

Improving Your Sleep Course

Session 5 Dealing with Nightmares

Specialist Services

Secure Services

Mental Health

Community Services

Children and Families



Week 5 Dealing with Nightmares

This session will:

- Help you to understand some causes and consequences of nightmares.
- Help you to understand the role of nightmares following trauma and why they persist.
- Discuss the treatment of nightmares following trauma and of nightmares of imaginary events.
 - Check the progress of your goals.



Understanding Nightmares

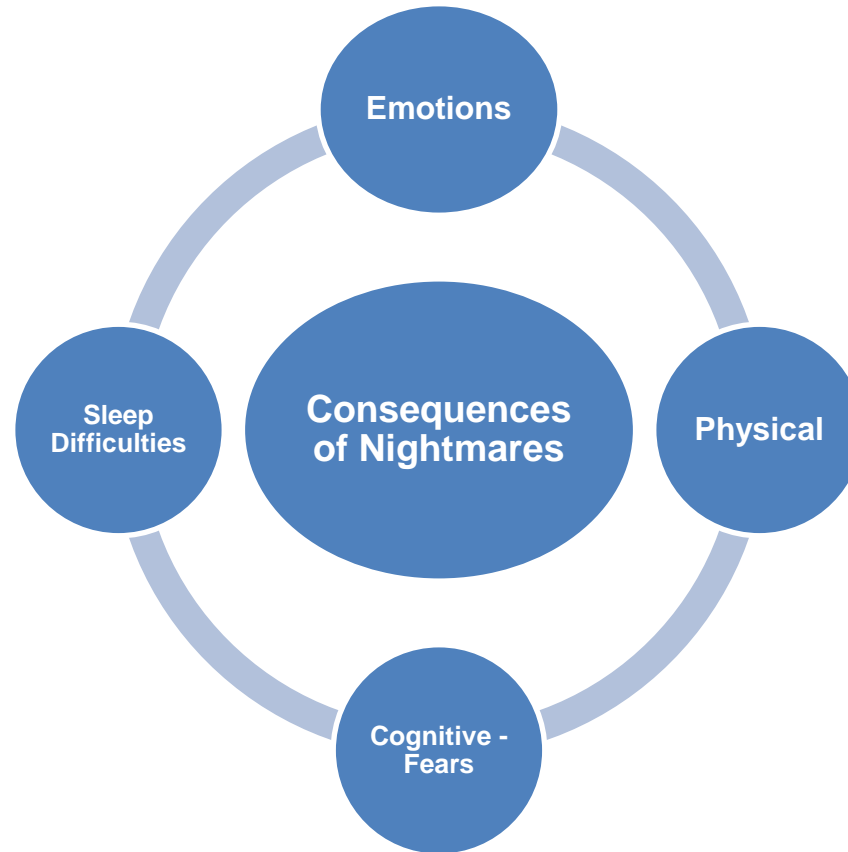
Understanding Nightmares

- A nightmare is a bad dream that wakes you up out of your sleep. A disturbing dream that does not wake you up is not considered a nightmare. It is simply a bad dream.
- Nightmares are usually coherent visual dreams that seem real and get more disturbing as they unfold and cause you to wake up. Sleep loss can cause you to have even more intense nightmares.
- Nightmares tend to happen during REM sleep, the last stage in the sleep cycle.

Understanding Nightmares

- Withdrawal from antidepressants or alcohol can be associated with the experience of nightmares.
- In most instances after you wake up, you will be able to clearly remember the details of your nightmare.

Consequences of Nightmares





Nightmares Following Trauma

Trauma-Related Nightmares

In the case of trauma:

- Where a traumatic event was not properly processed – emotionally or cognitively - nightmares result as the mind's attempt to process the traumatic event.
- Nightmares may have a normal function in processing but then become no longer functional when sleep is disrupted, trauma related info is not processed, or the content and painful images are replayed.
- When nightmares persist over time something within the natural system has failed.
- Avoidance of trauma related information and situations will maintain nightmares over time.

Processing Nightmares

- In the case of trauma, repeating the event is a good way of storing the memory but the need to repeat the memory in order to process it is at odds with the strong desire to escape the emotional pain associated with the memories.
- There is therefore a battle between trying to process and store the memory and efforts to avoid it.
- Nightmares are likely to continue until they are emotionally processed.

Waking, distress, loss of sleep, arousal and anticipation of further sleep loss make it increasingly hard for normal processing to take place.

Avoidance of trauma related material during the day may make it more likely that trauma material is experienced through dreams or nightmares.

- Sometimes the sense of loss of control experienced will generalise to other areas of life. For someone who needs to be vigilant and on guard – this sense of vulnerability may feel overwhelming.
- This may intensify as the time for sleep approaches, given that most of us have a belief that we have little control over what happens when we are sleeping. Be reassured that nightmares can be controlled.

Treating Trauma – Related Nightmares

- In the first instance, people with symptoms of PTSD and who have sleep difficulties following a trauma should receive CBT.
- Imagery Rehearsal Therapy (IRT) can be used to address nightmares following CBT if nightmares remain frequent.
- IRT is particularly indicated where nightmares of an imaginary event occur. Let's look at IRT in more detail!



Imagery Rehearsal Therapy (IRT)

Imagery Rehearsal Therapy

- IRT combines psycho-education on sleep, nightmares and sleep disturbance, imagery skills and practice, and finally selecting a nightmare, re-scripting it with a different non-threatening ending, and daytime rehearsal of the re-scripted dream.
- IRT involves some degree of exposure to the nightmare content as well as rewriting or re-scripting components.

Re-scripting Technique

- Pick an unpleasant dream/nightmare, one that is not a direct replay or a re-enactment of a distressing event and write it down – not to be used for trauma.
- Write the unpleasant dream down in as much detail as you can. In your account of the dream, change the ending so that it suits you.
- Now, get to know this new preferred version of the dream, rehearse it several times a day including prior to going to sleep.

Re-scripting Technique

- Once you have rehearsed the dream at bedtime, perform a relaxation exercise. It can be useful to repeat this relaxation exercise if you wake up.
- When you are satisfied that you have re-storied the unpleasant dream to better suit you, you can choose to work on another nightmare that is slightly more intense than the last. Try to use a degree of humour in your new ending.

Quick Break





Examples of IRT

Example

- Person experiences nightmare 3 to 4 times a week – being chased by a man with a knife – usually wakes as he grabs her – sweating, palpitations, dry mouth – unable to return to sleep.
- This was not an event that had happened.
- Rescripted ending – as she is grabbed – she turns around and realises this was not someone holding a knife, it was her husband running after her to give her the lunchbox she had forgotten to take to work.
- Initial change in the level of distress experienced followed by a reduction in frequency of nightmares.



Example

- Police Officer – significant number of violent incidents during day job. Recurrent nightmare of being assaulted – wakes at the point when a weapon can be felt pressing against his chest. Experiences significant symptoms of panic and anxiety when this nightmare occurs.
- This is not an event that happened.
- Re-scripted ending involved looking down and seeing that the weapon was in fact an umbrella, the assailant was drunk and had picked up an umbrella.



Revisiting Goals

Goals



Think back to four weeks ago as we set your goals for the course?

Ask yourself the following questions.....

- How are you getting on with sleep scheduling? This included strengthening the sleep / bed connection, applying the 15 minute rule, setting a rising and threshold time. Is there anything you need to do more of?



Are you sticking to evaluating your sleep-related thoughts?

Is there anything you need to change about your lifestyle that is affecting your sleep?

- How is your sleep environment? Are there any changes you need to make?
- Are you forming more accurate sleep thoughts and using imagery and thought blocking? Putting the day to rest?



- Are you abandoning putting effort into sleep and clock watching?



Session 5 Summary

Session 5



Homework

- Sleep diary and thought record.
- Sleep scheduling and challenging thoughts.
- Sleep hygiene, bedtime wind-down and relaxation.
- Techniques to deal with your racing mind.
- Today's techniques to deal with your nightmares.
- Re-evaluate your goals – what do you still need to work on?



What's Coming Next Session?

- Putting it all together and review.
- Re-completing the Insomnia Severity Index to assess your progress on the course.

Thought For The Week Ahead



A signpost with two black signs. The top sign says "SWEET" and the bottom sign says "DREAMS". The signpost is set against a blue sky with white clouds.

SWEET

DREAMS