Piloting Your Dreams: The Answer to Your Childhood Fantasies?

The elusive “dream world” is a place of wonder, where the alternate reality one may want to exist can really take life; however, few individuals can manipulate their dreams and really let their imaginations roam.

Lucid dreaming, the phenomenon of controlling the plot of one’s dreams, is extremely hard to experience by chance, but it actually does not require a great deal of mental energy. My first experience with lucid dreaming came suddenly and unexpectedly, when I was in ninth grade. I had read articles previously about how to remember one’s dream, which I had always found fascinating. I read online that if I could somehow tell that I was in a dream, I would be able to recall the dream. Based on this idea and the movie Inception, I got to work.

\*Disclaimer: Before I explain, from this point on “our world” will be referred to as the physical world while the events that occur in dreams will be called the dream world.

In the movie Inception, the main character spins a top to determine whether he is experiencing events in the dream world or the physical world. However, when I was in a dream I found it difficult to have a top available. To improvise, I developed a different method: I kept a watch with me at all times in the physical world and would look at it every hour. Then, I would focus on the watch and close my eyes, attempting to change the time. If the time were to change backwards or forwards, then that would mean I had been experiencing the events in the dream world; an unchanging clock would mean that I was is in the physical world. After practicing the method for days and getting a severe watch tan, the watch time that I thought was in the physical world turned backward in time. I woke up ecstatic yet terrified, eager to explore the experience I just had.

I decided to begin my research on what exactly dreams were, and the multiple perspectives that have developed about why we dream.

The National Sleep Foundation describes dreams as stories and images created by our mind while we sleep; it is a way that the memory center of our brain processes the events that occurred during the day. Dreams occur in the REM phase of sleep, and this phase is observed when the sleeping individual’s eyes begin to move rapidly. A typical, well-rested individual experiences between 5-6 REM phases per night, with the phases fluctuating between REM and NREM and each REM phase getting longer until the individual awakens.

REM sleep has been proven to be very important to us in maintaining our overall wellbeing. A study by William C. Dement on REM deprivation showed the problems that a lack of REM sleep would result in. Participants of the study were allowed to sleep for approximately 30-35 minutes (the time period that REM sleep usually begins) and they were awakened when their eyes began to exhibit any movement. Researchers would record the contents of their dreams and then allowed the participants to go back to sleep, and the process was repeated two more times during the night. After the month-long study, the participants were observed to have problems with focusing, motor coordination, increase in appetite, and hallucinatory tendencies.

One fact that the study revealed is that it is difficult, but not impossible, to manipulate dream content experimentally, whether by exposure to external stimuli before or during sleep (such as splashing water). Therefore, it is difficult to predict the contents of specific dreams, and modern research instead observes neural activity with machines to read the dream “form” rather than dream content.

However, studies of the neural network within children demonstrate that dream features show gradual development that parallels their cognitive development when awake; whatever the child sees corresponds to their dream. On the contrary, patients with brain lesions that impair their waking cognition show corresponding absence of detail in dreams. This is seen in individuals with impaired face recognition, in which individuals will have dreams devoid of faces. Formal content analysis (in which individuals were asked to describe dreams) revealed that mood, imaginativeness, individuals of interest and important concerns are also important factors in a dream’s content; personal anxieties experienced in a woken state, such as being late for an examination, can appear.

The dream realm is a place where an individual seemingly cannot pursue goals and motivate the self to do tasks; it could be compared to the life of a video game character, in which choices are decided by the person behind the controller.

When dreaming, memories of the dream are often unable to be recalled and are often lost forever; upon awakening, memory for the dream often vanishes rapidly unless written down or recorded. The psychodynamic model, which emphasizes systematic study of internal psychological forces, labels this phenomenon as caused by active regression in which the mind purposely “deletes” the dream as a means of protection. The neurocognitive model, which emphasizes how the dream is a state of reduced sensory wakefulness, claims that dreams are usually forgotten because they are internal narratives, unless these internal experiences are tied to external cues such as times and places.

Dreamers are usually disconnected from the environment by the high arousal threshold that persists in REM sleep, and direct external stimuli very rarely appear in the dream experienced. If there were no high arousal threshold, then an individual may inflict self-harm while in REM sleep. I had these accidents when I was in middle school. One of these accidents happened after watching the famous Star Wars scene in which Anakin gets his hand severed; unfortunately, I played Anakin. I woke up clutching my hand, picking up my sprawled bed sheets and soaked pillow from the floor.

So, are dreams formed from activity in low-level sensory areas, which is then interpreted and put together by parts of the brain, or do they begin as wishes, abstract thoughts and memories deep in the brain which are then enriched with perceptual and sensory aspects as in imagination?

Dream researchers say that brain-activity presumably flows in a top-down manner, from the brain throughout the body, and so the same can be said about dreams; they can be viewed as a powerful form of imagination which is used to help explain many of a dream’s unique features, such as sudden transitions, uncertainty about people and places, poor subsequent recall and disconnection from environment.

The above stated principles have been determined by experiments and current research. However, the study of dreams has fascinated people from all walks of life, since the start of questioning what it means to be self-conscious and self-aware.

The recording of dreams and the search for self-awareness began with the Mesopotamians, one of the oldest civilizations known to have existed. As time went on the intellectual periods flourished, and Chinese and Greek philosophers began to seek out the purpose of dreams. They pondered the question: “How can you determine whether at this moment we are sleeping, and all our thoughts are a dream; or whether we are awake, and talking to one another in the waking state?” It is this question that started the debate of what it means to be yourself, and spawned numerous perspectives.

The Enlightenment Period, among helping to pioneer amazing texts and art pieces, was crucial in spreading the idea of self. Philosophers proposed perspectives and presented religious ideals in an effort to find the answers. This sparked the famous Dream Argument, and the participants included Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke.

Descartes’ famous “I think, therefore I am” phrase had come under fire; in this time period, dreaming was considered a state of unconsciousness. But if this was the case, why does the mind take on some form of thought? Descartes’ response was that dreams are experiences that can replicate any form of waking experience, even negative events. He describes one instance in which he sits by a fire in his room, and he feels the warmth of the fire just as in the physical world, even though there is no fire in the physical world. The fact that he feels the fire doesn’t give him enough information to tell when he is awake or dreaming. Hobbes believed that internal components (such as body temperature and heartbeat) affected the content of dreams, while Locke believed that whatever happened within the dream would stay in the dream. This method of logical and scientific thinking would eventually create the psychological models used in modern psychology.

On the other side of the world, some Native American tribes used dream-catchers, extremely intricate and colorful “nets”, to collect and store dreams in an effort to communicate with higher beings. Although each tribe may have had different interpretations of what a dream meant, most tribes used dreams as guidance in lifestyle, such as a vision of future events. Dreams could also be said to have contributed to the downfall of Native Americans while facing European explorers; their dreams identified these white invaders as gods, and so they unfortunately followed them to their demise. However, in terms of the Native American identity, it can be said that a part of their self-conscious rested in their dreams, which is why they used dream catchers as a means of treasuring their dreams.

Current research primarily revolves around the neurologist/psychologist perspective, in which the brain undergoes dreaming in order to collect information stored during the day, processes this information, and transfers it to long-term memory. Researching the process of what goes on in the brain is a step in the right direction, but the question of whether it can be considered an identity of the dreamer is, at best, only vaguely considered.

I asked Michael P. Hodges, a philosophy professor at Vanderbilt University, about the increasing shift to the neurological perspective. He said the following: “The fact that modern research has shifted to the neurological perspective is not necessarily negative. However, modern science, after identifying everything there is about dreams, should retreat and try to rethink how this may change philosophical perspectives. In order to further the impact of modern science and the relationship between philosophical thinking and empirical analysis, the two should come together.”

According to Professor Hodges, lucid dreaming may be the key to linking these two different perspectives. “Lucid dreaming is something that is mystical, almost fictional. It’s something that makes scientists wonder how a feat is possible, while we philosophers sit back and ponder what it really means to achieve this feat. I believe that if these two questions can be answered, a cohesive statement can be made. Lucid dreaming is being considered as a third state of consciousness because it assumes that the brain takes on two different states at once, but how can one brain take on “two” states of consciousness? Is one inseparable from another? That’s the question we should strive to answer.”

In a study done by Stephen P. LA Berge, a Stanford professor who was interested in lucid dreaming after hearing a lecture, developed a technique used to lucid dream; the method was known as MIND. With this method, he recorded a total of 389 lucid dreams in a period of one month.

The first step happens during early morning, in which the subject awakens spontaneously from a dream. Next, the subject engaged in 10 to 15 min of reading or other activity demanding full wakefulness. Then, while lying in bed later at night, the subject repeated to himself, “Next time I’m dreaming I want to remember I’m dreaming.” Lastly, the subject visualized his body lying in bed, and rapid eye movement indicating that subject is dreaming.

The study reflected many advantages and disadvantages in trying to achieve a lucid state. One con is that it may interrupt the flow of one’s sleeping activity, as it requires a certain sleep schedule that may disrupt the previous schedule set beforehand by the individual.

One advantage of lucid dreaming is that it can somewhat treat those with night terrors or nightmares. It works by protecting the subject from the traumatic feelings of some concrete dream nightmares and allows an individual to pass through it without awakenings.

An expert dream researcher at the Vanderbilt Sleep Center provided insight as to why lucid dreaming may be a valid treatment for sleep disorders such as night terrors. She said that, “As soon as the individual starts to lucid dream, the dreamer automatically enters the positive side of the dream and dodges all negative attributes of the dream, caused by inherent human instinct of avoiding negativity. The interesting aspect of lucid dreaming is that there is no significant impact in the individual’s sleep quality, despite the complexity of surroundings in dreams. You could say that lucid dreamers live two different “lives”: the physical world during the day and the dream world during the nighttime.”

Lucid dreaming was shown to help subjects solve more insight problems in wakefulness in comparison to non-lucid dreamers, and brain analyses have shown that lucid dreams are usually reported by people with strong imagination as well as right hemisphere dominance, which plays a role in creativity and insight.

Overall, lucid dreaming helps to decrease emotional experiences caused by dreams, and to become free from them at least for some period but at the same time prevents real awakenings from nightmares and night terrors. Though the process may take some time to master, lucid dreaming can be achieved if the procedures are followed.

In my opinion, lucid dreaming is something that isn’t necessarily harmful to one’s health, but it can be compared to the attributes of virtual reality. An expert on personality/identity said that “lucid dreaming may be a dangerous state of mind, especially when the individual is mentally unstable. The dream world could become indistinguishable from reality, which lead to harm for the individual or others.

 Because a lucid dream is under an individual’s control, some individuals may take on completely different personalities and traits once they know this is their world. However, if done in moderation and control, lucid dreaming may turn out to be something that one might enjoy doing daily as it is helpful and relatively easy to learn. I mean, who wouldn’t want to control one’s dreams? It would be the end of bad dreams, nightmares, and night terrors, and maybe that sugar wonderland you might have imagined as a child can become a reality.

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