

DREAMS

What goes on when the lights are off

In psychology, dreams are defined as any thoughts, images, or emotions that a person experiences while asleep. Psychologists have yet to agree on why we dream and what these dreams mean, but there are several significant theories.

The "Science" of Sleep

Believe it or not, scientists still don't know the reason or purpose for sleeping in the first case!

FREUD'S PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY OF DREAMS

Sigmund Freud believed that the contents of our dreams were associated with wish fulfillment, and that our dreams represented the thoughts, motivations, and desires of our unconscious. Furthermore, Freud believed that the sexual instincts that the conscious represses appear in our dreams. In Freud's book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud broke dreams down into two components:

- **Manifest content**—The actual thoughts, content, and images in the dream
- **Latent content**—The psychological meaning in the dream that is hidden

To understand the meaning behind dreams, Freud broke dreams down into five distinct parts:

- **Displacement:** When a desire for something is represented by something or someone else
- **Projection:** When the wants and desires of the dreamer are pushed onto another person in the dream
- **Symbolization:** When the urges and desires that are suppressed are metaphorically acted out in the dream
- **Condensation:** When a lot of information is compressed into one image or thought, making meaning difficult to decipher
- **Secondary Revision:** The final stage of dreaming, where the incoherent elements become reorganized into a comprehensible dream

While research has refuted Freud's theory of the latent content being disguised by the manifest content, the work of Sigmund Freud contributed greatly to interest in the field of dream interpretation.

CARL JUNG'S THEORY ON DREAMS

While Jung believed in much of what Freud did when it came to dreams, Jung thought dreams were not just an expression of repressed desires, but that they also compensated for those parts of the psyche that were underdeveloped during waking life. Jung also believed dreams revealed the collective unconscious and personal unconscious, and featured archetypes that were representative of unconscious thoughts.

THE ACTIVATION-SYNTHESIS MODEL OF DREAMING

In 1977, Robert McCarley and J. Allan Hobson created the activation-synthesis model, in which they proposed that dreams were caused by the physiological processes of the brain.

According to the activation-synthesis model, during the final stage of the sleep cycle known as rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, circuits within the brain stem activate, which in turn activates parts of the limbic system that play a key role in memory, sensation, and emotion. The brain then attempts to produce meaning from this internal activity, resulting in dreams.

When the activation-synthesis model came out, it was met with controversy within the field of psychology, and particularly among those who followed Freud's teachings. While many psychologists were attempting to find the hidden meaning behind dreams, the activation-synthesis model proposed that these dreams were simply the product of the brain trying to process brain activity.

Hobson did not think dreams were utterly meaningless, however, and claimed instead that dreams were the "most creative conscious state," where new ideas, both fanciful and useful, are formed.

HALL'S THEORY ON DREAMS

Psychologist Calvin S. Hall claimed the goal of dream interpretation was to understand the individual doing the dreaming, and not to simply understand the dream itself.

Hall claimed that properly interpreting dreams required understanding several items:

- The actions the dreamer partakes in within the dream
- Any figures or objects that appear in the dream
- All of the interactions that occur between the dreamer and characters within the dream
- The setting of the dream
- Any transitions that occur within the dream
- The outcome of the dream

DOMHOFF'S THEORY ON DREAMS

G. William Domhoff studied under Calvin Hall, and came to the conclusion that dreams are actually reflections of any thoughts or concerns that occur during the waking life of the individual dreaming. According to Domhoff's theory, dreams are the result of neurological processes.

COMMON THEMES FOUND IN DREAMS

The following are ten of the most common themes people experience while dreaming, as well as the possible meanings of these themes according to Freudian theory.

1. **Taking a test that you are not prepared for:** This type of dream does not only pertain to an academic test, and will usually be specific to the dreamer. For example, an actor might dream about not remembering their audition or not being able to recognize the words on a script. This type of dream deals with the feeling of being exposed, and the test might symbolize being judged or evaluated by someone else.
2. **Being naked or inappropriately dressed in public:** This type of dream relates to feelings of shame or vulnerability.

3. **Being chased or attacked:** This type of dream is much more common in children, whose dreams tend to focus on more physical rather than social fears. Additionally, their size can often make them feel as though they are more physically vulnerable. In adults, this type of dream can be a sign of being under stress.
4. **Falling:** Falling can represent feelings of being extremely overwhelmed with your current situation and having a loss of control.
5. **Being lost in transit:** This often represents feeling lost, or trying to get something or find your path and being unsure of how to do it.
6. **Losing a tooth:** This can represent feeling unheard or unseen in a personal relationship, or feelings of aggression.
7. **Natural disasters:** This can signify feeling so overwhelmed by personal problems that it seems they are raging out of control.
8. **Flying:** This can represent a desire to escape or be free from a situation.
9. **Dying or being injured:** This can represent something in the dreamer's everyday life that no longer thrives or is wilting away, like a personal relationship or personal attribute, and does not necessarily mean or imply true thoughts of death.
10. **Losing control of a car:** This type of dream can result from feelings of stress and fear, and of not feeling in control of everyday life.

While psychologists still do not fully understand dreams, their interpretation plays a key role in modern psychology. From Freud's prominently used interpretation of dream analysis, which suggests dreams are connected to our unconscious and represent repressed desires, to the work of G. William Domhoff, who believed dreams were merely a result of neurological processes, understanding why dreams occur and the various details and possible meanings behind them remains a very important part of psychology.