

Smart ways to live well

MARCH 2009

Prevention

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- New Plan Boosts Fat Burn 50%

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ENERGY!

**FEEL 10 YEARS
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6 New Tips Inspired by
"The Biggest Loser"



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MORE
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After
40!**

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dream up BETTER HEALTH

Science shows that simple self-analysis of your dreams can help you sleep better, live healthier, and feel happier. Here's how.

■ BY ELIZABETH SVOBODA ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLAIRE ROSEN



IF YOU'RE LIKE MOST PEOPLE, YOUR return to consciousness each morning follows a predictable pattern: You blink awake, still half-trapped in the dream you just had—a high-stakes epic in which you soared over the Grand Canyon or watched as a tsunami engulfed your house. *What was THAT about?* Within minutes, though, you sweep away the hallucinatory traces like cobwebs, dismissing the dream as just another meaningless, though exciting, sleep-time drama.

But hold on: New science suggests you're passing up a great opportunity to gain a little self-knowledge. Experts say our brains' nocturnal sagas can supply us with insights that will help heal emotional stress and trauma, enable us to sleep better, make us feel happier while awake, or even answer nagging questions about our lives. How? Thoughts that occur while you sleep mingle recent events, buried memories, and hopes

and fears into a potent stew, forging neural connections that might never be made through conscious thought alone. "The latest brain research suggests that dreams are part of a healthy emotional coping process," says dream researcher Robert Hoss, author of *Dream Language*.

Indeed, recent brain-scan studies show that regions active during dreaming are the same ones responsible for processing memories and emotions when we're awake. Dreams, the new thinking goes, shape your self-image by helping you work through unresolved emotions from waking life. (For this reason, even unpleasant nightmares can be beneficial, says Hoss.) In fact, for a day or two after a significant life event—and again about a week later—hints of it show up in your dreams, according to a study at Canada's University of Alberta. "Revisiting events in dreams helps reshape your understanding of them," says study author Don Kuiken, PhD.

With a little know-how, you can reap these insights on your own. Here are six strategies that will help you benefit from your subconscious mind's nocturnal adventures.

Wake up slowly. Your conscious mind can wipe away memories of a dream in minutes—and with them, possible insights. To prevent images from slipping away too quickly, lie still in bed right after waking up, keeping your eyes closed and concentrating on what you were just dreaming about, suggests Charles McPhee, former coordinator of the National Institute of Mental Health's sleep research laboratory and author of *Ask the Dream Doctor*. When you've recalled everything you can, jot down the dream's details in a notebook kept by your bed. Come back to this entry later to think more about what your dream might have been telling you, and look for recurring characters, places, and patterns over time.

Don't take it literally. Straightforward dream interpretations seldom yield insight—if you subconsciously imagine kissing your friend's brother, for example, it doesn't necessarily mean you want to betray your spouse. Tufts University psychiatrist Ernest Hartmann, MD, confirmed this idea when he studied Americans' dreams after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. “The dreams had more intense, powerful images”—like frightening animals, for instance—“than ones before 9/11, but almost none were about the Twin Towers themselves,” he says.

Rather than take dreams at face value, try a little free association to get at their real meaning. For example, what's your first impression of your friend's brother? If “gregarious” comes to mind, you could be longing for a more active social life.

Confront your “demons.”

People who experience trauma in their lives often relive it while asleep—but eventually they acquire “mastery” in their dreams, meaning they find a way to take charge of unpleasant subconscious images. Patrick Andries, a dream therapist at Chicago Healers in Illinois, recalls one client who had a recurring nightmare that she was being chased by a mysterious woman. “She finally decided to stand up to this person,” Andries recalls. “When she asked her in the dream, ‘Who are you?’ the dream character replied, ‘I’m your low self-esteem.’” This insight enabled Andries’ client to move forward and better appreciate her unique abilities. To develop a similar take-charge mindset, try “dream intervention”: If you experience recurring dreams of a loved one who recently passed away, for example, spend a few minutes at bedtime imagining yourself carrying on their legacy (such as starting a scholarship in their name). Your dream content may soon become less stressful, says Andries.

Put yourself in the dream after waking.

Because every person's life is unique, it's important to uncover the specific emotions or situations that may have inspired your dream. Hoss suggests

imagining yourself as one of the central characters. (Some experts believe we play *all* the characters in our dreams.) “If there's a red sports car present, imagine you *are* the car,” Hoss says. “Question yourself in that role: *What is my purpose? What do I like? What do I fear?* As the car, you might answer, ‘I like being able to get where I want fast, but I'm afraid I may crash.’” Then ask if any of the car's traits apply to you; are you afraid of spinning out of control in your personal or professional life?

Describe your dream to an alien.

If you were talking to someone new to Earth, how would you describe your dream to her so that it made sense? Which parts would you emphasize, and why? Write down your answers. This strategy might sound wacky, but according to dream interpretation expert Reneau Peurifoy, it can help you recall details, zero in on unlikely but important aspects, and better interpret dream symbols.

Plan a course of action.

After identifying events and emotions from your life that may have inspired a dream, decide how to deal with them in the future, Hoss suggests. If your dream came to no conclusion or ended poorly, imagine a new ending that works for you. Then ask yourself—or a friend, mentor, or psychologist—if this might be a new solution to your waking-life situation. “Is it healthy, appropriate, and practical?” Hoss notes. “This will tell you if the advice you gleaned from the dream is worth following.”



Your Common Dreams Deciphered

Although every dream (and dreamer) is unique, many themes crop up repeatedly. Here are three dreams many women have, and possible interpretations from experts.

FLYING This is usually a good dream—a sign that you're in control of your life. The more skillfully you maneuver through the air, the more likely you are to feel in charge of things while awake. On the other hand, if your airborne self gets buffeted by winds, the dream could suggest a loss of control.

TEETH FALLING OUT Because teeth “process” food just as the brain digests new knowledge, losing your teeth can mean you've come across information that you aren't quite ready to accept yet, dream therapist Patrick Andries says.

FAILING A SCHOOL TEST This dream typically occurs when you are feeling tested by a life circumstance. Ask yourself how you are being challenged or judged, and what you can do to relax and effectively prepare for what (or whom) you're facing.