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## **DREAMS: Frequently Asked Questions**

*From DREAMEMPORIUM.COM*

### **Does everybody dream? Why is it that I don't remember my dreams?**

Everybody dreams. Not only all humans, but in fact all mammals are shown to have REM sleep, which is associated with dreams. It is a normal and necessary function of the body (though the details, especially the exact reason why it is important, are unknown). So if you think you don't dream you probably just don't remember.

People vary greatly in how much they remember their dreams. Perhaps the most important reason why people forget their dreams is that they don't care. Western culture does not regard dreams as especially important; rather it regards getting out of the bed in time as a prevalent survival factor. This is bad in two respects as most dreams occur at the end of the sleeping cycle and are often interrupted, and the necessity of getting up fast and keeping up with the schedule occupies peoples' minds and prevents them from thinking about their dreams in the morning.

Dream recall can be trained. When you wake up in the morning before jumping out of bed, try to think about all you have dreamed and write it down soon afterwards.

### **How do external stimuli affect my dreams?**

Sensory "input" while sleeping is incorporated into dreams. Most notably, while sleeping, you hear as well as while awake - the ears are never turned off. This leads to the consequence that what you hear while sleeping, you'll hear in your dreams. The sound is always coming from "somewhere." Common experiences of this kind are a telephone ringing or music from the radio. The same holds for the other senses. Note that it is not important how loud some noise is in order for it to be noticed while sleeping - even an otherwise unnoticed sound, like a mouse running over your floor, can wake you up if it is uncommon or otherwise alarming to you. On the other hand, you can get accustomed to high levels of noise, like construction work nearby. (What definitely will wake you up is someone knocking at your window if you live at the 10th floor.)

It is an interesting experience that you can hear exactly what is going on, but will forget it on waking up along with forgetting the rest of your dream. This includes things such as news broadcasts heard on the radio - after waking up; you have forgotten it. It is like you have dreamed the news broadcast as well - but distinguishing this fact is a good clue that you may have a heightened awareness of your dreams.

## **How do my dreams interact with my waking life?**

Dreams seem to be a way for the subconscious mind to sort out and process all the input and problems that are encountered in waking life. For example, the famous scientist Kekul was said to have discovered the structure of the benzene molecule after having a dream in which he sees a snake biting its tail. Although this is a legend, it could well be true. Many people gain creative ideas from their dreams.

Another positive example of how dreams can influence our waking life: Students who get some good REM sleep after studying retain the information better and for longer periods of time than students who study longer, but have no sleep. This is because the brain needs time to process the information, form sensible pattern out of it and place it in long-term memory.

Dreams can also improve your emotional well being, reduce stress, improve your creativity and provide a playground for your mind while your body recovers and repairs itself.

## **What causes dreams, anyway?**

Good question. There are many different theories, but we don't know for sure. According to the Freudian school, dreams are the result of subconscious thoughts and desires. The other extreme attributes dreams to random "noise" or electrical activity in the neurons that make up our brain. This approach concludes that dreams have no special meaning.

My own understanding is that dreams are made out of many small parts of memory and imagination that get combined to form dream imagery. This is a process that runs both consciously and subconsciously. I don't know and leave to speculation the reason why this is so.

## **How long do dreams last?**

REM sleep periods, and therefore dreams, typically last in the range of 5 to 45 minutes. Often, the subjective time spent in a dream is much longer. One possible explanation for this time-stretch effect is that dreams are combined from pieces that have their own different setting in time. You first dream of something that occurred a year ago, then of something that occurred just recently, mix them up a bit and you're left with the remembrance of a dream that lasted a year.

Experiments suggest that dreamed actions run in "real time" - what you do in your dream takes exactly this time to dream. With external influences like the radio running in the morning, you have both the real time in which you hear something and, sometimes, the feeling that it lasted considerably longer. Anyway, time is one of the perceptions that are heavily distorted in dreams.