

The Sleep Paralysis Report: Symptoms, Causes, and How to Treat It

By RYAN HURD

Sleep paralysis is the least understood type of terrifying dream. Its gloomy brothers, the nightmare and the night terror, have finally been teased apart thanks to the work of sleep scientists and dream researchers. But sleep paralysis, also known as the Hag Effect or the Incubus Effect, remains the dark and unknown figure in the room.

What is sleep paralysis?

Sleep paralysis (SP) is an intrusion of dream imagery into the waking world, experienced by roughly half the population of narcoleptics and millions of healthy sleepers too. Ordinarily in REM (dreaming) sleep, our muscles are paralyzed as we sleep. According to evolutionary scientists, this is a feature designed to keep up from living out our dreams so we



No one can hear you scream

don't hurt our sleeping partner as we swash-buckle a path through a pirate adventure.

But, sometimes, we “wake up” while still in REM paralysis. What follows is a confusing mixture of waking world perception and dreaming imagination.

Common symptoms are:

- feeling unable to move or held down
- pressure on the chest, throat and abdomen
- extreme fear and terror
- pounding heart rate
- strange sounds like buzzing or a crackling paper bag
- bizarre shifts in gravity and kinesthetics
- as well as breathing difficulties
- feeling a presence in the room

- seeing an apparition, often a nightmarish figure
- being touched by the apparition
- full mental awareness, ie “It was real.”

The Biology of Sleep Paralysis

Biologically speaking, SP is harmless; it’s perfectly natural if not accompanied by symptoms of narcolepsy or sleep apnea. The muscle paralysis occurs when our brain is flooded with the neurotransmitter acetylcholine, which suppresses muscle tone in all the major muscle groups that are not autonomic (such as the heart, the intestines, and the lungs). However, many lose sleep over SP, which contributes to insomnia and actually increases the odds of another SP attack.



Figure 1: Dream, reality, or both?

And that’s the tricky part, because SP can get even creepier, as it is sometimes associated with powerful hypnagogic hallucinations (HH). So although you can feel your body (but not move it), as well as see where you are sleeping accurately, your vision and senses are also filled with dream-like imagery. Known as REM intrusion, it’s really pretty magical: a hybrid state of consciousness that is like dreaming with your eyes open. However, for many it is not magical at all—it’s terrifying because we assume we are awake. Fear increases, driving more dream-based imagery, and what results is pretty

much the worst thing imaginable.

Enter the Stranger

This is the last common symptom of sleep paralysis: the feeling that someone is in the room. A presence that sometimes cannot be seen, and other times makes itself very clear. The Other, the man with no face.

This is where SP and hypnagogic hallucinations merge into a lucid nightmare, leaving sleepers dazed, horrified and scared to go back to sleep for hours afterwards. In Medieval times the Incubus was the demon

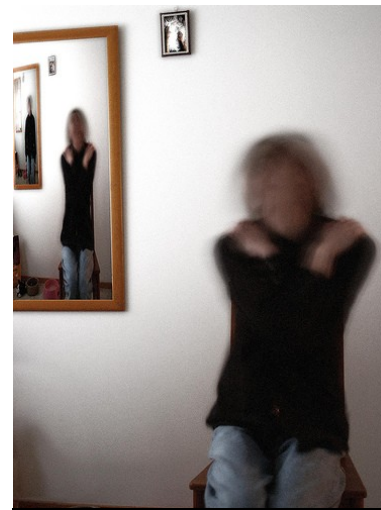


Figure 2: the doppelgänger

known to sit on women's chests to molest them. In Hawaiian society, the spirits are known as the *Night Walkers*. In Teutonic lore, the *Doppelgänger*. And we can't overlook the fact that many alien abduction tales start with being paralyzed in bed.

Here's some dream examples of SP/HH that were anonymously recorded from my website DreamStudies.org:

On several occasions I have felt choked, hit and held down. My throat and vocal cords very paralyzed when I tried to scream.

Someone was lying on top of me and I was trying to shout out but could not.

Demons trying to possess me. Trying to break my neck, scream in my face, engulf me into a thick damp humid sensation of a God-awful feeling of sinister corruption.

I personally have experienced sleep paralysis hundreds of times. In fact, my first recorded dream is a scary SP encounter that I had at 14 years old. Later, I found many dreamers like myself who use their SP to launch into a lucid dream. The important step

to make this transition is to learn how to banish your fear, and learn how to be more comfortable with the ambiguity in the dreaming world.

The Burden and the Gift of SP

And that's the balm to all these stories of demons, stranglers, and alien abductions. As I now see it, SP is an initiation into the dreaming arts. The calling is for light sleepers, conscious dreamers, and those who have thin boundaries, or what researcher Ernest Hartmann has called "vulnerability." The initiation can also come when we are at our most stressed out, as we take on new roles and responsibilities, or are suddenly forced to face existential realities such as a death in the family, or a debilitating sickness of our own. Others are life-long sufferers who are prone to SP for unknown reasons, perhaps because it runs in the family. As of this writing, there is no known gene for sleep paralysis attacks, although research indicates that women suffer more than men, and African-American women are especially prone.

Taken together, what all SP sufferers have in common is a *greater ability to be touched by the world*, to experience life and all of its pain, as well as its beauty. This vulnerability is a double-edged sword, pointing towards both creativity as well as increased anguish.

The good news is that SP can be managed, and even cultivated. There are simple ways to lessen SP if you want the attacks to go away. Transforming sleep paralysis into a lucid dream or an out-of-body experience (OBE) is another way to spin this unique hybrid state of consciousness into a new opportunity. And for the truly bold, you can invite SP by understanding its causes and instigating it on purpose.

Causes of Sleep Paralysis

Here are some external causes of SP that can be managed through life circumstance

- Keeping an erratic sleep schedule.
- Sleeping on your back
- Increased levels of anxiety – especially social anxiety
- Overuse of stimulants – including caffeine
- Physical fatigue
- Significant life changes
- Medication for ADHD
- Side effect of galantamine, a supplement taken by Alzheimer's patients

Lessening Sleep Paralysis Nightmares

So if you want to cut down the sleep paralysis altogether, then first priorities are a more regular sleep habit, less stress, and less caffeine. Easily said, huh? After all, this is the modern lifestyle in a nutshell, and these patterns run deep in our culture. Even if we clean up our diet, we're still busy people. But having an irregular sleep schedule is hard on our bodies. As much as possible, go to bed and wake up at the same times.

Another dietary quick-fix is having a light snack before bed, something with carbs and/or protein, but not a lot of sugar. Don't binge on cheese and meat, however: this combination is known for actually increasing bad dreams.

Creating a Safe Home Again: Getting Grounded



Figure 3: Image by Denise Cross (CC)

Some more ways to cope include adding bedtime rituals that create a “safe place” for sleeping, such as gentle music or aromatherapy an hour before sleep. Also, make a connection to your deep beliefs about the world: where can you “lean against” to help calm you down during fearful encounters? Having a sense of gratitude and the courage to love can break through the spell of fear in SP. For others, repeating the scientific truth that “this is normal, I am experiencing REM paralysis” is an effective way to keep fears from spiraling out of control.

In all of these strategies, the theme is *getting grounded*. Because SP has both physical and psychological causes, it can be difficult at first to know the best way to proceed. I recommend keeping a dream journal of your experiences, as well as noting the times you go to bed and wake up, and your diet choices. This will help you make

correlations to your personal SP triggers. Most importantly, make a commitment to get more sleep. And better sleep too. Reducing alcohol and caffeine are a good starting point, but you may have to make new habits at night that allow you to relax and get ready for bed without worry.

Lastly, share your experiences with your partner, family and friends. Discussing the fearful visions will reduce tension and give your community a chance to support you. If you don't want to open up to those who know you best, there are many opportunities to share your experiences more anonymously online (see my resources at the end).

Top 5 ways to Get Out of Sleep Paralysis

1. Don't fight. Instead, relax into the sensation, and go with the flow.
2. Wiggle Your Toe – this is the best way to break the paralysis dream.
3. Clench your fist – a variation of the toe wiggle method.
4. Breathe deeply and fully. This prevents run-away fear and can also shake you out of the dream.
5. Prepare an affirmation when you notice you're in SP. Something like, "I am in sleep paralysis, I am not in danger, don't forget to breathe."

3 ways to Prevent Multiple SP Attacks in the same night

1. After awakening, do 10 minutes of exercise before going to bed. This will prevent repetitive bouts of SP because of the indirect way exercise affects mood and emotionality. Climb the stairs, use the treadmill, a little Wii Fit, whatever works.
2. Before going back to bed, turn on a lamp and look at it for a full minute. This

resets the body's circadian rhythm. You will still be able to go back to sleep later, but you won't slip straight into REM (dreaming) sleep.

3. Have a carb-heavy snack such as bread or pasta. Stay away from heavy fats and sugar. A glass of milk is another classic choice; it's not an old wife's tale.

Facing the Stranger: A Note about Trust and Acceptance



Sometimes the hardest part of sleep paralysis and the hypnagogic hallucinations that follow is the encounter with the dark figure in the room. This is where fear can really get in the way. It's important to stay centered, to focus on breathing regularly, and to meditate on acceptance and gratitude.

Who shows up? The unknown figure can turn out to be a deceased relative, an angel, or a goddess figure. She may have something to tell you. Listen careful because sometimes she will whisper. Sometimes the stranger can tell the dreamer something that turns out to be “uncanny” information that the dreamer could not have known.

Once I fell asleep into an uneasy nap after a rough social encounter that left me feeling discouraged and alone. Here's the text of the sleep paralysis dream that followed:

(4/12/2004) in a half-dream state, there is a woman in front of me with dark curly hair. Then I am conscious of my sleeping body on my bed, lying on my stomach. I feel her presence – she steps out of the dream and into the room. I feel her standing beside the bed, then sitting besides me. I am slightly apprehensive, but I trust the woman. She then sits on my lower back – I can feel her weight, and then “gravity” rotated 180 degrees so it seems as if I am lying on my back. Then I feel the woman's hands on my chest area, and my whole chest region becomes warm and tingly. I know she is healing me somehow, and I relax into the sensation of being cared for. The heat extends through my body to my back, not just on the surface of the skin, a warm glow.

The turning point of the dream is when I note my fear and decide to trust the woman. Lucidity in this case is not used to control the dream, or even try to escape the scene for an OBE adventure, but rather to gather courage to face the encounter that is naturally unfolding. My reward in this case was a healing gift. I woke up completely refreshed.

So who are these visitors that come in the veil between waking and dreaming? Maybe they are internalized self-helpers, as dream researcher Robert van de Castle suggests about angel dreams. I am a dream agnostic on this point, but am deeply humbled and thankful for all the uncanny sleep paralysis experiences, including the lessons, the healing gifts, and the journeys to inner landscapes.

Reframing Sleep Paralysis as Uncanny Intelligence

This report is designed to reframe how we talk about sleep paralysis and its related visionary states. Sometimes just knowing that the experience does not have to be a nightmare is enough for people to break out of paralysis and explore the amazing dream worlds that are just around the bend. Whether SP is a familiar friend, or a new and unwelcome visitor in your home, the best way to approach these unique experiences is to make room for the uncanny intelligence of this state of mind. What SP brings for you is a personal matter, but I assure you that gaining the courage to meet the unknown will lead to self-knowledge, a greater passion for living, and perhaps even wisdom.

Resources

- To make sure you don't have a more serious sleep condition like sleep apnea or narcolepsy, I recommend checking out this free and anonymous online survey: www.sleepnet.com/sleeptest.html

- Online forums that discuss sleep paralysis and conscious nightmares:

www.dreamviews.com
www.mortalmist.com
www.stevpavlina.com

- For more cutting-edge instruction about treating sleep paralysis, visit www.DreamStudies.org



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