

CHILDHOOD NIGHTMARES

WHAT ARE NIGHTMARES?

Nightmares are scary dreams that wake someone up and usually happen during the second half of the night. Nightmares are most common between ages 3 and 12. They can feel very real and may result in feeling upset, scared, or worried even after awakening.

WHAT CAUSES NIGHTMARES?

Nightmares can be related to real-life feelings like stress, worry, or fear. Other times, they happen for no clear reason. Nightmares can be linked to trauma but do not always reflect a bad experience.

TIP: To help prevent nightmares, create a calming bedtime routine and limit exposure to scary stories, images, or shows, especially before bed.

WHAT TO DO AFTER A NIGHTMARE

If your child wakes up from a nightmare, the best response is to comfort them and help them feel safe. If your child is very upset, use grounding techniques to help them regulate their emotions and remind them it was just a dream. Once your child feels calmer, encourage them to talk about the dream if they want to, and gently remind them that dreams are not real, even though they can feel very scary. While it may be tempting to let your child sleep in your room, it is important to help them return to their own bed once they feel calm to build their confidence in sleeping independently.

IS IT A NIGHTMARE?

Nightmares and sleep terrors are different. Sleep terrors usually occur earlier in the night. Sleep terrors are most common in toddlers and preschoolers. During a sleep terror, a child may cry, look terrified, and push you away if comforted but will not remember it in the morning. You do not need to comfort them, as sleep terrors are not a sign of poor sleep quality. If they are frequent or disruptive, consider talking to a sleep specialist.

Imagery Rehearsal Therapy (IRT)

IRT can help your child take control of your dreams and change scary ones into less frightening, more positive dreams. For young kids, parent involvement is important for guidance, support, and helping them feel safe during the process.

#1

Encourage your child to write or draw their nightmare in as much detail as possible. Help them capture everything they remember, such as how it felt, what happened, and who was there. It is best to do this during a low-stress part of the day.

#2

Right after writing or drawing the nightmare, have your child go through it again, but stop when it starts to feel frightening. Then, guide them to change the story. What if the scary thing became silly or they had superpowers? Help them use their creativity to make the threat smaller and themselves stronger.

#3

The next day, support your child in writing or drawing their new dream, starting from the beginning and continuing to the new, positive ending. Encourage vivid details, like creating a movie in their mind. Children do not need to write or draw their dream each day; verbal rehearsal is often enough.

#4

After your child practices the new dream during the day, cue them to recall it at bedtime. They can say it out loud, and looking at their written version may help. Then, guide them through a grounding exercise to relax and focus on the present. Practicing both dream rehearsal and grounding helps make this feel more natural for their brain.

#5

Continue bedtime recall with your child for at least 10 days. If nightmares persist, repeat the process of writing, rescripting, and doing at least one daytime written rehearsal. Regular practice will help your child feel more in control and confident in managing their dreams.

Mindfulness Skills



Look around and find one object for each color of the rainbow.



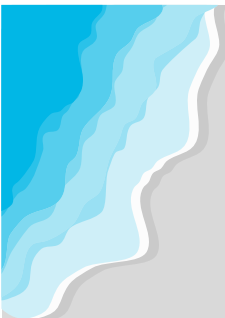
Name 5 things you see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you hear, 2 things you smell, and 1 thing you taste.



Picture a peaceful place. Imagine that you are safe and relaxing there.



Squeeze and hold each muscle group, like fists, arms, or legs, then release.



Breathe in deeply through your nose for 5 seconds, hold for 5 seconds, then exhale with your mouth for 5 seconds while making a wave-like sound.

MY NIGHTMARE

Think about the last nightmare that you can remember or bothers you the most. Close your eyes for a moment and try to remember everything you can about it. What did you see, hear, or feel? Were there any people, places, or things that stood out to you? Now, draw the nightmare in as much detail as possible. Do not worry about making it perfect.

CHANGING THE STORY

After you draw your bad dream, let's make it not so scary. Start writing or drawing it again, but stop when you feel scared. Then, make a new story! Maybe the scary thing becomes funny, or you get special powers like a superhero! You can make the scary thing tiny and make yourself super strong. It's your dream, so you get to pick what happens!

PRACTICE THE NEW DREAM

Let's practice your new dream! Write or draw your dream from start to finish. Make it very clear with lots of little details, just like watching a movie. If you do this every day, your brain will remember the new dream better when you go to sleep.