

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. They do not always mean something bad has happened, but they can be linked to difficult or scary experiences.

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. Reassure them that you are there and nothing can harm them. If your child is very upset, use grounding techniques (included) to help them regulate their emotions and remember that 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. This helps 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. They 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 behavioral sleep specialist.

Imagery Rehearsal Therapy (IRT)

IRT helps you take control of your dreams and change scary ones into less frightening.

#1

Start by writing or drawing your nightmare in as much detail as possible. Capture everything possible about the dream (i.e., how it felt, what happened, and who was there).

#2

Write or draw the dream again, but stop when it starts to feel frightening. Then, change the story. What if the scary thing became silly or you had superpowers? Make the threat smaller and yourself stronger!

#3

To help your brain learn this new skill, we need to practice! Write or draw your new dream, starting from the beginning and going all the way to the new ending. Make the details as clear and vivid as possible, like a movie in your head.

#4

Once you have practiced the new dream during the day, repeat it aloud before bed. Then, choose a grounding exercise to help you relax and focus on the present moment.

#5

Continue practicing bedtime recall for at least 10 days. If nightmares persist or new ones occur, repeat the process of writing, rescripting, and doing at least one daytime written rehearsal. Practicing regularly will help increase control and confidence in managing your dreams.

Please bring questions or problems to your next appointment.

Mindfulness Skills



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



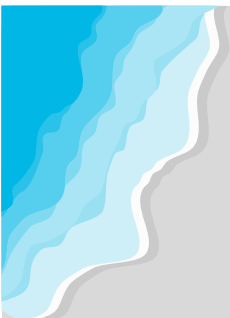
Name 5 things you see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you hear, 2 things you smell, and 1 thing you taste.



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, then exhale with your mouth while making a wave-like sound.

MY NIGHTMARE

Think about the nightmare that has been bothering you. 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, write or draw the nightmare in as much detail as possible. Do not worry about making it perfect.

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CHANGING THE STORY

Now that you have written your nightmare, it is time to make it less scary. Write the dream again but stop when it starts to feel frightening. Then, change the story. What if the scary thing became silly or you had superpowers? Make the threat smaller and yourself stronger! You are the author of your dream and can decide what happens next!

This image shows a full page of blank white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, providing a template for writing or drawing. There are no margins, text, or other markings present.

REHEARSING THE NEW DREAM

To help your brain learn this new skill, we need to practice! Write your new dream, starting from the beginning and going all the way to the new ending. Make the details as clear and vivid as possible, just like a movie in your head. Practicing this at least once a day will help your brain remember your new dream and make it easier to change when you sleep.

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