



Anxiety Dreams: What's It All About?

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Imagine this: You're sitting in class at the beginning of the day, waiting for the teacher to arrive. You look at your phone, checking your emails while you wait. The teacher walks in, and surprise, surprise! She announces that you have an exam today! You didn't study for it - you didn't even know you had an exam today at all. The teacher passes out the exams, and you anxiously flip through the packet, looking for a question that you know the answer to. Unfortunately, you don't see any. After an unidentifiable amount of time, the clock rings, signaling that time is up for the exam. You then wake up in the middle of the night, in your bed, to find that it was all a dream. Sound familiar? What you experienced was an **anxiety dream**. You may not have heard of them, but I bet you've had one before! Anxiety dreams are basically, "any dream that causes stress or distress" (Raypole, 2020, p.1). They tend to cause persistent unease even after you wake up, and you might feel anxious throughout the day.

Recently, I've had the same recurring dream over and over again: I'm either in high school or college, and I'm failing a science class. In some variations of the dream, I haven't completed my science fair project, or I'm about to graduate but I don't know what my class grade is. Many elements of the dream just don't make sense, like the fact that I'm still in high school (I just graduated from college). Or, the fact that I have to do a science fair project - which I haven't done in years!

Other anxiety dreams (and even nightmares) I've had include: being unable to stop or control my car while driving, not completing class quizzes, and being humiliated in a huge college lecture hall.

Common anxiety dreams for people to experience are: "being chased, your teeth falling out, being underwater, people laughing at you, forgetting something important, being late, and driving out of control" (Bennett, 2019, p.1).

But why do we get anxiety dreams?

Basically, it's because we're stressed!

An article writes that, "Some general causes of nightmares and anxiety dreams include: fear or stress, recent life changes, traumatic events, insomnia, and use of substances such as alcohol" (Raypole, 2020, p.1). While you're sleeping, your brain is still actively working to keep your body healthily running. During this time, your brain plays out what happens in your day-to-day life. If you've been stressed about a current job situation, it only makes sense that you would dream about it. An article notes that, "For better or worse, part of this nightly brain activity sometimes involves patching memories and sensations into a semi-narrative. It follows, then, that if you're recent thoughts and feelings cause stress and fear, your dreams will likely follow a similar pattern" (Raypole, 2020, p.1).

Unfortunately, when you wake up from an anxiety dream, you might have trouble going back to sleep. To get some rest, try calming activities, like drinking a warm beverage, breathing exercises, or reading a slow-paced book. And, while looking at your phone or the television might seem tempting, don't do it. These devices actually wake you up more, rather than putting you to sleep.

Fortunately, there are ways to prevent anxiety dreams from happening in the first place. An article notes that a good way to prevent anxiety dreams is to do something pleasant before bedtime. "If the last thing you do before bed is go over your finances or read a distressing email from a loved one, you'll probably keep thinking about these things when trying to get some rest. It's not possible to completely avoid all stressful tasks, of course. But if you know something inspires feelings of stress or anxiety, try to handle it earlier in the day" (Raypole, 2020, p.1). Additionally, activities like reading, listening to music, and journaling can help you relax before bedtime. Getting exercise during the day, such as walking, swimming, or cycling can also help you sleep better.

All of this leads to the question: do anxiety dreams mean anything?

There are many theories as to what different anxiety dreams might mean. For example, it's thought that being chased in a dream means that you feel unsafe, or that being unable to control a moving car in a dream means that you don't feel in control of your own life. As mentioned above, dreams tend to reflect what we're feeling in our day-to-day life. An anxiety dream is your brain trying to tell you that you're feeling stressed or anxious about something.

While anxiety dreams can be stressful (or scary), they aren't inherently a bad thing. In fact, they can actually alert you to the stress that you feel, prompting you to do something about it. It's important to seek professional help if your anxiety dreams are particularly worrying - this could be a symptom of an underlying medical condition.

References

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