

# Nightmares and Night Terrors: The Horror Movies of the Mind

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It is terribly disconcerting to the parent of a child whom experiences a nightmare. You may try to reassure them, but it is usually the problem that you can't even understand them. Our adult instinct is to rationalise; to assure the child of the difference between the fear they feel and the real world. But how helpful is this? First it is useful to understand the nature of nightmares, how they occur, and what they mean. It is also useful to explore the models we can teach our children in order to best help them with this parasomnia.

As unsettling as it is to see our children struggle with the fears of a nightmare, imagine a more dynamic form. To see your child awaken soon after sleep has set in and physically experience a terrifying aspect of sleep can be far more disturbing. Night Terrors are a dynamic sleep disorder experienced in the early hours of sleep. To understand this disorder we must first look at how it is different from the more common and less explosive nightmare. In the same way that we understand nightmares we must look at night terrors. By understanding the biological reasons and causes of night terrors we can then understand more about them. This information while useful to parents is not always as reassuring as the methods they can use to help their child return to bed and enjoy a restful night sleep.

## Personal Interests:

The specific topic of nightmares and night terrors in the area of parasomnia deemed to be very intriguing. The reason that it was so interesting was because as a child I was ravaged by such occurrences. I would either wake up shaking or screaming with my sheets soaked right through. As I grew older the bad dreams went away and I grew out of them. It wasn't until I took this class that I started to really think about them again. I used to have some terrible dreams after watching Friday the 13th movies. I can remember one vividly where the killer Jason was standing down at the end of my street where I used to live with a big machete in his hand. He would start walking towards my house and I would try to move and hide, but everything was going so slow and he was moving so fast. He would never get me because I would wake up just before anything bad would happen. I had another episode where I was locked in my house and I could see outside the windows. All I could see out the windows was my mother being chased by a great big Sasquatch. She would try to open the doors, but they were locked and I couldn't get them open no matter how hard I tried. She finally got around to the back door of the house and I was trying frantically to open it. Just before I get it open I look up through the window and this Sasquatch grabs my mother, throws her through the air, and then starts howling in through the window. I would wake up practically screaming and my legs would be running like crazy. I wouldn't really have a clue what was going on until my mother calmed me down and she would ask me what happened.

The really important thing is the fact that my mother would let me explain to her what my dream was all about. She wouldn't sit there and tell me that my dreams weren't real because to me they were. How can you possibly explain reality to a child right after he watched a Sasquatch throw his beaten mother

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through the air. I was personally more worried about my mother being all right than anything else. My mother realised how scary and real these dreams were to me and she would help me cope with the realism. She would tell me to picture whatever it was that scared me in my head and then she would tell me to make the scary thing disappear. By doing this my mother gave me a way to fight against all the Jason's and the Sasquatches that troubled me in my dreams. Saying that scary things are not real to children is pointless; they thrive on the boogie man in their closet or the ogre under their bed. By believing with them and showing them how to fight the bad you are helping your child to feel safer and less frightened of going to bed and dreaming.

### What is a Nightmare?

Nightmares have quite an interesting past to them. "Nightmares have fascinated us for centuries. From Antiquity through to the late 18th century, it was commonly thought that the dream anxiety attack was caused by a demon pressing upon the chest of a person during sleep." (Anch et al, 1988, pg. 227) Nightmares were even considered to be signs of black magic, evil affiliation, or even possession. These dreams mainly consisted of, being chased down or hunted, threatened by old witches, vampires and other dark characters, and even variations of everyday waking activities. (Hadfield, 1954) So it seems that nightmares are not just common to our era, but are as old the function of sleeping itself. Maybe the only thing that is changing is the content of what we find scary in our specific time period.

Our sleep cycle occurs in a multi-stage format in which there are five stages altogether. The first four stages of sleep are that of non-rapid eye movement (NREM) while the fifth stage occurs in rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. "They are dream experiences of a frightening nature, occurring usually in the second half of the night, in a REM sleep stage, and ending with our waking up with a start." (Borbely, 1986, pg. 58) Usually when a person awakens from this type of REM nightmare they are oriented and aware of their surroundings. This can be related to the fact that REM sleep is not as deep of a sleep than is NREM sleep, therefore the person is not as drowsy and is more functionally alert.

Now we must ask ourselves what causes nightmares to occur. We mainly relate nightmares to children and them waking up crying in the middle of the night. "Dream anxiety attacks are quite common during childhood, apparently reflecting normal development conflicts and concerns during childhood." (Anch et al, 1988, pg. 227) This relates to children as well as adults. "The general adult themes involve fears, such as being chased or attacked. The person experiencing the nightmare often has physical sensations." (Anch et al, 1988, pg. 227) There is a theme suggested here where what we dream is related to our surrounding environment and what events are occurring in our lives. "In particular, nightmares occur following significant real events in life that are psychologically painful, such as a death in the family or being the victim of an assault. Nightmares are also involved with physical illness, which includes high fever." (Anch et al, 1988, pg. 227) It also suggests that we can sense physically what is happening during this parasomnia sleep.

Why is it that are bodies sense these dream occurrences? "The lesser intensity of the REM anxiety dream may be at least partially explained by the fact that during REM the physiological activation provides a buffer which prevents extreme terror." (Arkin et al, 1978, pg. 533) This physical movement also helps the body awaken to avoid the nightmare altogether and awaken the dreamer. "The nightmare provokes a retaliatory response, both in dream content and in actual physical movement. The resulting body movement is usually sufficient to cause an awakening." (Anch et al, 1988, 227) Therefore it seems that even though our mind is putting us through a nightmare the dreaming is helping us fight against the scary situation by giving us physical movement to wake ourselves up.

### What is a Night Terror?

Night terrors differ from nightmares in many ways. "These two types of anxiety dreams reflect the characteristic differences between an awakening from REM sleep and on awakening from the deep sleep stage of non-REM sleep." (Borbely, 1986, pg. 58) As we already know nightmares take place during the REM while night terrors take place within the deepest level of NREM sleep. "The night terror is usually an event of the early part of the night when most stage 4 is present, while the nightmare can take place in

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any REM period." (Arkin et al, 1978, pg.533) Another area where these two parasomnias differ is that people waking up from a nightmare are fully aware they were dreaming while people from night terrors wake up confused, disoriented, and drowsy. "Here the dreamer wakes up screaming and still frightened; he is covered with perspiration and is breathing rapidly. The individual is usually unaware of what has just occurred." (Borbely, 1986, pg. 58)

Another area in which nightmares and night terrors differ is in the physiological area of entering into the dream. "This finding suggests that in stage 4 night terror the frightening content does not build up gradually as in REM anxiety dream, rather it occurs suddenly, immediately igniting the arousal reaction." (Arkin et al, 1978, pg. 541) This could explain the different bodily reactions that people have depending on what stage of sleep they are in.

"Also, the night terror is physiologically much more intense than the REM nightmare (heart rates have almost tripled for the night terror while in the REM anxiety dream the greatest heart rate acceleration at our laboratory was from 76-92 beats per min)." (Arkin et al, 1978, pg. 533)

To look at another difference between the two parasomnias one must again look at content. Before we looked at the nightmare as a form of running away or being chased while night terrors usually involve some sort of physical entrapment. "Some of the most severe night terrors involved being crushed or struck by some sudden force, things closing in or being entrapped in a small area, being left alone or abandoned, and choking or swallowing something..." (Arkin et al, 1978, pg. 537)

The following is an example of a studied individual being woken up and asked what he was dreaming:

"Somebody said... Somebody... Oh shit... Somebody said something. I didn't even remember what the person said. All of a sudden I felt on all sides of me like, uh, metal, or stone doors. In other words I was someplace. Probably in a basement, and like on every side of me was, except on, which I could sort of see maybe a window, every side was like stone or something, stopped up, almost like when I was in a tomb. And so I started... uh, screaming. I didn't realise that there was still a... an opening of some kind." (Arkin et al, 1978, pg. 537)

## Conclusion:

Now that I have looked at both nightmares and night terrors I have a better understanding of them both in a physical sense as well as an emotional and mental sense. Being plagued with these as a child I never had the chance to fully recognise what they meant or how they effected me individually. I only had my mother to depend on due to my lack of knowledge. I'm just glad that she helped me face them instead of avoiding the problem altogether. The main thing that I learned was that just like life, our dreams incorporate the concept of good and bad. We must deal with these bad problems in a healthy way as to find closure within ourselves. I think that by doing this paper and taking this course I am one step closer to answering the many questions I have about my nightmares and night terrors, and if this takes me closer to finding my true self than I have truly learned something. When taking all these psychology courses in university I found myself wandering to the biological side of the science. I still think I favour the biological entity of it, but one must always look at the cognitive and mental entities as well to have a full understanding of this science, especially with dreaming. I hope one day we will be able to know biologically speaking what it is that makes us dream. In the mean time we can study the cognitive effects of dreaming and having nightmares and night terrors and take them for what they are. True adventures.

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