

Can we control our dreams?

Strange as it seems, the answer is yes – and it could help us solve our problems. Do we have any influence over the often strange, wandering, night-time journeys in our mind? Could we learn to dream differently, getting rid of repeated nightmares or finding answers to the problems that we cannot solve in daylight hours? Strange though it may seem, the answer is yes. Research suggests that, using practical and psychological techniques, we can influence our dreams and use them to draw on the vast, largely unused resource of our unconscious mind.

Deirdre Barrett, an assistant clinical professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School, is convinced we all have the power to manage our dreams. ‘If you want to dream about a particular subject,’ she says, ‘focus on it once you are in bed. (1)..... You can also place an object or photo that represents the desired dream on your bedside table,’ Barrett says.

Another key factor in using one’s dreams creatively is to avoid jumping out of bed the moment you wake up. (2)..... ‘If you don’t recall a dream immediately, lie still and see if a thought or image comes to mind,’ Barrett says. ‘Sometimes a whole dream will come flooding back.’

The point of this second strategy is to make use of the information presented by our unconscious as we sleep. It’s hard to put an exact figure on the ratio of our unconscious to conscious mind, but psychologists estimate it to be nine to one. We may believe that thinking is our best problem-solving strategy, but the power of our conscious mind is relatively tiny. (3)..... So letting the unconscious mind work on it may be healthier and more productive.

Barrett put this to the test in a week-long study with college students; she asked them to use dreaming as a way of finding ways of dealing with a particular problem. (4)..... ‘If we’re stuck on a problem, it’s our waking, logical way of thinking that’s stuck,’ Barrett says. ‘The dream’s power lies in the fact that it’s a

different manner of thought – it adds to and develops what we've already done while awake.'

Most of us enjoy the rich, pleasantly strange experience of dreaming (and we all dream – some people just don't remember it). But no one enjoys nightmares that keep coming back, or the kind of unpleasant dreams from which you wake sweating. (5)..... 'It's very common for them to have nightmares about being chased by a monster,' says Delphi Ellis, a counsellor and dream expert. 'This often happens as they get older and become aware of their place in the huge world.'

'As an adult, troubling or frightening dreams are often an indication of difficult issues from the past,' Ellis says. (6)..... They and all other kinds of dream are an incredibly valuable resource, which most of us simply ignore. So learn to listen to them, even the horrible ones – they're always trying to tell you something.'

A It's one in which you know you're dreaming as the dream is occurring – the kind of 'dream within a dream' that film characters sometimes have.

B Even more anxiety-causing, if you're a parent, are the scary ones that have such an effect on your kids.

C Doing so means you'll lose half of what your dream contained as the day's distractions take over your thoughts.

D About half of them dreamt about it and one-quarter of them solved it.

E Since dreaming is so visual, form a picture in your mind of something related to that topic as you fall asleep.

F The more you ignore dreams like those, the more your unconscious turns up the volume – so a nightmare is that message on full volume.

G Also, when this consists of going over and over negative or worrying issues in our minds, it is strongly linked with stress, depression and anxiety.