

Exercise for Getting Rid of Nightmares

Nightmares can prevent us from getting the restful sleep that we need. This exercise is designed to stop recurring nightmares. It takes dedication, but your efforts will be worth it.

1. Tell the nightmare to someone or write it out. Include the thoughts, emotions, and sensory details (smells, sounds, tastes, images, feelings) that were present in the nightmare. **Note:** If it is a particularly triggering nightmare, you may need to do relaxation and calming exercises first to prepare for engaging with the nightmare content.

2. Identify the negative assumptions about yourself during the nightmare. What does the nightmare say about you? Examples: I am in danger. I am bad. No one loves me. I can't get what I want. I am alone. It's my fault. I'm helpless.

3. Identify the positive assumption you would rather believe. This is often the opposite of the negative assumption. Examples: I am safe. I am good. I have people in my life who love me. I can succeed. It's not my fault. I can help.

4. Change the nightmare into a dream. Identify the point in the dream where it turns into a nightmare. This is the point where your negative assumption occurs. For some, that's at the beginning. Other nightmares start off innocuously and then turn bad.

From one step before that point, create changes so that this is no longer a nightmare but, instead, an ordinary or lovely dream. The changes should occur BEFORE anything traumatic or bad happens to you or others in the nightmare. Essentially, you want to come up with changes that prevent the bad outcome and negative assumption and remove the scary, gory, or sad content. Replace all the nightmare-ish sensory details, thoughts, and emotions with positive or neutral ones. Write an ending that will allow your positive assumption and give you a sense of peace when you wake up.

It's your dream. Feel free to include superhuman powers and magical creatures.

5. Write out the entire NEW dream with the changes and new ending.

6. Rehearse the new dream once in the morning and once before bed every day for 3 weeks by following these steps:

I. For 10 minutes engage in relaxing activities, such as listening to calm music, doing muscle relaxation or breathing exercises, doing guided imagery, or having a warm bath.

II. Visualize the new dream from beginning to end and repeat the positive assumption to yourself.

III. Do relaxation exercises for another 10 minutes.

Example of Changing a Nightmare to a Dream

Original nightmare:

I was walking on my college campus, going to class. It was an ordinary day, sunny, lots of people walking to their classes. I'm sipping my Starbucks. Carrying my book and notebook. Then I notice all the other people are gone. I'm the only one walking to class. I think that's odd, but I keep going. I hear the bells from the clock tower. Then I realize I'm late to class! And it's the day of the final! And I haven't studied or even attended class most of the term! And I'm not even sure where the room is! I start to panic and run. I think, "I'm going to fail the class and they'll kick me out of school. How stupid of me to not pay attention to the calendar or the clock or where the room is!"

Negative assumptions:

I've been careless. I've done the wrong thing. I've caused myself to fail.

Positive assumptions:

I've been careful. I've done the right thing. I have succeeded.

New dream:

I was walking on my college campus, going to class. It was an ordinary day, sunny, lots of people walking to their classes. I'm sipping my Starbucks. Carrying my book and notebook. Then I notice all the other people are gone. I'm the only one walking, and I'm wearing a cap and gown. I hear the bells from the clock tower. They are playing Pomp and Circumstance. I'm not walking to class. I'm walking to the stage to get my PhD. I'm graduating early and with honors because I have worked so hard. I look out at all the people in the audience, not sure where my friends and family are sitting. Then I see them holding up their signs: "We are proud of you!" and "You are a success!" Confetti cannons blast colorful confetti all over. I get a standing ovation.