

Dream to Remember

Since the dawn of time mankind has tried to understand the dream world. Ancient cultures used dreams as divination and ways to predict future, they even used substances to enhance and stimulate dreams, believing it expanded the consciousness of the dreamer. For the Egyptians dreams were a way to connect with the spirit world and understand wishes and intentions of their deities, ancient Hawaiians used dream interpretation when important decisions needed to be made, believing dreams could connect them to their ancestral guides and maintained an important spiritual connection to the other world through what they called the “soul sleep”. Traditional scientific community at one-point disregarded dreams as meaningless leftovers of the waking life, yet psychologists like Freud and Yung believed dreams were an important key to unlocking our subconscious wishes, desires and repressed internal conflicts. To this day dream life remains to be a mystery that fascinates and intrigues and while we do not have all the answers, emerging research in neuro biology and sleep studies is beginning to illuminate the biological purpose of dreams and the physiological impact of sleep on the body.

Brain scans in sleep studies reveal that when we fall asleep our brains go through a “sleep cycle”, this is an oscillation of slow wave/delta and REM sleep also known as REM-NREM cycle, which takes anywhere from 70 to 110 minutes, thus in a typical night we go through four to six sleep cycles before we fully awaken. These two stages of sleep are characterized by distinct types of brain activities. While we can dream in any part of the sleep cycle, most vivid dreams occur during our REM sleep. When deep into a non-REM sleep it is harder for us to awaken, and upon waking we are unlikely to remember our dreams. During NREM sleep, the control centers of the brain that are responsible for body movement shut off, thus rendering the body paralyzed. Our body temperature and heart beat drop and at this time our brain shows a slower activity, known as the delta waves, or delta sleep. During delta sleep there are detectible bursts of activity in the brain that actually help the body resist being woken up by external stimuli. Sleep experts believe that Delta sleep is a restorative sleep which allows the body to bolster immune system, grow, recover from stress and physical ailments and restore hormonal balance in the body. There is growing evidence that suggests that deep sleep contributes to improved creativity, insightful thinking and memory formation. Interestingly as the sleep cycles progress throughout the night the length of delta sleep becomes shorter and our brain begins to spend more time in REM sleep.

When we begin to enter REM or rapid eye movement sleep, we enter a more vivid dream state. At this time areas of the brain such as the amygdala which is responsible for emotional processing, become very active. Based on recent sleep experiments, as well as brain scans, experts believe that REM sleep plays a crucial role in our overall well-being. Dreaming appears to help us process emotions, attach meaning to events we experience, form coherent self-stories that play a part in emotional self-regulation and categorize memories, as well as improve our cognitive functions creativity and critical thinking. This is when we date stamp and store memories in various memory banks, recover from traumatic and unpleasant events, and make meaning of our lives. It follows then that sleep disturbance can cause post-traumatic stress disorder amongst other mental health and physical ailments.

While dreams may not predict the future or connect us to supernatural worlds, they certainly do help us understand and organize our life experiences in such a way that allows us to form coherent and meaningful stories about our lives. Dreams allow our brains to determine what is important and what is not, what to let go of and what to remember, dreams are your free therapy! Dreams help us make sense of who we are and what matters. Without a dream life we would be a jumbled mess of fragmented experiences with no meaning or memory. The fact is what we remember is what constitutes our sense of self. When forming memories during our REM sleep, same parts of the brain light up as when we are creating or imagining. Our memories are not necessarily accurate representations of external reality, but rather our own created stories, our own personal novel about us. Essentially dreams are what we are literally made of. So, when you turn out your lights tonight, sleep tight, sleep deep and dream yourself to the you that you've been dreaming of.