

Transcript Talking Therapies Episode 32:

How do dreams contribute to wellbeing?

Suzy:

Hello and welcome to talking therapies the podcast made together with psychologies magazine and the UK Council for psychotherapy, or UKCP for short. I'm Suzie Walker, and I'm the Editor-in-chief at Psychologies. Each month on Talking Therapies, we will be talking to a UKCP therapist about a range of topics. We all dream but don't often take the time to reflect on their meaning. What can we gain by delving deeper into dreams?

Melinda:

Perhaps you or people listening have had a dream of being chased by a stranger? That's a commonly reported nightmare scenario. And normally, we feel powerless in such situations. But if we can learn to become lucid in a dream, we can face that fear and realise we have more power than we know.

Suzy:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Melinda Powell, co-founder of the Dream Research Institute. Melinda works to promote research into dreams and their relationship to wellbeing. Melinda continues to practice as a psychotherapist as well as a lucid dream instructor, and recently published her new book *The Hidden Lives of Dreams: What They Can Tell Us and How They Can Change Our World*. In this episode, UKCP CEO Sarah Niblock will be sitting down with a UKCP psychotherapist Melinda Powell to better understand how we can work with dreams therapeutically, to gain a better understanding of ourselves.

Sarah:

Melinda, I'm really interested to ask you, why do we dream?

Melinda:

Thanks Sarah, and given that we spend about six years of our lifetime dreaming it's really worth asking why. In recent years evolving technologies, like Magnetic Resonance Imagery have enabled researchers to see into brain processes in real time while people are actually dreaming. And it's becoming increasingly clear that far from being merely random neural firings, as some have thought, dreaming has many purposes and these may differ across the lifespan. And I think one day it will be commonly recognised that dreaming has a vital role to play in the development of our consciousness. Thinking about it now, Sarah, it's interesting because in comparison with dreams we don't normally ask, for example, why do we breathe, and we all know we need to breathe for our survival, respiration is part of our evolutionary adaptation to the Earth's atmosphere. And we know that breathing plays a role in our emotional response to situations and we accept that. Through practices like mindfulness, or yoga, we can use our breath to help focus our minds, calm our anxieties, and improve our performance. Yet, most of the time, we take our breathing for granted. And the same with our dreams, I'd say. We may take our dreams for granted, but it appears that dreaming is actually fundamental to our neuro-psychological development and maintenance. So more recently, scientists hypothesising that dreaming may help to lay down the foundations of consciousness, because dreams seem to integrate our experience of the physical world, our perceptions, sensations, and embodied emotional responses -

with our subjective awareness - which ultimately gives us the capacity for self-reflection. So, this may be one reason for example, that infants spend about 50% of their sleep time in rapid-eye-movement dreaming, as they rapidly adapt to being on Earth, compared to 20% in adults. So, over time dreaming appears to help consolidate the memories we need to develop an autobiographical sense of self. And by that, I mean a sense of who we are in space and time. Although people may think dreams are bizarre and nonsensical, a growing body of research now supports the idea that dreaming develops cognitive skills like decision making and problem solving. So there's a growing consensus in the scientific community, that therapists have long argued, dreams help to process emotions and develop our emotional intelligence. I think that's something we'll be talking about more as we go on. But I did want to say that over the past ten years, more researchers have begun to look more closely at lucid dreams and your audience may be familiar with those dreams in which we become aware that we are dreaming while in a dream. This is a topic we can also come back to later, but for now, I'd like to make a few brief comments about lucid dreaming, if that's fine, Sarah?

Sarah:
Please do.

Melinda:
When lucid, we can use the dream state with conscious intent. So for instance, we can consciously practice skills. Athletes and musicians who rehearse in lucidity, in their lucid dreams, have been shown to improve their performance. Interestingly, we can interpret the dream while we're in it. By that, I mean, for example, I recall one lucid dream where I realised that for me, a fish was a symbol of the spirit. So we can also meditate, pray and practice breath awareness lucidity, which is part of my own practice. So indeed, in some cases, this is interesting to note, that the lucid brain state has been shown to have a brainwave frequency similar to those found in experienced meditators when they're meditating in the waking state. So as a psychotherapist and lucid dreamer, I believe we can work with our dreams, in both the waking state, and importantly, within dreams to enhance our self-understanding, and overall wellbeing, as much we can learn to work with the breath, to improve our wellbeing and emotional resilience. So as I see it, those six years we spent dreaming are certainly time well spent.

Sarah:
The process of dreaming itself, you've laid out so well how important it is to us and so pivotal to our healthy functioning in the same way, as you say, is breathing. But in terms of the actual content, the images and messages of our dreams, is there meaning behind what we dream?

Melinda:
Yes, spiritual traditions since ancient times, have believed that dreams are intrinsically meaningful in providing us with guidance. And therapists have long viewed dreams as potentially holding meaning because they tell us about an individual's subjective experience and providing psychological and spiritual insights about our inner most selves. Now what that meaning might be may differ according to the psychological approach a person takes, but I'd say ultimately, what matters most is what the dream means to each of us personally. So the neuroscientist Matthew Walker has recently called dreams 'overnight therapy', which I quite like, and also 'biological theatre'. But decades ago, Carl Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, he described the dreamer as taking part in our own personal drama. And when we realise this, dreams become more meaningful to us, they have more relevance to our lives. In that sense, when we bring our attentiveness to our dreams, then we recognise the meanings that they hold for us.

Sarah:

I must ask you Melinda, sometimes you wake up after a night's sleep and not remember what you've dreamed about and almost have the impression that you haven't dreamt. If you can't remember, do you dreams still have benefits to you?

Melinda:

Yes, I'd say we don't remember every breath we've taken and yet our breathing is supporting us in very fundamental ways. So yes, dreaming activity is happening. And we're benefiting from it in the ways that I've described previously. But when we bring our capacity for conscious reflection to the dream, then we can get even more out of it. We can mine the dream, so to speak, and I think that's something that we'll be talking about as well.

Sarah:

What's the connection between sleep and dreams?

Melinda:

As Freud noted, dreams are simply a different way of thinking in sleep. Many people may think of sleeping as 'a waste of time', actually sleep science has shown us that important physiological processes happen in sleep, and our dreams, and that we have 24-hour mind that works in different ways at night. So, Sarah, your previous question, whether we're aware of it or not these processes are going on, we know that we dream throughout the sleep cycle, even in so called non-REM sleep, and this is a more recent discovery. It used to be thought dreams only happened in so called REM dreaming. But actually, within the periods between the deep sleep and the REM dreaming stage, and the non-REM sleep, we're also actually dreaming but the dreams that we experience in REM dreaming, and tend to remember and work within therapy, the ones that have the imaginative and narrative content are those that occur during rapid-eye-movement sleep. So, REM dreaming comes in increasingly lengthy cycles in the night. So, we can go through waves of these 90-minute sleep cycles. And earlier in the night, the REM cycle is about a few minutes and with each progressive cycle, it extends to up to 20, giving us about two hours of dream time a night. So if we aren't getting enough sleep, we aren't getting our natural, and I would say, you know, the necessary allowance of dream time.

Sarah:

There was this myth, wasn't there, that you could get by on four-six hours of sleep a night, but actually, there are a huge psychological, as well as physical, benefits to getting seven to nine hours. I mean, is there an optimum sleep time that you would advocate for good psychological wellbeing?

Melinda:

I think they recommend seven hours for adults, so that would be important. I think for infants, they'll sleep up to 18 hours in a 24-hour period, with of course waking up in between.

Sarah:

And we're learning so much more, as you said, we're still unravelling sleep. A lot of science is being done, and we're learning a lot more about sleep hygiene and preparing for sleep and so on. And there are many resources out there now, aren't there, to help us to get a deeper and richer sleep.

Melinda:

If I may just say that the Sleep Council has some very good material, so does the NHS website, which was good to see.

Sarah:

And I think this speaks very much to the connection between mind and body that psychotherapists do attend to. Psychotherapists look at the overall health of a client or a service user, don't they, and evaluate whether there are physical aspects that may be impacting on someone's wellbeing and I guess this is one of those areas people can take some steps to resolve.

Melinda:

Yes, the World Health Organisation has chronic sleep deprivation as one of the main causes of poor mental health.

Sarah:

Do the stories or images or feelings that flashed through our minds at night reflect our current emotional state? Do they have a connection with what we may be experiencing that day?

Melinda:

Certainly, therapists have long thought so. And research now suggests that about 30 to 55 per cent of our dreams appear thematically related to the day's emotional content. And it's a smaller proportion, say three to five per cent that will actually have content from the preceding day, in terms of objects or people that we encountered. So primarily, the imagery is related thematically to the emotions that we've experienced the preceding day.

Sarah:

How can that affect us?

Melinda:

I think it's helpful to think of dreams as being like mirrors that can reflect back to us a lot about our personal psychology, the dynamics and conditioning that shape us. And often those emotions have deep connections with past memories that may not have been resolved emotionally. So kind of hits a trigger point in us. And when we make the connection between what's happening now in our lives, and in our dreams, and what's happened in the past, we can understand our reactions better, and so choose more consciously how we want to be in the world, in our lives.

Sarah:

So how can psychotherapy help someone to develop a deeper understanding of their dream state?

Melinda:

I'll say that in therapy we can talk about a dream and make associations with it. But we can also re-enter a dream in the waking state with an experienced dream guide to explore the dream in a safe environment more fully. And it's important that we feel safe so we can feel held and we can trust the experience as it unfolds. So, for example, we can do this through Carl Jung's practice of what he called 'active imagination', for instance, in the waking stage in therapy, work on a dialogue in the dream and continue it and imagine how it might proceed or end. We can also undertake a dream re-entry technique, like the waking dream process developed by Nigel Hamilton. In my book, *The Hidden Lives of Dreams*, I give many examples of this more immersive dream therapy. In terms of, say, mastering our fears or facing our fears, people who suffer from chronic nightmares have been shown to benefit from what's called imagery rehearsal therapy, and in that the dreamer change it in any way they choose, and they mentally rehearse this during the day before falling asleep.

They may talk that revision over with a therapist, they may act it out, write it down, but the important thing is to rehearse it, and to go to bed with it. That intension, having that dream different experience, should come up again, because chronic nightmares tend to repeat over consecutive nights. So, one study on this type of therapy looked at the nightmares of women who had suffered post-traumatic stress syndrome caused by sexual abuse. And not only did their nightmares severity and frequency lessen, so did their other PTSD symptoms. And what I found particularly of interest out of that study is that even after it was over, half of the women also reported using imagery for dealing with their problems in waking life. So, in not just for dealing with a nightmarish dream, but for say, nightmarish situations that we might encounter in our day-to-day life. Thinking of that with the pandemic dreams that people have shared, allows us to, again experience the emotions that need to be acknowledged. So, the sense of mastery over their nightmares was at the heart of the therapy success really. Perhaps you or people listening have had a dream of being chased by a stranger? That's a commonly reported nightmare scenario. And normally, we feel powerless in such situations. But if we can learn to become lucid in a dream, we can face that fear and realise we have more power than we know. So for example, I know of many accounts in which a dreamer chased by a threatening person or even creature realises that they are dreaming, becomes lucid, and then are able to stop and ask the pursuer why they are chasing them. We don't have to become lucid to have this experience, I think that's important to make clear because we can do similar work with a therapist effectively. We are bringing a more conscious awareness to the dream when we work with it therapeutically. One doesn't have to become lucid to have that kind of experience. In fact, there have been studies that show that most people think they can't do anything to change their nightmares, a very high percentage and even just knowing that they can seems to reduce their number of nightmares,

Sarah:

And just through this podcast helping people to understand the process and demystify it. Psychotherapy can help people perhaps interpret to some extent and take away the fear and understand it as part of a psychological cleansing, if you will, that happens to us overnight. That it's normal and natural and not necessarily indicative of something that's wrong, or ill. Do people worry sometimes that if they're having particular dreams, maybe they're frightening or recurring, that they're not well?

Melinda:

Yes, I mean, I've heard people talk about wanting to get rid of 'bad dreams'. But as you're pointing out, not all bad dreams should be regarded as pathological. There's a recent study that supports this idea and researchers, having identified the neural correlates of fear in both REM dreaming and in the wake state, using MRI scans, found that people who had experienced more fear in their dreams during the previous week reacted less fearfully when shown distressing pictures in waking life. So it led researchers to conclude that dreams can have a role in moderating our fears. So, as you say, Sarah, that expression of the fear in the dream, it can serve as a release and so that's something we could all benefit from, particularly during the pandemic. I mean, if I could just add here to that, importantly, we put a lot of energy into those negative thoughts and once we face them, that energy is freed up to be used more positively in our lives. So we transform that energy, and use it for thinking about how we want to live our lives and move on. Again, it's helpful to think that dreams mirror our inner state, and they also show us what we need in order to move towards a dynamic balance in our lives, especially when we reflect on a dream later in therapy. So the more that we wake up to our dreams, the more we also wake up to life. They're reciprocal processes.

Sarah:

I think it also presents psychotherapy in a very positive, productive way. We have these myths from perhaps

through media representations or because we haven't really explained psychotherapy too well previously, that it's something you do when you're in an acute state of distress, or when you're not feeling well. But I think that what you've expressed here is how psychotherapy is actually a tool in productive self-knowing and productive self-development, which I think is very, very exciting. I get the sense that people are much more interested in understanding dream states than they were before. It's not something that whoo or a bit out there. Is that your impression?

Melinda:

Yes, absolutely. I think especially with more and more people undertaking psychotherapy, as you were saying before, it's more normal to do that now, and more understood and accepted. Also alongside the advances in the research that I spoke of earlier. So again, clearly, during the pandemic, there's been a great interest in dreams as people all over the world have shared their dreams online. Something about fear or anger, whether it's in a dream or waking life, it also tells us that there is something wrong and something perhaps is not right or feel right to us. But the challenge is then to move through that fear and determine how we would like to respond to it, let's say in a more reflective, thoughtful, mature way, that doesn't perpetuate unhelpful patterns in our life. So in many ways, rather, I'd say that the pandemic itself and the dreams people have been reporting are a kind of wake up call, as it were, for humanity. Wake up and pay attention to what we're doing to the earth, but also wake up and pay attention to our dreams and to our inner life and what it holds for us and an invitation to become more reflective, as people have reported during the lockdown. Speaking of waking up, I mean, one of the last things I did want to touch on is lucid dreaming, which is emerging as an area of popular interest, especially for how we can access the lucid dream space for personal development. It's a new frontier of consciousness really, and a fascinating tool for consciousness studies. There was research done in the 1970s and 80s in which lucid dreamers successfully used pre-agreed eye movements during REM sleep, so while they were asleep to signal their lucidity to the researchers who were watching them. So they moved that eyes in a certain pattern and the EEG that they were hooked up to measure their brain activity indicated they were in fact in the dreaming state, so it's quite a feat.

Sarah:

It's like a Hollywood movie.

Melinda:

It's almost like being contacted from another world or another dimension. But the world, I would say at large, and the scientific community remains sceptical that lucid dreaming really existed, let's say as an empirical, measurable, quantifiable reality, until as late as 2009 and a researcher named Alan Hopson and another one Bridgette Holsinger around that time, they began to use neural imaging, the MRI scans, to map the brain activity of the lucid state. So they actually could image us and show that it was more of a hybrid, let's say between the waking state and sleeping state. So a very fascinating combination and within that there also appear to be spectrums of awareness or consciousness. So that's a whole field in and of itself. But it's important to say that the development of reflective awareness and dreams has long history in esoteric traditions. I think many of your audience will be familiar with Tibetan Buddhism, which has really refined the practice of what they call dream yoga, developed over centuries, in which practitioners use the dreaming space to essentially meditate. And also, Judaism, Christianity and Islam have explored reflective dreaming, as well. So interestingly, these teachings have become more popularized and more secularised, and I think this is needed, especially to deal with the many global crises

facing humanity. And really only radical changes in our human attitudes and behaviour can give us hope for the future. So radically restructuring human technologies and economies will not happen without the insight and intuition and imagination and empathy and compassion that dream awareness can help us draw on. So it can give us the inspiration we need to, as we were saying before, overcome our fears, overcome our limited worldviews and empower us to enact more positive change.

Sarah:

I am truly inspired by what you've had to say, not only on a personal level, but as you say, on this collective level. Tomorrow morning, if I'm waking up, and I want to work with my dreams, what can I do to set that process in motion?

Melinda:

Well, first, begin to think of yourself as developing a relationship with your dream life. When I say that, I mean a more intimate relationship with your own dreams. So literally, just as just set aside time for a relationship, we need to set aside time for a dream. So a really simple way to do that is to get a notebook and record your dreams when you first wake up. I think a lot of studies on phone technology shows that the first thing we tend to look at is our phone and our emails. And so we lose our memory of the dreams, and gets into a very heady space, full of worries and concerns. So I'd reserve that time. There are a number of books on dreams, some are more theoretical, some are more experiential. And the book I've written is a combination, I'd say of the art and science of dreaming. You can also, of course, as we've discussed, seek out a qualified therapist who works with dreams, such as where I was trained at the Centre for Counselling and Psychotherapy Education (CCPE) in London. If you are having fearful dreams and finding it hard to think about them on your own, it can feel safer to do so with a therapist. And the Dream Research Institute, which I co-founded is based at CCPE and it offers trainings, courses and open events to raise awareness about dreams, that's a resource. And the international level, believe it or not, there's an organisation called the International Association for the Study of Dreams, which brings people together from a wide range of backgrounds, and all of them interested in dreams. So lots of opportunities there for you, Sarah.

Sarah:

I'm just so fascinated by this. When you think how much time we spend in this dormant state and yet, there's so much we don't know about ourselves, there's so much that we're only starting to uncover. I certainly will not be reaching for the coffee or my phone when I wake up in the morning, I'll be reaching for a notebook and make a start. So thank you very much, Melinda. What an interesting conversation.

Melinda:

Fantastic. I hope your listeners are motivated to do the same.

Suzy:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Melinda Powell, speaking to Sarah Niblock, the CEO of the UK Council for psychotherapy. If, after listening to that, you feel you could benefit from some talking time with a psychotherapist then go to the Find a therapist section of the UKCP website and have a look through. The website addresses psychology.org.uk and look for Find a Therapist. We'll also be discussing dreams and they're linked to wellbeing in Psychologies magazine this month, or you can find us online at www.psychologies.co.uk. We'll be doing a podcast each month with some of the UKCP psychotherapists, so remember to like and subscribe to our channel to hear it first. It also helps others to find us too. So join us again next month. Till then, thank you for listening and take good care of yourselves.