

Working *(and playing)* with Dreams

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Every dream has many layers of meaning. Every object, person, and situation in a dream may have many meanings. So take your time in trying to understand it. Think of your dream as something to EXPLORE. You have to look at it from different angles, walk around in it for awhile, work with it - and then its many meanings will begin to reveal themselves.

Try not to give into the “**pressure to interpret**” a dream. If you put yourself or others on the spot to “tell me what it means” then you are taking the wrong attitude toward working with the dream. It’s not a game of Jeopardy or a multiple choice test where there’s a right or wrong answer. Working with a dream is more like **playing** with it - the kind of play that involves creativity, imagination, and a willingness to experiment. It also requires patience!

Here are some ways to work with a dream:

b Free Association: to unpack the various meanings of a dream, take each object, person, situation, etc. and free associate to them, one at a time. What does it remind you of? What comes to mind when you think of that element of the dream? Let your imagination go. Let your attention wander. Come up with as many associations as possible. Do this in your head, or talk out loud. If you let yourself go with this, something will come up - a memory, an idea, a feeling. It may not tell you “The Meaning” to the dream, but it will give you pieces to the puzzle.

You know you are onto something when you have that AHA! lightbulb-popping experience.

b Free Writing: Write down on paper a stream of consciousness reaction to your dream. Start anywhere and just keep writing whatever comes to mind. Don’t censor or edit anything out. It’s like free associating onto a piece of paper. Record everything you are thinking and feeling. If you get stuck, simply write “I’m stuck, I’m stuck...” over and over again until a new association comes up. Then keep writing.

Or write down on a piece of paper each element of the dream, and then write a stream of consciousness for each one. Compare what you wrote for each element of the dream. Look for similarities and patterns. Hold onto these writings - and go back to them later on. Days or weeks later you may see something that you missed the first time around.

b Mental Images: Images are pictures or sensations in your imagination, in your “mind’s eye” - similar to dreams. Use them to explore a dream. For example, close your eyes and free associate to the various elements of your dream by letting PICTURES or SENSATIONS flow through your imagination. Let your imagination go. Don’t try to control what you see or experience. Let it move on its own. Stay with this and something important will come up.

Another technique is to RELIVE the dream in your imagination. Close your eyes, start at the beginning of the dream, and relive it as vividly as you can. Then replay the dream again, only this time let your imagination go. Let your imagination add to and change the dream in any way it wants. It will lead you to important insights.

Any sensations you experience in your body during a dream, or while working with it, may reveal something about its meaning.

b Dialogues: Create a conversation between you and the dream, or between two elements of the dream. If you dreamed about driving a car through a forest, write down on a piece of paper a conversation between you and the car (or the forest). What would you say to the car? What would the car say back to you? Don't try to over-control the conversation. Let it be as spontaneous as possible. Stay with the dialogue and let it progress. Or create a conversation between the car and the forest. What would they say to each other?

Another possibility is to carry out this conversation LIVE. Set up two chairs. Sit in one chair and put the car into the other. Talk to the car. Then switch chairs and talk back to yourself. Keep switching back and forth. Let the conversation progress. Be spontaneous and honest! Sounds crazy, but THIS WORKS!

b Dream Enactment: If you are in an adventurous move, get together some friends and reenact the dream as if it is a play. Assign roles to people. People can also be objects in the dream. First replay the dream as it actually occurred. Then do it again and let people improvise in their roles. Experiment with the play, with you as the "director." This is a powerful technique.

All of these techniques work best if you are SPONTANEOUS and FREE-WHEELING. Let your imagination go. Don't try to force or over-control the process. Be honest. Don't censor ideas.

b Day Residue: People, things, or events from the previous day that get incorporated into a dream were put there for a reason. They touched off ideas, feelings, and memories in the unconscious. Examining your thoughts and feelings about these events from the day will help you understand the dream and why it is "commenting" on these events. What do these day residue events remind you of? Have these sorts of things happened before?

b Dream "Intangibles": There is a tendency to focus just on objects, events, and people in a dream. But there is more to the dream than that. Consider also:

Õ *feeling tone* : what is the primary feeling in the dream. What does it remind you of in your life? Does the feeling tone change at different points in the dream? Why?

Õ *colors* : how are colors used in the dream? What feelings and meanings might be associated with them? What do the colors remind you of?

Õ *time and space* : how are time and space used in the dream? What feelings do these create? Is the dream communicating an idea by how it uses time and space?

Õ *missing and vague parts* : what parts of the dream are vague or unclear? Is something missing that should be there? These might be the points where dream censorship by the ego is at its strongest. Focus on these parts. There's something important going on there. Use free association and the other techniques described above to fill in the gaps. If there is a vague part to the dream, try to catch whatever details you can. For example, if you can't remember a person in the dream, can you remember what they were wearing, the color of their eyes, the color of their hair? Who does this remind you of?

b Connections Among Dreams:

Dreams often are connected to each other in their meanings. Look for similar patterns or themes across your dreams. Are your dreams progressing or changing somehow over time? This might indicate something about YOU that is changing over time. Pay particular attention to **recurring dreams** since these are important! They point to a persistent theme or issue in your life. They may indicate some "unfinished business" in your life. How are the recurring dreams similar to each other? Different? Are they changing over time? What might this say about how you are changing?

b Think “Unusual”: Remember that the unconscious thinking that affects a dream is unusual and illogical by conscious standards. Things can mean exactly the opposite of what they seem. Something you FEAR in the dream may be something you unconsciously wish for. Things may contradict each other, which suggests a conflict in which you have contradictory feelings about something.

Try EXAGGERATING some important aspect of the dream. In your mind, in writing, or in a dream enactment, amplify the feeling, action, or situation in the dream. Take it to the limit. Make it as intense as it could be. Where does this take you?

Try REVERSING the important elements in the dream. Turn them into the opposite feelings, behaviors, or characteristics. Does this ring any bells? Does it change the meaning of the dream?

b The Problem and its Solution: A dream may be showing you a problem or issue that needs to be resolved. It may be showing you how you are reacting to the problem. It may even be suggesting a solution. For each dream, ask yourself, “What is the problem? How am I reacting to it? Is the dream suggesting a solution?”

b Anxiety and Fear: Anxiety in a dream usually indicates a point where important, perhaps threatening, ideas are surfacing from the unconscious. The anxiety is a signal. Pay close attention to these anxiety dreams. Nightmares that wake you up indicate the surfacing of particularly powerful material. In these cases, the mind can only think of one way to deal with the situation - ESCAPE it.

When using any of these techniques, if something is making you too uncomfortable, then stop.

b Where are You?: You may be able to find yourself in various places in the dream. The most obvious place is the “dream-ego,” as Jung called it. This dream-ego is the person who is having the experiences that make up the dream. Usually the dream-ego does not know he/she is dreaming, unless it is a lucid dream.

Examine this dream-ego carefully. Even though you may experience this ego as yourself, the person in the dream may be behaving and feeling in very different ways than you normally would. Compare yourself to this person in the dream. How are you the same? Different? Is this person in the dream some hidden part of you - some part you wish for, need, or fear?

Other people in the dream may represent important people in your life - how they actually are, how you wish them to be, how you fear they might be.

Or, other figures in the dream may represent hidden parts of yourself - the way you wish you could be, the way you used to be, parts you try to deny, your hidden potentials, something that is missing in your personality etc. Some dream researchers even believe that everything in the dream - every person, object, and event - represents a hidden part of you.

Jung would say that you should always look for what the dream is trying to teach you about your SPIRITUAL self.

b Myth: Jung would say that every dream has its roots in mythology. Your dream - and the situations in your life that it depicts - are a reliving of issues that are universal to all humans. So find a good book on mythology. Locate a story that contains people or events similar to those in your dream. The mythical story will give you insights into your dream and how it relates to universal human struggles and triumphs.

b Impasse: At some point in working on a dream you will get stuck. This is an impasse, a barrier. It means you have to take a different perspective on the dream. You have to reorganize your thinking. Immerse yourself into that stuckness. Stick with it and eventually you will be able to break through to a new level of understanding.

If you're REALLY stuck and frustrated, you may have to set the dream aside and come back to it later. Let it "percolate" in the back of your mind. Look at other dreams. They may help you make that breakthrough.

Don't underestimate how "deep" a dream may be, even if it seems silly or simple. When you think that you are all finished working with a dream, think again. There is probably more there!

b A Little Help from Your Friends: It often helps quite a bit to get someone else's perspective on your dream. Tell your dream to a friend or family member, someone who knows you pretty well. Try using some of these dream techniques with them. Listen to their feedback, take what makes sense, and leave the rest.

Remember that the dream was created by your mind. Other people can help you explore it, but that's all. Ultimately, YOU are the expert on what your dream means.

