

Nightmare Exposure And Rescripting

Nightmares are often very distressing and can affect our mood, well-being, and the quality of our sleep. For some individuals, nightmares come and go, while others have frequent and repetitive nightmares. Sometimes nightmares are related to traumatic experiences we have had, while others don't seem to have a clear origin or cause.

Research indicates that there are effective things that you can do for your nightmares. Exposure to the content of your nightmares can help you to tolerate the negative emotions associated with them. Rescripting the nightmares (changing the content and storyline to something less upsetting) can help you to feel a sense of mastery and greater control.

The *Nightmare Exposure and Rescripting* exercise involves going over your nightmare in detail (exposure) and changing the content of it so that it's less upsetting (rescripting).



How could this tool help me?

You can use the *Nightmare Exposure and Rescripting* exercise to:

- Identify nightmares you want to address.
- Expose yourself to your nightmare so it becomes less distressing.
- Change the 'story' of your nightmare so you feel better about it.



How should I use it?

- **Identify the worst moment of your nightmare.** Start by describing the most distressing part of your nightmare in as much detail as you can. Include details about where you are, what you can see and hear, and what is happening.
- **What emotions are you feeling at that worst moment?** Describe what you are feeling at that worst moment (either within the dream or upon waking). Include details about your emotional reaction (e.g., feeling terrified, trapped, helpless) and physical reaction (e.g., racing heart, shaking, sweating).
- **What would you prefer to feel in that moment?** If you could change or replace how you feel in that worst moment, what would you choose? You could think of this as the 'antidote' to your negative emotion. For instance, if you feel terrified, you might choose to replace this feeling with happiness, calmness, or excitement.
- **How would the story need to change for you to feel that way?** This is your chance to change (rescript) the story of your nightmare. What would need to happen in your dream for you to feel this new emotion? Write down a detailed description and try to make the changes as vivid and creative as possible: the more memorable your new story is, the more it will stand out in your mind.



Helpful tips

- Be creative when you develop your 'new dream'. As it's a dream, you're only limited by your imagination. You can make anything happen!
- It's helpful if you can set aside some time each day to rehearse your new dream.
- Logging how often you experience your nightmare and how distressing it is, before and after using this tool, will show whether it has made a difference.

Nightmare Exposure And Rescripting

Exposure and rescripting are techniques that can help you to regain control over nightmares and bad dreams.

Exposure

We can make situations less fearful by confronting our fears. Imagine your nightmare is a movie script, that it has a beginning, middle, and end. Write down the story of what happens in your nightmare and read it through often. You can write it in words, or draw it out like a comic strip.

Rescripting

We can't change events that have happened in our lives, but we can change the stories we tell about them. Nightmares are just a story about something that has happened, and our minds 'play' that story at night as if it's a video. If we change the story in important and memorable ways we can encourage our minds to play a different video. Follow these instructions for your nightmares. You may need to do it multiple times if there are lots of important moments. Once you have rescripted your nightmare it is important to rehearse the new version so your mind will remember it while asleep.

Identify the worst moment of your nightmare

Where are you? What are you aware of? What is happening?

What emotions are you feeling at that worst moment?

Identify your emotions and what you feel in your body. Either during the nightmare or on waking.

What would you prefer to feel in that moment?

How would the story need to change for you to feel that way?
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Where are you? What are you aware of? What is happening?

I'm running down the path towards my house. It's dark and windy. There are noises behind me but I'm scared to look. The ground is rough and it's wet. I slip and I'm scrambling.

What emotions are you feeling at that worst moment?

Identify your emotions and what you feel in your body. Either during the nightmare or on waking.

Fear, terror - my heart is pounding.

What would you *prefer* to feel in that moment?

I would like to feel excited and happy.

How would the story need to change for you to feel that way?

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I'm running in a big cross-country race. I can hear other runners all around me. I look behind me and lots of people are in fancy dress - a pantomime horse. I slip and stumble but someone dressed as a unicorn helps me up. We turn the corner and there are crowds of people cheering us on to the finish. As I cross the line I'm greeted by my family and given a medal.