- It could be that some other factor is influencing both.
- It could be that the two (feeling unrested and having lots of dreams) are only coincidentally related
You ask if having more dreams at night means that your sleep is less restful. Possibly, but not necessarily. Some background: Research indicates that people dream 4-6 times per night during an 8 hour sleep cycle, with most dreams occurring during lighter stages of sleep. You’ve probably heard of Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep. This is one level deeper than the lightest stage of sleep that you experience as you fall asleep at night. As you cycle through the various five stages of sleep, you enter REM sleep about four times and you’ll spend anywhere from 5-30 minutes in REM sleep each time. During REM sleep, the brain is very active. If for some reason you are spending more time in REM sleep than is typical, it may be that you are not sleeping as deeply as you are during those months when you aren’t remembering your dreams. Most people also have non-REM dreams, too, especially during the last hour or two of sleep each night, as the brain becomes more active than it was in the deeper stages. It is worth noting that some people don’t dream at all, so during those periods where you aren’t having dreams, it could also be that you simply aren’t dreaming.

It is also possible that you simply don’t remember your dreams most of the time. Research indicates that most people forget about 95-99% of their dreams, primarily because they are not attending to them. Much in the way we may not attend closely to daily activities that don’t require much concentration (e.g. brushing teeth, driving to work). Thus, the times when you recall dreams, it may be that some other factor is causing you to pay more attention. It may be helpful to pay attention to the emotional aspect of these dreams that you are remembering. People remember emotionally difficult dreams more than pleasant or neutral dreams. Upsetting dreams may be in indication that (though not always) something in your real life is also making you anxious. It may be that some external disturbance is awakening you during REM sleep and thus interfering with your deeper stages of sleep. This disturbance could be any of several things: environmental factors (such as noise or temperature), emotional or psychological stress, or medications. The regularity of the symptoms is also interesting? it could indicate that it’s linked to something recurring in your life (midterms and finals?) or something hormonal, such as the menstrual cycle.

There are some things you can do to minimize the chance of external factors awakening you:

- Using the bed only for sleep or sex (avoid falling asleep on the couch or at the desk).
- Keep a regular routine before bed.
- Try to go to bed and waking up at consistent hours across the week.
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine four to six hours before bed.
- Avoid spicy, sugary, or heavy foods four to six hours before bed.
- Avoid exercise two hours before bed.
- Keep the bedroom at a comfortable temperature.
- Block out external noise and light (darker opaque curtains, earplugs).

It may be helpful to pay close attention to what’s going on in your life when these periods of feeling unrested occur. Keeping track of things such as stress, life changes, changes in habits (e.g. eating, exercise) medications, etc. Consult a doctor if symptoms don’t improve. It may also be helpful (and interesting) to keep a dream journal by your bed and write down your dreams first thing in the morning. Be sure to write down not only the content of the dream (what happened) but also the emotions you felt at the time. These both may provide clues as to what is happening that might be interfering with your sleep.

Sleep tight,
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