

Factsheet 14: Distressing dreams and nightmares

People who have experienced trauma may have distressing dreams or nightmares. After trauma, the brain tries to make sense of what happened. This can lead to strong memories or feelings showing up in dreams. Nightmares are a way for the brain to process and work through difficult experiences. They are not your fault and do not mean something is wrong with you.

Trauma affects the part of the brain that controls fear and memory. This can make dreams and nightmares feel very real, intense and hard to shake off.

Nightmares can involve reliving parts of the trauma, such as sights, sounds, or feelings from the event. Sometimes, the dreams may be different but still scary. For example, you might dream of being in danger or feeling trapped. You may wake up feeling scared, upset, or even confused. You may wake up and find yourself sweating or having difficulty breathing.

What can help?



Understanding

Remember that nightmares are common after trauma. They are your brain's way of trying to make sense of what has happened.



Grounding techniques

If you wake up from a nightmare, try grounding yourself by focusing on your surroundings.

EXERCISE: Notice five things



Practice this technique throughout the day, especially any time you find yourself getting caught up in difficult thoughts and feelings.



When we are feeling tense and afraid, we are caught up in difficult thoughts, memories, emotions and sensations related to the past or our fears for the future.

Bringing our focus to our sense of sight, sound, touch, smell and taste can be a quick and powerful way of bringing our attention back to the present moment where we are safe.

Pause for a moment. Notice and name what you are experiencing (e.g. I am having a difficult memory, I have tightness in my chest). Then look around and name out loud the following:

Turn over the page.



EXERCISE: Notice five things



5 things you can see (e.g. window, door, ceiling, trees, hands)



4 things you can hear (e.g. raining, bird chirping, traffic sound, breathing)



3 things you can touch or that you can feel on your skin (e.g. blanket)



2 things you can smell (e.g. perfume, shampoo)



1 thing you can taste (e.g. garlic bread from last meal)

EXERCISE: Remind yourself you are safe

Unwanted memories from the past and worry about the future can make you feel unsafe. A simple strategy you can practice daily is reminding yourself that you are safe now.

Combining this with the Relaxed Breathing Method can be particularly helpful when practiced regularly.



Remind yourself of where you are right now (e.g. I am in my bedroom, in my house, in Brisbane).



Remind yourself of when it is right now (e.g. It is 5pm on Sunday. It is the date/month/year).



Remind yourself how where you are right now is different to the past. Be specific.



If you are not currently in a safe environment, consider reaching out to QPASTT or another trusted service for help and support. You can also try the Dual Awareness exercise in Factsheet 7: Understanding and coping with frightening memories (flashbacks)

EXERCISE: Relaxed Breathing Method

Often when people are frightened or upset, they start to breathe faster. This is a natural survival response to prepare the body to fight or run away.

Sometimes our body can remain stuck on high alert and fast breathing can continue over a long period of time causing unpleasant physical sensations. Relaxed breathing is a simple technique that helps you slow down the body's survival response and is helpful in reducing our feelings of fear and panic.



Practice the exercise below for at least 5-10 minutes each day.

It may be difficult at first, but the more you practice the easier it will become. Practicing during times of ease will help your body more easily remember a sense of safety. This can help to reduce feelings of fear when they happen and can help you recover from an experience of panic more quickly.

Step 1



Lie on your back or sit comfortably upright with both feet on the floor.

Step 2



Place one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest.

Step 3



- Breathe in for 4 seconds
- Hold for 4 seconds

Step 4



Say the word 'relax' (or another calming word) every time you breath out for 6 seconds.

Step 5



Continue breathing like this until all signs of fear, tension and panic have gone.



Sometimes the symptoms will return after a short while – that's normal. Just continue the Relaxed Breathing Method again for as long as is needed.



You can also try the Progressive Muscle Relaxation in *Factsheet 8: Understanding and coping with fear, tension, panic and hypervigilance*.



EXERCISE: Resetting after a nightmare

This exercise allows you to acknowledge the fear you have experienced during a nightmare or dream and affirm that the past event is not happening now.

Write or say this exercise aloud before you go to sleep and at the time of waking up from a distressing dream:

TODAY (OR IN THE PAST) I HAVE BEEN REALLY SCARED OF:

SO, I MIGHT HAVE A NIGHTMARE AND WAKE UP FEELING:

MY HEART MIGHT BEAT FAST, AND I MIGHT BE SHAKING OR CRYING. IF THAT HAPPENS, I WILL TELL MYSELF IT IS BECAUSE I AM REMEMBERING: (KEEP BRIEF)

THEN I WILL TURN ON THE LIGHT AND LOOK AROUND MY ROOM AND NAME THE THINGS IN THE ROOM THAT I SEE.

AND I WILL TELL MYSELF THAT I JUST HAD A NIGHTMARE AND THAT

IS NOT HAPPENING NOW.



You may need to repeat this a few times to be able to return to sleep.

Remember:

Improving sleep is a gradual process. Seeking support, especially from a specialist/trauma counsellor, can provide personalised strategies and help you navigate challenges in a safe and supportive way.

To speak with QPASTT or find out more about our services, please call 07 3391 6677 or visit qpastt.org.au.

QPASTT is the Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma. It is a community organisation which provides a variety of flexible and culturally sensitive support services to people who have been tortured or who have suffered refugee-related trauma. QPASTT has offices across Queensland.