

How to Cope with Nightmares

Nightmares can cause problems for both parents and children. Children with anxiety often wake up screaming or running to mom and dad's room after having a nightmare. As a parent, your first instinct is to want to soothe your child, which is perfectly understandable. The way in which you are helping your child cope, however, might not be the best way to help him or her deal with anxiety in the long run.

What do parents *usually* do when their child has a nightmare?

Most parents adopt the following strategy:

- Asking your child to describe the nightmare:

"What were you dreaming about? Tell me what happened in the nightmare..."

- Reassuring your child that everything is okay.

"Don't worry. There are no monsters. I can even look in the closet for you, if you like."

"Nothing bad happened to me or daddy. You see, we are both here and we love you very much."

The problem with this strategy

When you ask your child to describe the nightmare to you in detail, you are actually making the memory more vivid: your child is more likely to remember the nightmare! If your child remembers the nightmare, the odds are good that he or she will have the same one again.

A better way to deal with nightmares

Think about how often you forget your dreams. You might wake up from a dream in the morning, go to the bathroom, maybe brush your teeth and take a shower. While you are doing all this, the memory of the dream just fades away.

A Good Rule of Thumb:

If you direct your attention elsewhere, a dream will fade away

When it comes to your child's nightmares, it is best to distract your child away from the memory of the nightmare, and on to something else. If you do this, soon your child will forget what the nightmare was about!

Coping Strategies

Step 1: Go to your child

It is probably your first instinct to go to your child's room when he or she is upset about a bad dream, which is exactly what you should be doing. You want to make sure that you can be there with your child to model the desired coping method: DISTRACTION.

Step 2: What to say

You need to have lots of different things you can say or do to help your child to cope with nightmares. Some examples are:

- *“Look at your face! It’s all sweaty! Should we go to the bathroom and clean you up?”*
- *“You’re really upset; let’s think about something nicer; how about we plan what we should do tomorrow? What kind of fun things could we do?”*
- *“What should I make you for breakfast tomorrow morning?”*
- *“Are there any new movies you want to go see?”*
- *“What should we do this weekend? What would be a fun activity we could do?”*
- *“Why don’t we try doing some calm breathing or relaxation to get you ready to go back to sleep?”*

Step 3: Dealing with repeated nightmares

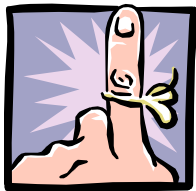
For children who have nightmares very often, or if your teen would like to cope with nightmares on his or her own, it's a good idea to have some strategies that your child can use alone.

- After helping your child distract him or herself from the nightmares a few times, **explain** that when you focus on other things rather than on the dream, the memory of the dream will fade away.
- Provide your child with items near the bed that might be a good distraction. For example, your child could have:
 - A book to look at
 - A photo album
 - A magazine
 - Music to listen to

Strategies for Teens

- Teens should come up with their own “distraction techniques” right from the start. As a parent, you can help by simply explaining why distraction is better than focusing on the nightmare.

- Remind your teen that dreams and nightmares do not tell what will happen in the future. They are just dreams. They do not tell anything important about who you are as a person, or that something bad is actually going to happen to you or your family.

**Remember...**

Talking about a nightmare strengthens the image. This makes the memory more scary, and the dream is more likely to recur the next night. If you remain calm, and encourage your child to think about something more pleasant, you help the memory of the dream to fade away (just like most of our dreams do...)