



COPING AFTER NIGHTMARES

A Resource Guide

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UNDERSTANDING SLEEP STAGES

STAGE 1 (N1):

- lightest stage of sleep
- occurs when first falling asleep

STAGE 2 (N2):

- body starts to relax more deeply
- body temperature drops, muscles, relax, and heart rate and breathing slow

STAGE 3 (N3/DEEP SLEEP):

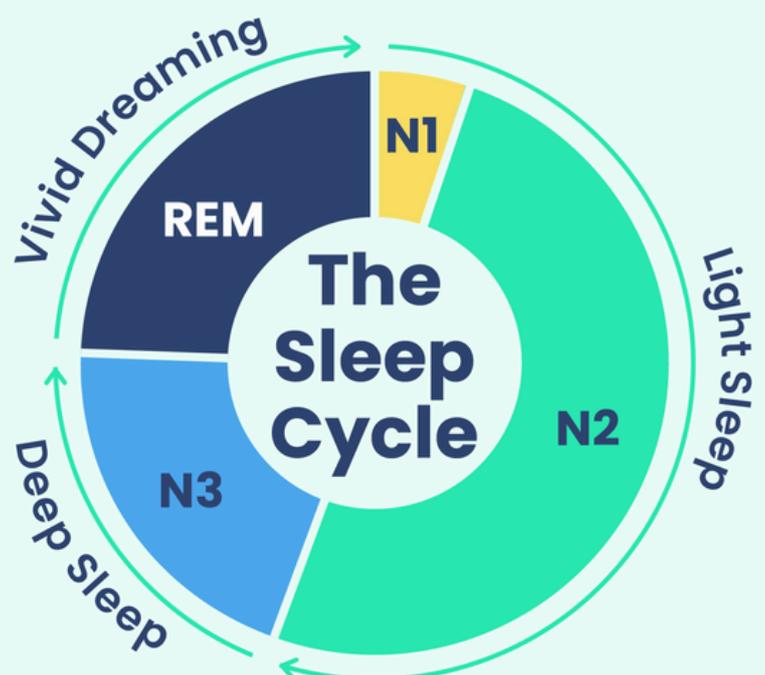
- deepest and most restorative
- allows for body to recover

STAGE 4 (REM SLEEP):

- brain activity increases
- dreaming occurs
- body becomes temporarily paralyzed

WHAT ARE NIGHTMARES?

- Nightmares are dreams that bring out strong feelings of fear, terror, distress, and anxiety.
- Nightmares can be caused by a number of things, including increased stressors, medication, substance use, or eating before bed.
- Repeated nightmares can be due to sleep apnea or other sleep disorders, and/or PTSD and other mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety.



Graph from
sleepfoundation.org

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS AFTER A NIGHTMARE



Ground Yourself

- Sit up and place your feet on the floor
- Use 5-4-3-2-1 method: name 5 things you see, 4 you hear, 3 you can touch, 2 you smell, and 1 you taste (or take a deep breath)
- Remind yourself you are awake and safe in your room

Deep Breathing

- Take slow, deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth
- Use different deep breathing techniques, such as 4-7-8 (inhale 4, hold 7, exhale 8)

Soothe Senses

- Drink (or hold) a cold glass of water
- Splash cold water on your face
- Place a cool, wet washcloth or towel on your forehead or back of your neck

Gentle Distraction

- Soothing visualization, such as picturing a calm, safe place.
- Engage in a quiet activity such as reading a book or listening to music (avoid screens!)
- Listen to a follow along a guided meditation

Avoid Triggers

- Avoid eating just before going to bed
- Limit screen-time before bedtime
- Limit caffeine and alcohol intake
- Try not to go to bed stressed - engage in self-care before bed to calm the body and mind

HOW TO PRACTICE GOOD SLEEP HYGIENE TO PREVENT NIGHTMARES

● Create a Sleep Sanctuary

- Minimize light - use light-blocking curtains or shades if outside lights shine into your bedroom.
- Replace worn or uncomfortable mattresses and pillows.
- Keep the room slightly cool (around 65F to 68F).
- Reduce or mask noise with a noise machine.
- Only use the bedroom for sleep and intimacy.
- Keep electronics and anything work-related in another room.

● Avoid Foods/Substances

- Eat evening meals at least three hours before bedtime.
- Avoid alcohol in the evenings.
- Avoid caffeine after lunch.
- Avoid smoking - nicotine is a stimulant and can interfere with sleep.

● Create a Relaxing Routine an hour before bed..

- Put away electronic devices (except if being used for music or guided relaxation).
- Take a warm bath or shower.
- Do some easy stretches, progressive muscle relaxation, or deep breathing.

● Exercise/Naps

- Exercise two hours before bed can either keep you awake or help you relax. Experiment what works best for you!
- Keep naps to 30 minutes or less and earlier in the day if they are needed.

● Keep a Sleep Diary

- Keep track of times, medications, caffeine consumption, dinner time, and more to track what sleep habits may be impacting you.
- Keep track of dreams and nightmares and compare to your sleep hygiene.

LONG-TERM INTERVENTIONS AND STRATEGIES

Sometimes, nightmares are the result of a sleep disorder, a mental health disorder, or other reasons that are not easily remedied by improving your sleep hygiene. If nightmares occur frequently and are debilitating, seeking out help for long-term interventions and treatments may be necessary. These treatments may include...

Therapy

- Certain therapies may help reduce nightmares and help you cope with them.
- Image Rehearsal Therapy (IRT), Relaxation and Rescripting Therapy (ERRT), and Eye-Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) may be helpful.
- As always, consult with your therapist to find out which therapy is right for you!

A Sleep Study

- Nightmares can be caused by different sleep disorders, such as sleep apnea.
- If a sleep study shows you have a sleep disorder, medications may help improve sleep and reduce nightmares.
- Sleep studies may take place at home, or in a specialized lab for sleep.

Medications

- Certain medications can reduce nightmares and limit the ability to remember them. These include Prazosin and Clonidine.
- Medications to improve sleep quality/treat insomnia may also prevent nightmares. These include melatonin and trazodone.
- Always consult with your doctor as side effects with medications can occur.

REFERENCES

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