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,

Sweet dreams are made of this… or in your case, any dreams make for not feeling well rested. There are a few possible explanations for what you’re experiencing. Your restlessness may be causing you to remember more of your dreams, or your dreams may be contributing to your restlessness (though this tends to be a more unlikely explanation). There might be some other factor that could be influencing both your sleep and your dreams, or the two might be only coincidentally related. Although there may be a number of reasons that you’re experiencing this, there’s still plenty of information about what’s going on while you’re sleeping and ways to improve your sleep quality.
Dreaming is an integral part of your sleep each night. In fact, research indicates that people dream four to six times per night during an eight hour cycle, with most dreams occurring during lighter stages of sleep. There are two types of sleep: rapid eye movement (REM) and non-REM. During non-REM sleep, which lasts most of the night, the thalamus, the part of the brain that helps to relay information, is quiet. There are both lighter and deeper stages to non-REM sleep. However, during REM, the thalamus is active, sending signals to the brain that cause the sensations (such as sight and sound) that fill dreams. A person typically cycles through lighter non-REM, deeper non-REM, and REM sleep a few times a night. Most people also have non-REM dreams, especially during the last hour or two of sleep each night, as the brain becomes more active than it was in the deeper stages.

Even though the average person spends about two hours a night dreaming, research indicates that most people forget the majority of their dreams. This may be due to the fact that they aren’t thinking deeply about them, in the same way people may not pay close attention to those daily activities that require little concentration, such as brushing their teeth or driving to work. So, in the times when you’re recalling dreams, there might be some other factor causing you to pay more attention. What tends to be happening in those weeks leading up to you remembering your dreams? You may consider paying attention to any emotions associated with the dreams that you’re remembering. In general, people remember emotionally difficult dreams more than pleasant or neutral ones. Upsetting dreams may be an indication that you’re feeling anxious about something in your life. Some external disturbance might also be waking you up during REM sleep, therefore interfering with your deeper stages of sleep. This disturbance may have any number of causes, including environmental factors (such as noise or temperature), emotional or psychological stress, or medications. The regularity of the symptoms could indicate that it’s linked to something recurring in your life that’s external to you, such as exams, or to something hormonal, such as the menstrual cycle.

It’s also possible that if you’re spending more time in REM than is typical, you’re not sleeping as deeply as you would when you’ve had the typical amount of REM sleep. It’s also worth noting that studies have shown that increased sleep following a particularly stressful event may be beneficial in recovering from the event. This is called REM rebound. Those who have a few longer periods of REM had better recovery from traumatic situations than those who had more periods of shorter REM. All this to say, getting enough sleep aids in recovery from stress, which is a meaningful aspect of maintaining mental health.

If you’re looking to get a better night’s sleep, consider doing some of the following before bed to increase the chances of restful zzzs:

- Using the bed only for sleep or sex (and avoiding falling asleep on the couch or at the desk).
- Keeping a regular before-bed routine (such as brushing your teeth then reading) to inform your body that it’s time to wind down.
- Setting a consistent sleeping and waking schedule to align your internal clock.
- Avoiding alcohol and caffeine for four to six hours before you intend to sleep.
- Avoiding spicy, sugary, or heavy foods for four to six hours before you intend to sleep.
- Relaxing to help yourself de-stress, so you don’t lie in bed awake.
- Avoiding physical activity two hours before you intend to sleep.
• Keeping the bedroom at a comfortable temperature.
• Blocking out external noise and light (darker opaque curtains, earplugs).

You might also consider paying close attention to what’s going on in your life when you remember more dreams and feel unrested; things to pay attention to include stress, life changes, or changes in habits (e.g., eating, physical activity) and medications. Keeping a dream journal by your bed and writing them down as soon as you wake up in the morning could be helpful. In addition to writing out the content of the dream, try to write out the emotions you felt at the time. Doing this has the potential to provide clues as to what’s happening that might be interfering with your sleep. For more suggestions on what to do about your sleep schedule and restlessness, consider checking out the Sleep [3] category in the Go Ask Alice! General Health [4] archives. If symptoms don’t improve or you have more questions, you might also want to speak with a health care provider.

Here’s to soothing snoozing!

Alice!
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