Dreams

Where were you, last night, while you were sleeping? “In bed,” you are probably saying to yourself, but it's almost certain that several times during the night, as you slept, your mind was elsewhere. I’m referring to dreams, the story-like sequences of images, sensations, and perceptions that occur primarily during the stage of sleep known as rapid-eye movement, or REM.

Though some people claim to dream little or not at all, research shows that under normal conditions each of us dreams several times a night. However, for reasons that aren’t well understood, we tend not to remember a dream unless we wake up during one, or very soon after one ends.

People have attempted to explain dreaming in various ways. In times past, dreams were thought to be messages from the spiritual world. In modern times, however, competing explanations for why we dream fall into one of two general categories: *wish fulfillment* or *activation-synthesis*.

According to wish fulfillment theory, our dreams are an indirect way for our mind to satisfy urges or to resolve conflicts that would be too threatening for us to acknowledge consciously. Sigmund Freud, the individual most associated with this view, believed that dreams were a “royal road to knowledge of the unconscious,” and attempted to understand their symbolic meaning as a way of accessing a patient’s deep-seated drives and conflicts. Though few modern psychotherapists interpret dreams precisely in the manner of Freud, some do help patients examine their dreams in an attempt to help them better understand their motivations, conflicts, and concerns.

By contrast, activation-synthesis theory sees dreams as inherently meaningless. According to this theory, our cerebral cortex – the wrinkly, outermost layer of the brain responsible for the most complex aspects of our mental life - is activated by the aroused state of our hindbrain during REM sleep. Having been activated, the cortex then tries to synthesize these random messages by drawing on our actual memories or current feelings. In other words, a dream is our brain’s attempt to make sense of neural activity that is no more meaningful than the static you hear on a radio that is not tuned to a station. The cortex’s ability to create something meaningful from this “brain static” is similar to our ability, while awake, to see patterns or objects in a formation of clouds.

Whether or not dreams have inherent meaning, there is evidence that dreaming is something we need to do. When people are prevented from dreaming – by being awakened each time they enter REM sleep – they then have more frequent and longer-lasting periods of REM sleep the following night.

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