Coronavirus and Nightmares: Why Bad Dreams Can Be a Good Thing

Bad dreams are a rehearsal for our brains that allow us to better manage anxiety-inducing situations in our normal lives.

April 22, 2020 By Michael Breus, PhD

Here's something I think we can all agree on: these are abnormal times. So it would make sense that few people are getting what we'd consider "normal" sleep right now.

As the coronavirus pandemic moves into late April, a flood of new research is coming in, looking at the ways in which COVID-19 has impacted our sleep. The verdict, according to one study from the U.K.: We're dividing into two camps, those who have had their sleep completely thrown off, and those who are actually getting *more* sleep.

According to a new survey of a few thousands Brits from King's College London, 62% of people find themselves getting the same amount of, or even more, sleep than usual.

You might've already guessed what's behind the sleep surge: people are spending a lot more time at home. Those hours away from work and school are being replaced by a little more time in bed.

This could turn out to be a nice health boost, too; getting at least 7 hours of sleep each night, research has shown, dramatically improves how our immune systems function.

On the other hand, the same survey found more than 33% of respondents said their sleep has gotten worse in the past few weeks. The reason? They're being kept up late at night, worried about financial problems brought on by the coronavirus. Much of this stems from how our bodies and mind naturally work. We're hardwired to avoid falling asleep when facing danger, and financial hardships certainly fit the mould.

These concerns are obviously understandable — and something millions of people here in the States are dealing with. If you're looking for something to help give you a little nudge before falling asleep, check out my Sleep Doctor PM spray; many use it to fall asleep and if they wake up to go

back to sleep. Also, if you missed it last week, I shared 5 tips on how to get better sleep, even when our schedules have been completely thrown off.

At the same time, a recent CNBC article brought up another issue — that the pandemic could be leading to more vivid dreams and nightmares. As one UCLA clinical psychologist pointed out, this could be due, at least in part, to "dream incorporation."

This is where a stimulus we encounter in our day-to-day lives weaves its way into our dreams. This is a concept scientists have studied for many years when it comes to how dreams and memory are connected. Both very short-term memories (known as day-residue), and slightly longer-term memories (from a period of about a week), often present themselves in dreams.

That can create problems, though, when we're looking for the latest coronavirus update.

Many people simply can't get enough COVID-19 news. TV news programs have seen a ratings bump in the past few weeks, and websites covering the coronavirus are enjoying an increase in traffic. I get it — it's a (hopefully) once in a lifetime event that's affecting the entire world.

But I want to stress the importance of not letting coronavirus news consume your media diet.

Remember, what you watch and what you read can directly affect what you're dreaming about.

If you've found yourself struggling with bad dreams tied to the coronavirus, go back to one of the basics we talk about: limiting time spent on your mobile devices within 90 minutes of going to sleep. I'd also recommend extending this to watching hard news, at least in relation to the pandemic, before bed as well. This will help you relax, ease into sleep, and hopefully avoid some of those coronavirus-induced nightmares.

And all of this brings me to something I've wanted to discuss in the last few months, but just haven't found a way to mention it in the weekly newsletter: bad dreams can often be a good thing. I know, you're probably asking "how does that work?" Nightmares, neuroscientists believe, help us "act out" how we would react in a real-life dangerous situation. In short, bad dreams are a rehearsal for our brains that allow us to better manage anxiety-inducing situations in our normal lives.

One study from late 2019 added to this belief. Researchers from the University of Wisconsin and University of Geneva wanted to find out more about how our brains react to nightmares.

In the first part of the study, the researchers would wake up 18 volunteers, who were wearing headsets to monitor the electrical activity in their brains, during the middle of the night and ask them about their dreams. The researchers would then compare their answers to their brain activity. “Scary” dreams, the study found, activated two parts of the brain: the insula, which helps us evaluate emotional responses, and the cingulate cortex, which helps our body’s prepare and react to danger. This is better known as the “fight or flight” response.

The second part of the study, which had 89 volunteers track their dreams in a diary for a week, only built on these findings. After a week, the researchers measured the volunteers’ brain activity while also showing them “distressing” images. The volunteers who reported having more bad dreams ended up showing less of a response in the amygdala, which is where our response to fear is generated. And on top of that, the volunteers who had more frequent nightmares showed more activity in the medial prefrontal cortex, which is a part of the brain that helps regulate our response to fear and threats.

Of course, I’m not wishing for anyone to deal with nightmares. But I did want to point out this silver lining — that bad dreams aren’t completely bad for us. Just like running at the gym helps us get ready to run a 10K race, nightmares are our emotional training ground and help us prepare to handle real adversity. It might not be pleasant in the moment, but there is at least *some* good that comes of it.

That’s it for this week. Thanks for reading, stay safe, and we’ll circle back again next week.

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