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Dreams

Where were you, last night, while you were sleeping? "In bed," you are probably saying to yourself, but it is almost certain that several times during the night, as you lay in bed sleeping, your mind was elsewhere. I'm referring to dreams, the story-like sequences of images, sensations, and perceptions that occur primarily during the stage of sleep known as rapid-eye movement, or REM.

Though some people claim to dream little or not at all, research has shown that, under normal conditions, each of us dreams several times during the course of sleep. However, for reasons that aren't well understood, we tend not to remember our dreams unless we wake up during the dream or very soon after it ends. Some people believe it is possible to remember dreams better by lying perfectly still upon awaking from a dream, or by attempting to record the dream in writing before one starts to consider waking concerns.

People have attempted to explain dreaming in various ways. In times past, dreams were thought to be messages from the spiritual world, or prophecies. In modern times, however, competing explanations for why we dream fall into one of two general categories: *wish fulfillment* or *activation-synthesis*.

According to wish fulfillment, our dreams are an indirect way for our mind to satisfy unconscious urges or to resolve unconscious conflicts that would be too threatening for us to acknowledge consciously. Sigmund Freud, the individual most associated with this view, believed that dreams were a "royal road to knowledge of the unconscious," and attempted to understand their symbolic meaning as a way of accessing a patient's deep-seated drives and conflicts. Though few modern psychotherapists interpret dreams precisely in the manner of Freud, some do help patients examine their dreams in an attempt to help them better understand their motivations, conflicts, and concerns.

By contrast, activation-synthesis theory sees dreams as inherently meaningless. According to the theory, our cerebral cortex – the wrinkly, outermost layer of the brain responsible for the most complex aspects of our mental life - is activated by the aroused state of our hindbrain during REM sleep. Having been activated, the cortex then tries to synthesize these random messages by drawing on actual memories or current feelings. In other words, a dream is our brain's attempt to make sense of neural activity that is no more meaningful than the static you hear on a radio that is not tuned to a station. The cortex's ability to create something meaningful from this "brain static" is similar to our ability, during our waking moments, to see patterns or objects in a formation of clouds.

Whether or not dreams have inherent meaning, there is evidence that dreaming is something we need to do. Research has shown that when people are prevented from dreaming – by being awakened each time they enter REM sleep – they will have more frequent and longer-lasting periods of REM sleep the following night.