

# Why Do We Sleep and Dream?

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By Michael Wiederman, PhD

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Most people think we need sleep for physical and mental rest. However, we're physically and mentally quite active during sleep. If the only benefit of sleeping was physical rest, we could practice deep relaxation and not need to sleep.

So, why do we spend nearly one third of our lives sleeping? In a sense, we sleep to dream. About three times each night we cycle through distinct stages of sleep. Almost all of our dreams occur during only one of these stages—the one having rapid eye movement (REM). During the REM stage, you can actually see the sleeper's eyeballs moving rapidly side-to-side underneath the eyelids.

Of the stages of sleep, REM, seems to be the most important for our mental functioning. If people are deprived of REM sleep but allowed as much as they want of the other stages, they don't function well mentally. When allowed to then sleep uninterrupted, people will make up for lost REM sleep by having much more of it.

Why is REM sleep so important? No one knows for sure. The answer probably has to do with what is happening to the brain. During REM the base of the brain sends bursts of

stimulation in seemingly random ways to the rest of the brain.

This repeated stimulation of various parts of the brain is probably useful for maintaining connections between nerve cells, or stimulating growth of such connections. This would explain why children have more REM sleep than do adults, and why adults tend to have more REM during times of intense learning.

There are side effects to these bursts of brain stimulation. They lead the sleeper to experience a variety of emotions as various parts of the brain are jolted. Perhaps one round of stimulation results in feelings of panic. Of course there is no "real" reason to feel panic—nothing is threatening us. But the parts of the brain that cause such feelings are stimulated just as if there was.

This is where dreaming comes in. Humans have a tremendous need to make sense of what is happening. When we feel something, we immediately try to figure out why. So, when we're asleep yet experience some set of emotions, we naturally try to figure out why we feel this way.

Dreams are the stories our brains create so that the emotions we're feeling

make sense. If we happen to be feeling panic during REM sleep, our brains might construct a dream in which we're being chased, so that the panic will make sense to us.

So why does it seem that our dreams contain things from the day prior to the dream? And why do we have some repeat dreams?

The theory is that in looking for an explanation for certain emotions, the brain seeks the easiest answer. If something recently occurred or was recently thought of or talked about, then that is most likely to end up being dream material.

With repeat dreams, it makes sense that once your brain gets used to using a certain scenario to explain a particular set of feelings, it is more likely to keep doing so because that is an easy scenario to recreate.

There's a common belief that dreams have deep psychological meaning. But now we can see why they probably don't. Dreams simply appear to be the result of our brains trying to make sense out of what is happening during REM stages of sleep.