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Published on *Explorable.com* (<https://explorable.com>)

Nightmare Exposure

A Rescripting Technique

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So far, you've learned tips and techniques that will help you relax and, hopefully, fall asleep without having to battle your thoughts and feelings. This technique, however, has been specifically designed for those who struggle with nightmares.

Nightmares can result in sleep deprivation or sleep avoidance, so either way, body, and mind won't get the rest they need. Keep in mind, though that having nightmares from time to time is entirely normal and trying to reduce them is only worth it if your sleep is frequently disturbed by them.

The banner features the Explorable logo at the top center. Below it are three quiz cards, each with a representative image and a title. The first card shows roller skates on a wooden deck, the second shows a fan of colored pencils, and the third shows a Ferris wheel at sunset. A link to 'See all quizzes' is located at the bottom right of the banner.

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Nightmare Exposure

The technique of exposure also comes from cognitive behavioral therapy. In its core, what exposure does is to help you face your fears, and strip them of their power, by allowing you to spend some time with them and to see that there is nothing to be objectively feared. Nightmare exposure goes hand in hand with a technique called rescripting.

Rescripting

It is frequently used to help people who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and

are haunted by flashbacks of a traumatic experience from the past. As the name suggests, the premise of this technique is that –while we can't change past events– we can change how we perceive them.

This approach allows people to regain control over upsetting images. It can be very useful, whether the images are about something that happened in reality, or are the fruit of imagination, as may be the case with nightmares. Rescripting also helps with the negative experiences, such as frustration, nervous tics, fear, or sadness, that often accompany nightmares.

The Benefits

Studies have shown that this technique can reduce the frequency of nightmares if applied in an organized, constant manner, for a minimum of one month.

If your sleep problem involves constant nightmares, don't hesitate to try this approach. Remember that challenging our thoughts and mental images can have significant benefits for our sleep, as well as our psychological state. While doing so, don't forget to continue taking care of your sleep hygiene.

How to Apply It

Confront Your Nightmares

When you have a nightmare that upsets you, don't try to avoid it the next day. Confront and challenge it instead. Remember that just like stories have many different interpretations, dreams do too.

Look into the Abyss

Take some time (remember, this is an investment), and when there're no distractions around, confront your nightmare by answering the following question:

What was the worst part of your nightmare? Describe it. Better yet – write it down.

This may be painful, as it is only natural not to want to relive the nightmare, but sadly you can't change it unless you know it quite well. Even if you have had the same recurrent nightmare and you know it well, it still makes a difference to write it down and say it out loud, since it takes some of the weight off. Keep in mind that you don't need to say it to anyone unless you want to – all you have to do is say it out loud, even if you are by yourself.

Focus on Your Experience

Now that you have described the details of your nightmare, focus on your experiences – both emotional and physical, since both groups can be present in dreams. Apply the same descriptive method to your experiences, preferably while writing them down, and then say them.

Dream vs. Reality

Although some nightmares may be as vivid as it is to read this line right now, there is usually a tell-tale sign that reveals it is only a dream. Consider what, in your nightmare, regarding sensations and experiences, differs from reality. Repeat the writing and speaking procedure for this step as well. This will help you separate reality from the falsity of the dream, and will, therefore, make it less traumatic, in time.

What Would Be a Better Feeling?

Now is the time to focus, once again, on the negative experiences you have during your nightmares. This may be something you've never thought about, but if you had a magic wand, what experiences would you choose to have, in place of those in the nightmare? What are the experiences, sensations, and emotions, which would make you feel good? Try to be as specific as possible.

Change the Story

As you now know, we have the power of changing how we perceive the world – both inner and outer. Although you may feel like your nightmares are something that happens to you or that you are under their control, it doesn't have to be that way.

The point of rescripting is to change the story, and gradually teach your mind to recreate what you want in your dreams. For that purpose, your next step is to use the feelings from the step above, as well as the details of your nightmare, and change the story, so that it corresponds with what you want. Turn frightening events into something else, transform the settings, change the ending – let your imagination go wild! Remember, there is no use to succumb to restrictions or stigmas – this is your dream, and it is only going to be visible to you, so you can do whatever you like with it!

Visualize the New Story

Now that you have changed how the story plays out to try to imagine the new and improved dream as vividly as possible. The more you visualize it, the more your mind will become used to it, and will, therefore, be more likely to reproduce it, once you go to sleep. However, be patient and remember that this won't work overnight. The first few days, or even weeks, you may find yourself significantly challenged. Despite the difficulties, sticking to the approach can be extremely beneficial.

Start Light

If you would like to avoid getting turned off by the technique, before you have even actually started, don't begin with your worst nightmare. Instead, create a list of your nightmares and start with the least scary one, then gradually build up to those who give you more trouble.

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Links:

[1] <https://explorable.com/users/Liya%20Panayotova>, [2] <https://explorable.com/e/nightmare-exposure>