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[Wellness](#)

Having coronavirus nightmares? Here's what you can do about those bad dreams.

By Galadriel Watson
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Swarms of bees out to get you. Invisible monsters assaulting your family members. Being sent to a one-person colony on Mars. Having to home school every student in your child's class. Is it just your imagination, or are your dreams getting more bizarre, vivid, frequent and perhaps horrifying since the start of the pandemic?

The other night, I dreamed I did a flyby of several famous monuments — before the plane nose-dived hopelessly to the ground. It was a rude way to wake up and put a gloomy spin on my day. Lately, my daughter also often rises perturbed by her dreams (for example, facing down a bull attack, a shooting and an explosion — all in one night). According to accounts on social media and in the media, this is a widespread phenomenon.

I asked three experts what is happening. Has covid-19 truly altered our dreams? Why? And what can we do about it?

Covid is stirring the pot

“There's an uptick in dream life right now, which happens a little bit after any crisis,” says Deirdre Barrett, a dream researcher and assistant professor of psychology at Harvard University. She is collecting pandemic-related dreams — including the examples at the beginning of this article — and has studied the dreams of survivors of Sept. 11, 2001, and British prisoners of World War II. A crisis like this “stirs up our dreams,” whether this means you experience more vivid dreams, more emotional dreams or more bizarre dreams.

After having heard many informal reports of dream life being affected by the pandemic, Barrett — author of “[The Committee of Sleep](#)” — decided to more formally capture what's going on. To do so, she created an [online survey](#) where people can record dreams they feel are about the pandemic, with about 7,000 dreams submitted so far by about 2,800 respondents.

Although formal analysis will come later, Barrett already has a sense of the trends. “There are these anxiety dreams about ‘I'm getting it,’ ” she says. These may not exactly follow reality, such as having blue stripes on your stomach as a symptom.

“Then there are a lot of metaphoric dreams,” she adds. One major category is bug-attack dreams, in which insects stand in for the virus. There are also lots of invisible monsters, reflecting the fact the virus is invisible, too. People who are lonely may find themselves on Mars or in prison, whereas those who feel too crowded at home may dream the entire neighborhood has moved in.

Barrett is not the only researcher who has noticed something different about dreams during the pandemic. Erin Wamsley, an associate professor of psychology at Furman University and principle investigator of the Furman Sleep Lab, says, “People are definitely saying that they’re having more vivid dreams.”

And it extends beyond the United States. Julie Carrier, a professor of psychology at l’Université de Montréal and scientific director of both the Canadian Sleep and Circadian Network and Sleep on It Canada, has noticed it, too. The topic of dreams, she says, is “the new sexy thing about sleep during the covid crisis.”

Reasons for better recall

The fact that people are reporting more dreams, however, does not mean they are *dreaming* more because of the pandemic. They may simply be *remembering* more because of the pandemic.

“There is no known brain correlate of dreaming,” Wamsley says. Because dreams can happen in any stage of sleep, “the only measure that we have of whether someone is dreaming or not, how intense their dream is, what they’re dreaming about, is their verbal report of what they remember.”

If people are remembering more dreams, the key could be in their sleeping habits. “Their schedule has changed,” Wamsley says, “so that they’re sleeping in late in the morning, but also that they’re waking up during the night more.”

Consider sleeping longer. Wamsley explains that as night progresses toward day, your brain’s cerebral cortex ramps up activity, making the dreams more vivid and boosting recall. You also spend increasing time in rapid-eye-movement (REM) sleep; when you wake from this stage, you are more likely to remember a dream.

Barrett also says your last quarter of sleep provides about half of your dreaming time — “and the most vivid dreams.” And because you may not be rushing headfirst into a busy routine like you used to, you may have a greater chance of mentally hanging onto those dreams.

Now consider the interrupted sleep, which could be a result of increased anxiety. “The memory for dreams is fleeting,” Wamsley says. “The more times you wake up, the more times you have a chance to capture that dream in memory. Whereas if you don’t wake up, the memory just fades.”

But whether you are dreaming more or simply have better recall of your dreams does not really matter if the dreams are bothering you. Here are a few steps to avoid bad dreams or to shake off the haunted feeling they leave you with and get on with the rest of your day.

Deeper sleep will help

The first step is to try to improve the quality of your sleep. Although your old sleep schedule may have gone out the window, you should try to make your new schedule regular so “your brain and biological clock can really predict when it’s time to be awake and when it’s time to be asleep,” Carrier says.

Also watch alcohol use, which can knock you out faster but harm your night’s rest. If you are going to drink, Carrier recommends a happy hour glass of wine rather than a nightcap before bed. Other [Sleep on It Canada](#) tips include staying away from electronic devices in the bedroom, exposing yourself to daylight and avoiding stimulants such as coffee, especially later in the day.

“Getting lots of exercise, but not real close to bedtime, is good for sleep,” Barrett adds. In the evening, concentrate on relaxing your muscles and easing your breath. “Basically, many of the things that help you be less anxious by day,” such as meditation or deep breathing or massage, will help you sleep better if you do them toward bedtime, she says.

And do not forget the kids. You can help children sleep better by doing things like creating a cozy nest for them and establishing a relaxing bedtime routine.

Improve the dream

If you are still assaulted by an unpleasant dream, Barrett suggests that upon awakening you redirect your attention to “something good that you know you’re going to be able to do that day, that you can look forward to.”

Wamsley and Carrier both suggest rewriting the dream. “Try to change or finish the dream in a positive way,” says Carrier. In your mind or by drawing on paper (a good technique to use with children), take the dream and solve the problem, defeat the monster or overcome the anxiety. “Rehearsing the nightmare while awake could cause a more positive outcome the next time that one has the same dream,” Wamsley says.

Learn about yourself

You could also consider your dreams as windows into your unconscious. “What we dream of are bits and pieces of recent experiences connected to other related experiences and remote memories,” says Wamsley. While the exact function of dreams is unknown, she says, her lab’s top hypothesis is that they help strengthen and stabilize memories.

Often, that jumble of experiences is more negative than positive, says Carrier, and “that’s probably even more true during the covid-19 crisis. If you have stress or anxiety, even if you’re not really conscious about it, it may very well go into your dreams. If you are making bad dreams that you don’t like, it’s saying something about the state of mind that you have during the day.”

Barrett encourages people to be open to the possibility that their bad dreams are symptomatic of unacknowledged concerns. “Once you consciously understand something,” she says, “the emotion usually lets up.”

Write your own script

Rather than dealing with the aftermath of bad dreams, you could try ordering up some better ones. As you are falling asleep, “come up with something you’re really excited about in a positive way,” Barrett says. “Tell yourself, ‘I want to dream about this tonight.’ ” In a study she conducted with 76 college students, half were able to influence their dreams using this method.

Although other researchers have not since replicated this study, I decided to try its technique. While falling asleep one night, I thought about a particularly romantic scene from a Netflix show. I noted my dreams each time I woke to go to the bathroom or kick a cat out of my bedroom. They seemed normal until my last round of sleep. Suddenly, I was the leading lady, adored by the leading man. It was a much better start to my day than plummeting in an airplane.

Galadriel Watson is a freelance writer, comics artist and author of many books for kids, including “[Running Wild](#)” and “[Extreme Abilities](#).”