

Why do I keep having recurring dreams?
by Stacey Colino

It's like watching a rerun while you're sleeping: Once again, you show up for a class not knowing there's a test, or lose control of your car while driving, or get chased by a shadowy figure. Recurring dreams have a way of popping up again and again.

"The dreams contain the same content, emotions, or narrative structure," explains Antonio Zadra, a professor of psychology and senior researcher at the Center for Advanced Research in Sleep Medicine at the University of Montreal. Common themes include falling into space, losing teeth, feeling paralyzed in a threatening situation, enduring a natural disaster, or being ripped off or cheated on. But "a significant chunk of recurrent dreams are idiosyncratic," says Zadra, who co-wrote the book *When Brains Dream: Exploring the Science and Mystery of Sleep*. "And some people have more than one recurrent dream."

Here's what to know about why they keep happening.

How common are recurring dreams?

The vast majority of adults have recurring dreams at some point in their lives, experts say. For several reasons, women tend to be most afflicted. "Overall, women recall their dreams more often than men, and women are also more likely to have disturbing dreams," says Michael R. Nadorff, a professor of psychology at Mississippi State University and former president of the Society of Behavioral Sleep Medicine.

The strange makeup of recurring dreams

Research has found that most recurring dreams have a negative tone with themes often related to helplessness, failure, or being chased. But sometimes they can have positive themes, such as discovering a new room in your home or excelling at an activity like skiing.

Sometimes these recurring dream themes may feel random. Other times they may relate to an experience from your past or to something that's currently worrying you. Research has found that people who feel ineffective in their lives and disconnected from others are more likely to experience negative recurring dreams.

These dreams "often correlate with periods of heightened stress or significant life changes, suggesting that they may serve as indicators of underlying anxiety," says Deirdre Barrett, a dream researcher at Harvard Medical School and author of the books *The Committee of Sleep* and *Pandemic Dreams*. "A specific subset of recurring

dreams happen to trauma survivors, especially those with post-traumatic stress disorder. They experience nightmares related to their traumatic experiences.”

How recurring dreams make people feel

Depending on the emotional tone of the dreams and whether you remember them, recurring dreams can impact people in different ways. Also, “the effect of the dreams strongly depends on their frequency,” says Michael Schredl, head of research in the sleep laboratory at the Central Institute of Mental Health in Mannheim, Germany. “I would think that a recurring dream once a year, even several times a year, is puzzling at least sometimes to the dreamer, but otherwise not disturbing. But if the frequency is once a week or more often, then there might be clinically significant distress.”

The content of the recurring dream can also affect how you feel. After having one that’s neutral or simply odd, you might wake up feeling perplexed or puzzled about why you’ve had this dream again, Zadra says. On the other hand, positive recurring dreams about mastering a dance move, say, can leave you feeling inspired, hopeful, or exhilarated.

Meanwhile, recurring dreams that are upsetting can leave you with an emotional hangover the next day. “Recurring negative dreams can cause significant emotional distress, leading to feelings of fear, anxiety, or helplessness upon waking,” Barrett says. “This emotional residue can linger throughout the day, affecting mood and mental focus.”

If these distressing dreams occur frequently, these patterns can even lead you to dread going to sleep, which can interfere with your ability to fall asleep and your overall sleep quality.

How to make sense of recurring dreams

To try to understand a recurring dream you’ve been having, it helps to think about the elements of the dream—whether it’s a tsunami, teeth, or a tiger—and what they mean to you, Barrett says. For example, as far as teeth go, “different dreamers would say, ‘You’d starve if you didn’t have them,’ ‘You can bite people with them,’ or ‘I’d look awful without my teeth,’” she explains. “Each of these implies a different metaphoric concern.”

Consider events and emotions that tend to repeat in your daily life and how they might relate to the recurring dream. If you feel overwhelmed and perpetually behind on tasks at work, for example, that might relate to a dream about being unprepared for a test in school or losing control of a car you’re driving.

“By recognizing events and emotions that occurred the day before or the day of the dream, that can help people get a grip on why these dreams tend to come back at particular times,” Zadra says.

With positive recurring dreams—about revisiting a beautiful place, for example—you also might consider how it could relate to what’s happening in your life. Maybe you’re recognizing an under-appreciated quality or skill in yourself or discovering a new interest you want to pursue. These are the kinds of recurring dreams people don’t mind having, experts say. They can even be motivating.

It's the negative ones people want to manage. Fortunately, if negative recurring dreams persist, experts say a technique called imagery rehearsal therapy (IRT) can help, whether you do it on your own or with the help of a therapist. With IRT, the basic idea is to select an upsetting dream, visualize the dream while you’re awake, change the narrative or outcome in some way, then rehearse the new dream in your mind during the day.

“Change it however feels right to you,” Zadra says. “You might change everything or a small detail or the ending. This has an empowering effect on people during the day and allows you to have some control over what happens in your dreams.”