ENHANCE YOUR DREAM LIFE

FOR SLEEPING BETTER AND DREAMING BIG

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Dream
Studies Press

Version 1.1 Print friendly

Let's kickstart a new dreaming culture together!

INTRODUCTION

Dreaming is part of being human, but most of us have to learn how to become good dreamers. Why is this? Because dreaming is not valued in today's scientific-rational culture. To be called a dreamer is to be out of touch with reality. "You're dreaming" literally means, "your ideas aren't relevant."

Yet the dreamers I know are actually more in touch with reality. In fact, they are in touch with two worlds simultaneously: the material world that we all share, and the private dream world where the real work is done.

I'm talking about the inner work of learning and adapting that is crucial for success in this life. People who have taken the time to work with their

dreams understand their emotions, their desires, and their fears better than non-dreamers.

Dreamers may also be more in touch with their relationships, their family myths, and their health and sexuality.

Dreamers are more intuitive and can avoid real life dangers.

Dreamers know what they want and they know how to get it.

Finally, dreamers are creative: musicians, artists, writers, and big idea people regularly find insight from their nightly sojourns.

In short, dreamers make up a core group of creative people who are healthy and happy. I'm proud to call myself a dreamer too: it's my answer to that droll question at networking events, "What do you do?"

I'm a dreamer, and together with my fellow dreamers, we change the culture for the better precisely because we live in two worlds. If this sounds interesting but you do not remember many of your dreams, welcome back.

Simply by adopting a few habits and changing some everyday routines, your dreams will start coming back when you wake up from sleep every morning. Even reading this book starts the process. In fact, it's already begun. Dreaming well

is a feedback system: the more you put in, the more you get back.

You may want to start a dream group, interpret your dreams for creative problem solving, or delve into lucid dreaming to take on your fantasies and fears. No matter your intention or interests, it all starts with recognizing your current sleep patterns (or lack thereof) and building a healthier lifestyle that supports the dreaming mind.

That's what this book provides: the essentials to a healthy dream life.

1

GO TO SLEEP TO DREAM

There are a lot of sleep health resources available on the web, but most sleep-optimizing guides are geared towards people who are looking to get by on less sleep. While this can sometimes be done in a healthy and sustainable way, unfortunately dreaming is often what first takes the hit.

So my sleep tips differ from many sleep experts because I am not willing to cut out those precious dreaming hours. But before we get into the basics of sleep optimization for dreaming well, we need to take a quick look in the mirror.

How do you feel in the morning? Are you ready to get up or do you drag through the first half of the day?

It's easy to be sleep deprived, and chances are you probably could be getting more sleep. I'm not judging; actually, I'm often in the same boat. Truthfully, our collective health also has been compromised by factors other than straight-up sleep deprivation.

I'll explain. When I was a stay-at-home dad for six years, my sleep was pretty much toast. I accepted that I wasn't going to sleep for a period of more than three hours at a time for the foreseeable future. But technically I was not sleep deprived; I was still getting about seven hours of sleep per 24 hours, sometimes more. Still, I wasn't waking up refreshed at all.

That's because I was actually suffering from *sleep fragmentation*, in which multiple awakenings throughout the night limited the amount of restorative sleep I got. Deep sleep and long bouts of REM were on the decline, and more of my night consisted of light sleep and awakenings (I'll explore the differences of these types of sleep in the next chapter).

This distinction is important as it put me in the same camp as millions of other insomniacs who do not feel rested when waking up in the morning, despite having lain in bed for eight hours or more.

The most common causes for insomnia—besides having a baby in the house—include diabetes, health conditions with chronic pain, as well as anxiety. Undiagnosed conditions like sleep apnea and restless leg syndrome are also big sleep zappers because they cause hundreds of awakenings a night that are so short they aren't remembered.

This descent into the territories of insomnia has made me sensitive to the attitudes I hear in the media and around town everyday that seem to make light of the importance of sleep.

For example:

"I'll sleep when I'm dead."

"Sleep is for the weak."

Or this winner: "Real men don't sleep."

Anti-sleep bravado is intense, and culturally enforced, no matter your gender identity. I used to work at an office where co-workers would brag about how little sleep they got the night before, as a badge of honor of how busy they were.

Sleeplessness is more than an irritation. It's actually been declared a public health crisis. Apparently for every twenty people who think they can get by on five hours of sleep, only one of them is correct and the other nineteen are chronically sleep deprived.[1]

Let's be absolutely clear: our culture does not care if we sleep.

So let me rant. Society actually profits from our sleeplessness, because when we're tired, we eat more, work more, buy more, and watch more media. When our base needs aren't being met and our hormonal systems are out of whack, we are more likely to fill this void with consumer products, drugs and distractions.

In my opinion, this is not a conscious conspiracy of individuals, but more of a sick systemic design that has its roots in the concept of "human capital." Indeed, Tricia Hershey aka the Nap Bishop says grind culture is inextricably tied to colonialism.[2]

If businesses were really interested in productivity, we'd have sleep rooms in every business park. After all, workers with fatigue cost employers more than 100 billion dollars compared with workers without fatigue.[3]

If our culture really looked out for our health, teenagers would be allowed to sleep in. Aviation officials would be allowed to take naps. Doctors would have less grueling internships, resulting in less life-threatening errors. And new dads like me would be less crabby.

One exception I'm happy to report: Progressive

companies that rely on creativity, like Apple and Google, are leading the trend in providing their workers with sleep breaks. But since the COVID-19 pandemic began, in which many are still working from home, "nap pods" are not enough. We have just taken grind culture back to our home offices.

So you really have to carve out some space to get better sleep, especially if you want to explore the creative and healing potentials of dreaming. The next step is understanding what are minds are doing when we fall asleep.

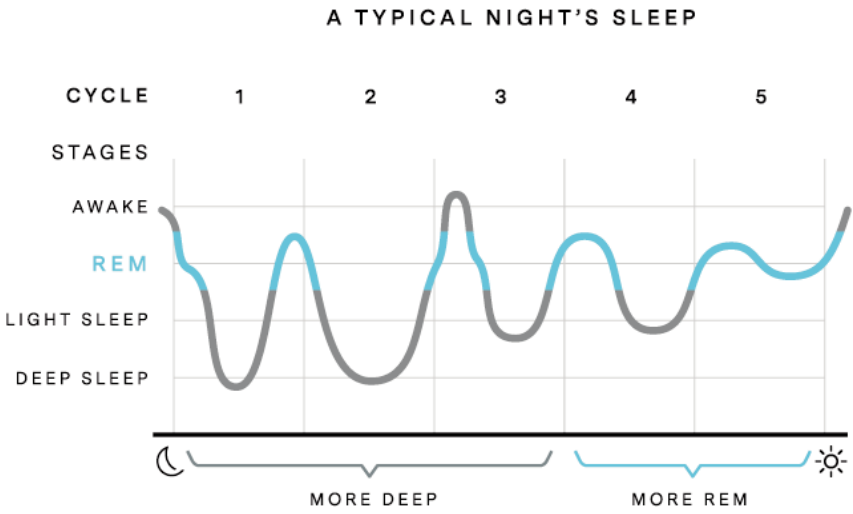
2

SCIENCE OF SLEEP

Modern sleep science breaks sleep down into four stages. These stages are based on brain activity, those patterns of electrochemical surges that regulate body systems and maintain conscious awareness. To be honest, it's a little arbitrary. In fact, the "gold standard" of sleep staging is that sleep researchers agree about 80% when looking at sleep data. The brain cycles through all four stages of sleep several times throughout the night. While these stages of sleep are universal, everyone has their own baseline for how long the stages last, as well as how much sleep is needed to feel refreshed the next day. Finding out how long your sleep cycles lasts is an important step in sleeping and dreaming well.

- **Stage N1 – Sleep onset.** Sleep onset is really a state of relaxation. When disturbed from stage one sleep, most people will say, "I was still awake and thinking." Nonetheless, sleep has begun and breathing has slowed as the body relaxes. Sometimes people hear voices and strange noises like bells or their name being called, known as a hypnagogic hallucination.
- **Stage N2 – Light sleep.** This is usually the jumping-off point to dreaming sleep. Light sleep gets a bad rap as not being important, but recent studies have shown that important learning processes, including memory consolidation, occur here.[1]
- **Stage N3 – Deep sleep.** Also known as slow-wave sleep, due to the increase in Delta waves. If you're awakened from this stage of sleep, you are often disoriented. Typically deep sleep occurs in the first half of the night, and appears to have an important role in the release of human growth hormone and other physical renewal processes.

- **REM sleep.** REM stands for Rapid Eye Movement. In this stage, most of the body's voluntary muscles are under paralysis while the mind is extraordinarily active. REM is the stage many of our vivid dreams come from, and is also called "dreaming sleep."



We spend about 25% of the night in REM sleep, mostly in the second half of the night.

Actually we dream in all stages of sleep. Surprised? The reason REM dreams continue to be associated with dreams is because REM dreams are easier to remember, tend to be longer and

structured more like a story than non-REM dreams. This memory trick is due to the fact that the REM brain state is actually more similar to the waking state than are the other stages of sleep. Yes, you read that right: REM activity looks more like waking thought, except perhaps more active and more synchronized. Also, we often wake up directly out of REM, with the dream still fresh in our minds.

For most people, cycling through these four stages of sleep takes about an hour and a half, but it can take up to two hours. There's a lot of variability. You have probably heard that 7-8 hours is the optimal amount of sleep—this is the average time to cycle through the stages four to six times throughout the night. Needing 8 hours of sleep is a myth. Some people sleep less, some sleep more, although most people in the Western world tend to be sleep deprived, getting by on stimulants and living with their grumpy moods. The most important thing when figuring out how much sleep is right for you is to get enough rest so you feel energized during the day.

Each sleep cycle is not created equal. In each sleep cycle, we spend more time in REM, so by the early morning the dreams can last anywhere from

twenty minutes to an hour. When you get less sleep, by going to bed late and then getting up early, you are probably missing out on some great dreams. So if dreaming is important to you, try to get at least seven hours of sleep per night.

It's true that some people can get by on less sleep without it affecting their lives. Known as short sleepers, these folks make up 2-4% of the population, sleeping four hours or less with no discernible wear and tear. Everyone else who thinks they are short sleepers is simply sleep deprived. By the way, sleep deprivation is an illegal torture method outlawed by the Geneva Convention and international courts, but most of us do it to ourselves.

Need another motivation to get more sleep? Sleep deprivation is linked to slower metabolism rates. One extra hour of sleep per night—without changing any other factor in diet or exercise—can result in a loss of 10 lb. or more within a year. Oh, and male-identified folx who get less than seven hours of sleep have lower testosterone levels and smaller libidos.[2] Enough said.

An alternative way to tap into some serious dreams is to take an afternoon nap. This is particularly effective if you get less than six hours of sleep

per night. Your nap will most likely be a combination of REM and light sleep, and chock full of dreams.

The added bonus, of course, is that an afternoon nap is healthier than loading up on caffeine when you get sleepy mid-day. You will feel refreshed, and ready for more challenges at work than if you just grin and bear it. Naps not only improve cognitive performance, but also lift your mood.

If light pollution is in your way of a good nap, try a sleep mask to block out the light. Some masks have aromatherapy too, adding pleasing scents to lull you to dreamland. Earplugs can also be your best friend; they are very affordable and found at most drug stores. For light sleepers, I recommend earplugs with a Noise Reduction Rating (NRR) of at least 30. Don't wait until the airport to buy them, by the way, or you will pay double.

For most of us, an important key to healthy sleep is going to bed around the same time every night, and getting up in the morning around the same time too. Our sleep clock (also called the *diurnal clock*) runs best when we keep it regular. Sleep will be sounder and our daytime hours will be more alert.

If you want to get more sleep on the weekend, go to bed earlier rather than sleeping in later. This will keep you roughly on schedule and make Mondays less of a drag. Of course, if weekends are the time for late night socializing or kicking back, this advice is hard to follow. So try a healthy compromise: sleep in on Saturday but try to get up at your regular time on Sunday.

A small percentage of people don't appear to have sleep schedules linked to the circadian day. These folks tend to be artists and creative types who burn up with energy regardless of the time, and sleep for a few hours at a time when they feel tired.

Sometimes this is pejoratively labeled as *Non-24-hour sleep-wake syndrome*. But this sleeping style doesn't have to be a problem if you can adapt your life to your personal energetic cycles, something that used to be easier before the industrially-mandated work whistle.

For example, author George Dawes Green says he used to suffer from non-24-hour sleep-wake syndrome, but then learned how to redesign a life that works for his personal clock, burning the extreme midnight oil for writing his novels.[3]

If this sounds like you, trying to get regular sleep may be the wrong direction. Rather, honor

your cycles and try to build a life that lets you be you. Some of history's most creative folks—such as Thomas Edison, Benjamin Franklin, and Salvador Dali—appear to have been sleep phase independent.

3

CREATING YOUR SLEEP SANCTUARY

Having eight hours of unbroken sleep is actually a modern sleep style that became popular due to social changes in the Enlightenment, and was cemented into modern practice thanks to industrialization and the invention of the electric light bulb.[1] In the recent past, sleep was broken up into two periods throughout the night, with social time or quiet reflection in between. This secret awakening time can also be useful for calling lucid dreams or any particular dream theme.

In the pre-modern past, it was not uncommon for people to visit each other's homes in the middle of the night for intimate conversations—as

well as for illicit rendezvous that would not be smiled upon in public. Indeed, some people today who stay awake at night might not actually be suffering from insomnia, an idea that rests upon the notion of unbroken sleep, but rather are simply naturally attuned to this middle-of-the-night consciousness.[2]

Many people in non-industrial countries today still sleep biphasically (in two main sleep periods) like our ancestors did. They rest surrounded by others in the same room, with thin walls, listening to farm animals and a nearby popping campfire. Sleep and waking is fluid, social, and not confined to certain rooms or times.

In contrast, the ideal for sleep in the Eurocentric world is a large, unbroken block of sleep. Some anthropologists jokingly call this modern way of sleeping the lay down and die method.[3] Modern sleep patterns are not fluid, but enforced by mandatory institutional attendance (work and school) and strict adherence to the clock. We tend to sleep alone or with one other person, in quiet rooms walled off from the outdoors, away from our extended families and friends. This enculturation starts early. "Sleep training" begins in infancy, and where it's not uncommon for infants younger

than six months of age to be isolated in their own rooms.

This pattern is very different than modern Japanese culture, for example, in which it is common for children to sleep in the same bedroom as their parents until adolescence. Sleep, like all our behaviors, is influenced by culture as much as biology. The goal is to find what works best for you personally within the comfort zone provided by this container.

An important part of getting good sleep is preparing for sleep. Beyond brushing your teeth and packing tomorrow's lunch, sleep prep is about downshifting into a relaxing night.

The bulk of the following sleep tips are ways to help you make your bedroom into a sanctuary from the outside world. It should be clean, quiet, and feel safe. This can be reflected not only in how you set up your bedroom but also in how you approach going to bed.

- **Keep it dreamy.** Reserve the use of your bedroom for relaxing, sleeping and intimacy.
- **Dress for comfort.** Sleep in clean, loose clothing, or nothing at all. Putting on your sleep clothes an hour before

bed is another way of reinforcing your downward shift. It sends a message to others in the household too.

- **Keep it clean**. Fresh sheets, clean pillowcases, and a neat room create a relaxing space. Reducing clutter is also crucial for creating mental space.
- **Clear the air.** If you can't get fresh air, have some fresh flowers in a vase, an aromatherapy diffuser, or small dream pillows stuffed with lavender or mugwort. Bad smells can actually increase the likelihood of negative emotions in dreams.
- **Shield the sounds.** Erratic sounds are the worst. If you live near busy street, turn on a small fan or invest in a white noise machine (or a white noise app for your mobile).
- **Darkness rules.** The bedroom should be dark. If you take naps, get some good light-blocking curtains. A latching door also creates feelings of safety in the evening hours.
- **Stay cool.** The ideal temperature for sleeping is 68-72° F (20-22° C). The lowering of the body temperature is a

further cue for the brain to release sleep-inducing hormones. Taking a cool bath in the summer months is another refreshing way to get ready for bed.

- **Wind down** for an hour before you plan on being asleep. Create a ritual of winding down that incorporates relaxation, the dimming of household lighting, and the shutting out of information (streaming, texting, doomscrolling, etc). Read if you wish or listen to some relaxing music while you settle down with your dream journal.
- **No Blues.** Rapid fire light in the blue spectrum may prevent the release of melatonin in the evening, so if you are using a mobile device at night, make sure to turn your screen towards light on the orange side of the spectrum. Both iOS and Android make this easy.
- **Make peace.** Don't go to bed angry. If you tend to have heart-to-heart conversations with your partner at night, make a point to resolve the tension or make a date to continue the conversation the next day.

Tracking Your Sleep

What is measured, improves. An easy way to get quantified data on your sleep is to track it using a smartphone app. There are several cheap (and free) apps available that turn your phone into a sleep device. They work by actigraphy, measuring the small movements you have during sleep and correlating these telltale patterns with the sleep stages. By simply placing your phone on the bed, you can learn how long it takes to fall asleep, the number of awakenings you have at night (that you probably don't remember), and the time spent in lighter versus deeper sleep.

Actigraphy alone, however, cannot reliably discern REM from non-REM sleep. Wearable tech like Apple Watch or Fitbit are next level for sleep tracking. But for data closer to what sleep professionals use, I recommend Beddit, which combines actigraphy with heart-rate, body temperature and breathing measures to pin-point the likely stage of sleep.

Tracking your sleep is good to determine your

baselines, and it can reveal secret periods of insomnia that you didn't know about. The newest Fitbit even can alert you to micro awakenings which can be a sign on a more serious sleep issue like sleep apnea.

4

SCIENCE OF DREAMING

Sigmund Freud is considered the father of dream science, even though most of his dream theory is largely discredited today. But from the get-go, Freud assumed that dreaming is an expression of the mind-brain system, a premise still widely accepted by scientists, psychologists and philosophers today. Still, in popular culture, we still hear the question asked, "Do dreams have meaning? Or are they just random bits of brain trash?

Let's take a look at the neurological and cognitive evidence, focusing on the brain layer by layer. Many parts of the brain contribute to the experience of dreaming: from the lower brain and upwards to the middle and higher brain structures.

Nihilists may gnash their teeth, but judging by the theories coming out of neuroscience today, it appears that meaning is built into the fabric of dreaming itself.

The Lower Brain Structures REM sleep

Evolutionarily speaking, the brain stem is the most ancient part of the human brain, shared by all vertebrates. In 1977, Allan Hobson and Robert McCarley discovered that electro-chemical pulses from the brain stem are associated with the architecture for REM sleep.[1] Not all dreams occur in REM sleep, of course, but it is this stage of sleep that provides the relatively active mind state during which many of our remembered dreams occur. These brain stem pulses may add to the substructure of the dreaming experience, including how long the REM period lasts.

However, not all dream researchers agree that this lower brain activity is the sole creator of the dreaming experience, and Hobson himself has moderated his perspective over the years from a lower brain focused model to a more inclusive model.[2]

Also, the idea that these brain stem pulses are essentially randomly generated has been misinter-

preted by many a journalist to mean that the content of dreams is also randomly generated or "meaningless." Rather, Hobson's hypothesis suggests that the function of dreaming is primarily physiological. Psychologists don't dispute this. And as Hobson himself clarified before he died, he does think that dreams have psychological meaning—in fact Hobson kept his own dream journal for decades—in fact he spoke eloquently at many venues about the beauty of the creative dreaming mind.

What about the idea that dreams defrag the brain—the process of deleting information? This theory comes to us from Francis Crick and Graeme Mitchison in 1982, known as the "reverse learning theory of dreams."

While it conveniently mirrors computer science, the evidence for defragging as the function of REM is rather poor, and the overwhelming majority of dream researchers do not support it today. In fact, the trend today is that dreams consolidate memory and are essential to learning. So I recommend unlearning this theory.

The Middle Brain Integrates Emotions

When dreaming sleep begins, the middle brain becomes an electro-chemical fireworks display of activity. All mammals have this part of the brain. Also known as the limbic system, it regulates emotional responses and cravings. During dreaming, the middle brain is more active than it is in waking life, so you could say that emotional intelligence is the guiding structure here.

One part of the middle brain is especially active: the amygdala, a walnut-sized lump that philosopher Rene Descartes, and later Emanuel Swedenborg, once thought was the seat of the soul. Today, we call the amygdala the seat of emotion. It's also the nesting grounds for fear and anxiety, due to its role in maintaining fight or flight responses.

But why so emotional? Dream researcher Rosalind Cartwright argued that we are replaying old memories and updating them with information from recent experiences.[3] Cartwright's laboratory research suggests that most dreams are negative in emotion, the most common ones being fear, anxiety, anger and confusion. This idea is mirrored in the evolutionary theory of dreaming, which supposes that dreams rehearse possible threats.[4]

Threats from the past are important data in this sense, showcasing how a dream can both be about the past and future simultaneously. Perhaps this is why dreams are not neat linear dramas, as they not structured by cause and effect, but rather, emotional correspondences that can span a lifetime.

The Higher Brain Takes a Nap

So, when we are chatting with a talking bear, how come we usually don't realize that we are dreaming? Neuroscientist Thomas Balkin (and company) published a provocative finding in 2002 using new evidence from brain imagery scans. They discovered that, during dreaming sleep, the higher brain is essentially offline.[5]

The higher brain is the newest part of the brain—the cortex. Humans have the most grey matter, as well as the most enfolded grey matter, in this layer compared to all the other mammals. Dr. Balkin argues that the prefrontal cortex—which generates language, logic, and critical thinking—is taking an electro-chemical nap while we argue with that talking bear. In consequence, we largely accept the bizarre landscape around us.

Something similar happens in other highly

creative states. For example, a 2008 fMRI study showed reduced activation in the prefrontal cortex when expert jazz musicians were spontaneously jamming compared with when they were playing memorized pieces.[6] From this perspective, dreaming sounds like a flow state, not a "deficiency" in cognition.

Keep in mind, *some* critical thinking still occurs in dreams, as we actually co-create dreaming outcomes when we work around the weird plot changes and bizarre visual imagery that the other parts of the mind throw our way. Indeed, cognitive psychologists Tracey Kahan and Stephen LaBerge have amassed plenty of quantifiable evidence that we have *metacognition* in dreams.[7]

Metacognition can be defined as thinking about our feelings, pondering our choices, and wondering about our own mental activity. Thinking about thinking used to be thought of as the pinnacle of waking cognition, and dreams were assumed to be completely devoid of it. The extreme of this trend in metacognition, of course, is *lucid dreaming,* which is when dreamers know "this is a dream" and can reflect on their own self-awareness. Another myth about dreams bites the dust.

But where is the meaning? You decide, literally.

As psychologist Bill Domhoff has shown using statistical modeling, the content of our dreams largely matches our interests, worries, and preoccupations from waking life.[8] Drawing and expanding on this work, Kelly Bulkeley has repeatedly shown how he can make loads of inferences about a person's life simply by reviewing the surface content of their dream reports.[9]

In my world, reviewing theories about how the brain creates and interprets the dream does not reduce dreaming to "only" a biological event. Rather, a holistic approach to dreaming must integrate the material, the psychological and the spiritual to reflect the depth of our experience. Today the question is not do dreams have meaning but rather emerges as: what do *you* find meaningful?

5

PREPARING FOR GOOD DREAMING

Now let's move on to tips and practices that will truly optimize the recall and appreciation of dreams. I didn't invent most of these—some are actually thousands of years old.

I covered this in Chapter 1, but it bears repeating: the more time you give to transitioning into and out of sleep, the better you will sleep and the more dreams you will remember. The single most important key to sleeping well and having lots of dreams is to treat your bedroom like a sanctuary, and to develop a nightly ritual that quiets your mind, soothes your tensions, and gives you space to check in, rather than checking out.

Action plan: clean your room, clear your

schedule, and set the intention to treat your sleep life with respect. Make a date with slumber.

Now that your sleep sanctuary is ready to go, let's turn towards dreaming. A holistic approach to good dreaming starts while the sun is still up. Below are three basic dietary tips for improving your chances for healthy sleep and vivid dreams.

Three Dietary Tips for Better Dreams

1. *Snack Lightly*

Don't eat heavily right before bed. This really affects digestion and can cause sleep disturbances throughout the night. However, a light snack of simple carbs or milk can have a light sedative effect that actually rivals over-the-counter medication — usually tastes better too. Cold milk may actually works better than warm milk, because it helps cool the body core, another signal for sleep.

2. Put a Cap on Night Caps

A drink before bed can be a sedative, but beware; it has long-term effects that can actually promote insomnia. By the way, both alcohol and cannabis act primarily as a dream-inhibitor. If you don't get much sleep (less than 6 hours) and regularly imbibe, then you will miss out on a lot of dreaming. However, if you sleep in, these sub-

stances actually can indirectly create a "REM rebound" effect that will promote long dreams in the second half of the night. That said, I would stay away from the habitual use of *any* substance to encourage sleep or dreams.

3. Reduce your Caffeine Intake

Approximately 80% of adults in the world consume some form of caffeine every day. In the United States, the the average adult takes in 300 to 400 mg caffeine, mostly because coffee is available in very office, restaurant, and even at streetside vendors. It's hard *not* to be caffeinated these days. It's the most invisible drug in the world.

Caffeine is not all bad–in fact there's plenty of evidence it can act as a health tonic—but the caffeine from that mocha after work is still in the bloodstream by the time you go to bed. Make it a rule to not drink caffeinated beverages after noon, and you may see a difference in your sleep quality.

Try switching to black tea for your second cup, which has about half the caffeine (and just as many reasons to add milk and sugar). Better yet: green tea –as you will still get the pleasure of the morning ritual, plus the nerve-quelling and anti-inflammatory benefits of l-theanine and other natural compounds.

Dream Journaling

Perhaps the most crucial practice is keeping a dream journal, which is simply one of the most effective ways to set the intention to remember more dreams. It's also helpful to have in the long run, so you can compare similar dreams over time and make new connections and see larger patterns.

I have kept a dream journal since I was fifteen years old, and am constantly surprised how my early dreams contain wisdom (usually in the form of brutal honesty) about my passions, my fears, and my highest hopes. This is exactly in line with the continuity theory of dreams, in which dreams showcase past, present and future possibilities.

Everyone has their own way of incorporating a dream journal into their life.

Tips for Keeping a Dream Journal

- Keep the journal just for dreams, no other purposes. No recipes, phone numbers, to-do lists, or notes from class.
- The journal can be a fancy leather-bound one or just a spiral-bound

notebook you picked up at the grocery store. Whatever you choose, make sure you feel comfortable with the journal and that it feels "inviting."

- Choose a special pen that is dedicated to use for the dream journal. Keep them together at all times.
- Keep the journal on your nightstand or close at hand when you go to bed. Notice it before you go to bed and set an intention such as, "I want to remember my dreams tonight." Have a small reading lamp or flashlight that you can turn on in the middle of the night if you awaken with a dream memory. If you sleep with a partner, it's important that you feel you have social permission to turn the lamp on whenever you need to.
- Journal after you wake up, immediately, before getting out of bed. If you just remember a few impressions, jot them down. If you are pressed for time, make it easy on yourself and write down a few phrases that will jog your memory later.

- Continue the journaling process when you usually read the paper at breakfast, or on the train on the way to work, or at your lunch break. Make the time.
- If you are in a rush, flesh out the most striking images and the most emotional bits. Don't worry about recording every impression if it's a long and detailed dream. If I did that, I'd spend my entire day writing, and then I'd go to sleep for more. There is definitely a point of limited returns.
- Be truthful to yourself about how the dream events work together—be conscious of the desire to make it a tidy story. Beware; this is called the narrative effect; it happens easily, simply because memory is very unreliable when it comes to translating events from one state of awareness to another. If you are confused about whether something did or didn't happen in the dream, write down both impressions, because sometimes dreams run through the same experience multiple times.

- Use the present tense as if the action is unfolding now.
- Don't lose heart if it takes a few weeks to remember your first dream fragment after choosing your dream journal. Be patient with yourself, and keep the journal in plain sight on the nightstand. If you haven't previously remembered a dream in over a year, it will take some time to reawaken the recall.
- Reread your dreams from the night before as you settle down to sleep. You may be surprised that you remember more about the dream than you did when you first wrote it down. We remember our dreams more when we are sleepy due to state-specific memory. There are also dips in the circadian rhythm during the day when it may be easier to recall your dreams, particularly around the traditional siesta time in the mid-afternoon.

Why does journaling help with remembering dreams? When we write, we are translating visual and emotional memories into words and stories, so the experience is turned inside out. Writing also

uses a part of the brain that makes linguistic connections.

An interesting aside—laboratory research suggests that subjects just awakened from REM sleep do better at crossword puzzles. This effect may be because REM sleep is more cognitively flexible than waking life thinking, so metaphors and connections are more visible and closer to the surface.[1]

So writing the dream down actually teases out these connections and makes them plain. Indeed, Freudian slips are a very common part of dream recording too–watch your misspellings for synonyms that may have some special significance.

The Backwards Day

Once you are in bed, try this next practice to clear the mind as you go to sleep. I call it The Backwards Day. This practice prevents those worry sessions in the middle of the "night that are unproductive and draining, and it paves the way to more creative dreams. After laying back in bed, ready for sleep, spend 5-10 minutes thinking through your day backwards. Start with the last thing you did before going to bed (flossing your teeth) and then what happened before then (read

novel), and before that (watched Matlock), all the way until you woke up in the morning.

Don't dwell on anything, just touch-and-go. And don't worry about remembering every little behavior... instead focus on the big ones, and especially the emotional moments of the day. That annoying client call, that scary moment driving to work when someone almost swerved into you, that flirtation with your coworker.

Again, don't dwell or try to analyze. The goal is to acknowledge what happened and your feelings about what happened, and move on.

Why is this technique effective? It basically steals the wind from the sails of those boring dreams that essentially do the same work, freeing up your mind to delve into the next level. Monks in Tibet developed this over 800 years ago as a dream meditation aid.

Drift to Sleep with Awareness

After going through this meditation, you will likely be sleepy. In fact, it's not uncommon to fall asleep when doing the Backwards Day Technique.

Let yourself sink into sleep, but as your thoughts wander, try to keep some awareness on the visual and auditory hallucinations you experi-

ence. Common examples include white stars or flickering lights, the sound of someone calling your name, the feeling of floating or sinking. These ephemeral visions are called *hypnagogia*, which means "visions while falling into sleep."

The practice of noticing these experiences at sleep onset builds those cognitive bridges between your waking sense of self and the dreaming self. Most people pass through this stage of sleep without awareness, so don't fret if it doesn't work for you.

However, if you find this easy enough, you are a good candidate for some advanced dreamwork practices like lucid dreaming and dream re-entry.

The Snooze Method

Here's another painless method for remembering more dreams. I call it The Snooze Method because it takes advantage of your alarm clock. It's easy: try not to move out of your original sleeping position when you wake up in the morning. If you woke up on your side, stay there and begin scanning for remembered dreams. Once you have run through the experiences, then grab the journal and begin either jotting down the main points or the full dream (depending on your morning schedule).

If you wake up by alarm, this technique can still work. Hit the snooze button and then lay back down in the same exact sleep position. You may fall back asleep of course, but try it again when the snooze goes off again. Like most mental habits, this will take a little time but after a spell it will become an automatic habit.

Why does it work? Believe it or not, dreams are easier to remember when you are in the same position that you had them. In general, body position holds the key to our mental and emotional health. Try putting your head in your hands and you will most likely start lamenting some aspect of your life. Put your arms in the air like you are praising the sun and you may feel elated. This is one of the principles behind yoga and also is a clue to how our bodily habits can dictate mood.

Dreams are in the body, not just in the brain, and the emotions are still swirling around in our bodies when we awaken.

CONCLUSION

I hope you have enjoyed this whirlwind tour about how to get more sleep, enhance your dreams, and wake up to a new life. If you incorporate just some of the tactics, habits, and practices into your daily life, you'll quickly begin the process of dream work that we are neurologically primed for but culturally bereft.

At the end of the day (or the beginning of the night), enhancing your dream life is about building bridges between worlds, preparing mindfully for sleep, and developing your intention to check in rather than check out when you lay down to rest.

When you do that, the dreams will follow.... and you will be transformed in the process. I mean

this quite literally. Dreaming can revolutionize your life. I think you've probably got that message already. I repeat it often because dreamwork has transformed me.

The dreaming arts also have the potential to transform our culture. It begins as we recognize sleep as the third pillar of health, as diet and exercise are useless without a restful night. On the heels of this discovery is the cognitive revolution that dreaming offers—for when we value other forms of thinking besides the narrow gaze of reason, new creative potentials will arise within us.

Every dream has the potential to discover, energize, and subvert unhealthy symbols in our lives. Metaphors provide depth and insight, and make space for creative solutions. By investing in the dreaming mind, we are allowing new levels of flexibility and ingenuity to percolate into our lives and the culture at large.

I'm not saying to let go of your critical thinking or skepticism, as they are the true fruits of the scientific legacy. I'm just saying it's time for imagination to reclaim its power and place in our lives.

We can embrace the fullness of our human destiny only if we remember our dreams, share them, and act from them with eyes and hearts wide open.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryan Dungan Hurd (he/him) is an educator and dream researcher. His work has been featured on NPR, CNN, Coast to Coast, TedMed, Psychology Today, and many more. Ryan has been invited to lecture at venues such as Stanford University, the Institute of Buddhist Studies, and the Rhine Research Center. He has a MA in Consciousness Studies from John F. Kennedy University and a BA in Anthropology / Archaeology from the University of Georgia.

Ryan is a member of the International Association for the Study of Dreams and abides by their ethical guidelines. His website DreamStudies.org has been going strong since 2007. He currently lives in Philadelphia, PA.

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