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Persistent Nightmares

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Maybe you don't have trouble falling asleep, and you don't oversleep either. Not all sleep-related problems fall under those categories. Sometimes, the actual problem is waking up during the night. Such is the case with persistent nightmares and night terrors.

These disruptions in sleep are more frequent in children, but adults can struggle with them as well. And as you have probably experienced on your own, persistent nightmares can form a vicious and dangerous cycle.

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The Cycle of Bad Dreams

It can go like this: you have troubling nightmares, perhaps you wake up during the night, and so you don't get restorative sleep; you go to bed feeling vulnerable or irritable, which is why you're prone to having nightmares again, and the cycle repeats itself.

In some cases, nightmares can be the root of insomnia's symptoms, since people who fear having awful dreams may consciously or subconsciously avoid sleeping.

The irony is that sleep deprivation can be a contributing factor to having nightmares.

Why Do We Have Nightmares?

Freudian Perspective

One of the main contributions to the psychology of dreams was made by Sigmund Freud. His theory about the interpretation of dreams stated that dreams reveal our unconscious desires; those desires were masked and wrapped in symbolism, but through talking and association we could figure out their meaning.

Nightmares, however, didn't quite fit that description, since their content can be so disturbing and uncomfortable, that it wakes us up or leaves us feeling uneasy in the morning. So how could our unconscious mind wish for something that makes us feel so bad?

According to psychoanalysis, nightmares are a product of the power battle between a deep unconscious desire (usually a socially unaccepted one) and the self-defense mechanism of repression, through which we block out distressful thoughts, experiences, and other information.

Emotions

To this day, there's no certainty as to why we dream what we dream. We've all had nightmares, and it is both common knowledge and the object of recent studies, that emotions play a big part in the formation of bad dreams. Fear, guilt, disgust, shame, anxiety and confusion are likely to fuel a restless night.

As writer Jillian Rose Lim puts it: "Dreams are the mind's way of handling or making sense of the chaotic and fluctuating nature of everyday life."

Medications and Substance Abuse

Psychological causes aren't the only reason we have nightmares.

As with every sleep disorder, this problem can be caused by an unbalanced medication dosage or substance use. Eating habits can also influence your dreams. Consumption of heavy late night snacks, or copious amounts of food for dinner, may lead to nightmares since the metabolism remains unusually active during sleep so that it can process all that food.

The Dangers

Although nightmares are unpleasant and may cause fragmented sleep, they can, more importantly, lead to sleep deprivation. As you already know, lack of sleep has a lot of negative consequences.

Night Terrors

Night terrors are another story. They're episodes of intense fear, even panic, and can be

accompanied by crying, heavy breathing, screaming, standing up in bed with eyes wide open, while still awake, and other bodily reactions to strong fear.

People who struggle with night terrors are difficult to wake up and console. They are also usually unable to recall the events and content of the dream, upon waking up. The condition is rare in adults, although children do suffer from it more often. The precise causes of night terrors are not yet known. However, they have always been associated with difficult, stressful periods in one's life.

What to Do

Even though all sleep disorders have their specificities, they have one thing in common - all be treated, and your condition can improve. If you suffer from constant nightmares or night terrors, it is highly recommended that you practice relaxation techniques and incorporate the tips, which we will share a bit later, into your daily life.

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