

Dreams and bereavement



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EVERYONE HAS DREAMS and, pleasant or frightening, they can be used in bereavement care as a starting point to address emotional aspects of loss. Dreams can help the bereaved to accept the absence of the person who has died, or face feelings repressed or avoided in waking life. For some, they also offer spiritual comfort. Working with dreams is a deeply satisfying process which can empower both client and counsellor.

Dreaming of the deceased has been shown to facilitate the grieving process². Sometimes the dead appear to 'return to life', allowing the past and present to be integrated and unfinished tasks to be completed, helping the dreamer to a resolution. Dreams can permit us to work through frightening episodes and traumatic grief. Traumatic nightmares may be a 'wake-up call', forcing us from the world of sleep to confront their terrors. They may also signpost the need for skilled therapeutic intervention when, for example, post-traumatic nightmares impair waking life³. In harnessing the power of dreams to heal, especially during the grief process, we enter a world that has been central to humanity across all time and all cultures.

What is a dream?

A dream is mental activity which occurs when we sleep. Free from the distractions or inhibitions of waking life, our sleeping thoughts reinterpret our experiences, sometimes symbolically. For most people there is an imagined series of events in a dream that may form a coherent story whilst for some there are a series of surreal images or shapes with no overt narrative thread. Dream imagery changes as we mature though some people have consistency in their dream 'themes' which last throughout life.

At times of great stress or when emotions are heightened we are likely to have dreams of greater intensity which impinge on our waking world.

*"Sleep that knits up the ravell'd
sleeve of care!"*

Edna St. Vincent Millay⁴ describes how her waking loss found its way into her sleeping consciousness:

Where you used to be, there is a
hole in the world,
which I find myself walking around in
the daytime,
and falling into at night.

Though we all have dreams every night, most are forgotten. However, I have found that those who are grieving recall their dreams more readily than those who are not and this is supported by research⁵. Dreaming is generally responsive to experiences that precede it during the day⁶ and emotional arousal affects the intensity of dreams, rather than their length or content⁷. So it is not surprising that someone who is with a dying person or who has been bereaved should have dreams of heightened intensity that reflect these events.

Dreaming and bereavement

Dreams relating to bereavement can occur before a death as a form of anticipatory grief, shortly afterwards in reaction to the loss, or for the rest of a person's lifetime, reflecting the nature of continuing bonds⁸. Adults who have experienced the death of someone they loved may long for a dream in which they are reunited, yet may feel heart broken on awakening because 'It was only a dream'.

My dreams of my wife are sometimes healing but it's painful when they raise again feelings of being utterly bereft because she has gone and cannot be touched or kissed and that her warmth that I long for, has gone forever.

For others, such dreams are entirely comforting.

When my mother died I was distraught and inconsolable and needed bereavement counselling for about a year. For all that time, every single night, I dreamt about my mother. Not in a surrealistic dream style, but as if my dream were the real world and she was still alive. They were wonderful, happy, healing dreams and they kept me sane. Every night I knew I would see my mother again...I always went to sleep in anticipation and woke feeling happy.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dreams are the worlds we create when we are asleep. They reflect the real world but, uninterrupted by external reality, they enable us to play and to re-view and revise our world in ways for which we have no time or inclination during the day. They include both the worlds we wish for and the worlds we dread. The small proportion of dreams that we recall during our waking life are likely to be remembered because they are important. This accounts for their value in therapy.

In this paper Brenda Mallon shows how bereavement counsellors can share the worlds of the dreamer and turn them to therapeutic account. CMP

Normal grief reactions such as anger, guilt, trauma, sadness and helplessness are reflected in dreams of the bereaved:

When I was much younger I dreamt of my father who died when I was ten. He appeared in army clothes and was looking for my mother. I was annoyed as I thought he did not want us children. He told me he would go away and I have never dreamt of him since.

In this dream my father has grown very old and is really ill. He later dies. I feel it is my fault and get really upset.

After the death of a very close friend I had terrible nightmares in which I saw his shooting and the scenes afterwards as his father and medical staff tried to revive him. Then the operation, his death and the funeral.

Visitation dreams

Many mourners feel that they have been visited by the deceased in their dreams and these encounters maintain the bonds that were so strong before the death. In the following example you can see how dreams reflected the process of grieving, as the bereaved person moves from disbelief to acceptance.

After my father died I had a series of dreams about him. First I dreamed he wasn't actually dead, then that he wouldn't accept that he was dead. Finally, I dreamed that he was getting better in the other world. Then a lovely dream where I met him. He was wearing a light blue shirt and looked years younger than when he was dying of cancer. He put his arms around me, told me he was fine now, that he loved me and told me not to worry about him anymore. I felt good when I woke and have felt good about him ever since.

The final meeting in the dream marks the resolution where the dreamer accepted her father's death and had no further feelings of remorse.

Grieving is not a linear process⁹ and emotions may need to be re-experienced. We can see this in the dream below. Clare's grandmother died when her grand daughter was 11. Following her death Clare, now an adult, recalled,

In the following weeks I had many dreams in which Nana was just around the corner or out shopping, and in one very vivid dream I truly believed I'd found her, I saw her so clearly, descending from a huge

staircase. I touched her and even spoke to her! On awakening from this particular dream, I revisited my initial reactions to her death, it was as if it had happened again.

Looking back, Clare realised that her dreams had been telling her that she was still locked in the early stages of grief.

In some instances the dead person appears but there is no longer the opportunity to touch the loved one:

I dreamt I was on a golf course I know well. My son, who died seven years ago, was walking towards the green but somehow I couldn't get to him.

I have noted a pattern in the dreams of some bereaved people in which the deceased goes further away and cannot be touched; they have gone to 'the other side' where the living gain no access. The dreamer above sees her son on his own journey but she cannot accompany him.

Whilst grieving many of us long for a 'sign of life' from the dead person, some indication that they are not suffering or that they are looked after. One client whose seven-year-old daughter had died found comfort from a dream in which she saw her daughter with her own mother who had died several years previously.

Dreams of guidance, of being looked after, have ancient roots in beliefs that the dead continue to watch over and care for the bereaved from beyond the grave. This is evident throughout the world in ancestor worship, prayers for guidance, shrines erected to the deceased and in spiritualism and mediumship¹⁰.

...It seems that the dreams I remember are very significant, as if someone, often someone I know, a relative who has passed on is emphasising I am being looked after. I remember them for years after. They are imprinted on my memory.

Children's dreams

Children's dreams reflect their waking concerns, as do those of adults. They may dream of the dead person, or fear sleep because of nightmares or because they equate sleep with death. Explaining death using euphemisms such as 'Grandad's gone to sleep now' is misleading and unhelpful. It is imperative that the language we use with young people is unambiguous and not

open to misinterpretation¹¹.

Recurrent distressing dreams are symptomatic of post-traumatic stress disorder in children, as in adults¹². In my research¹³ carried out in Northern Ireland in 1988 when 'the troubles' were still rife, I found more children had dreams of being kidnapped or being attacked and their dream had more death imagery than children in mainland Britain. Colette's dream was far from rare:

I dream about people and events that have happened, such as operations, bombs and close family dying...I dreamt that there was a bomb outside my house and nobody came to help my brother and me. And my brother couldn't move and neither could I. My brother died and I couldn't do anything to help him and in my dream I felt very guilty.

Her dream helplessness reflected her waking sense of insecurity. Children's experience of trauma disrupts their sense of psychological safety^{14, 15}.

Working with dreams

In working with dreams the essential aspect is to listen to the dream narrative, to explore the connections the dreamer makes to the dream images and waking life, to ask the client to describe images in greater detail and to collaborate with the dreamer to construct an interpretation. The aim is not to offer your own interpretation but to enable the dreamer to make theirs: the person who holds the key to the meaning of the dream is the dreamer¹⁶. There are many techniques you can use in this work but the first step is to be open to your clients' dreams and invite them to talk about them. We all dream every night but are not always aware of it so clients may need encouragement to remember or record dreams.

"An uninterpreted dream is like an unopened letter"¹⁷

Dreams may be used in anticipatory grief work. For example, in working with cancer patients and their carers¹⁸ dreams are discussed and related to the impact of the illness on the emotional lives of those concerned. Dreams may

be used in conjunction with visualisation, healing imagery and relaxation techniques^{19, 20}.

When clients have not had the opportunity to say goodbye to the deceased, dreams can be another form of communication, as this young woman describes in a letter written in therapy to her dead father.

Dear Dad, I miss you so much, I'm so sorry that we couldn't sort out the things we argued about even though I know you loved me. I dream of you over and over and we make plans. You tell me how to look after the baby. You can see her in my dreams but I'm sad that you'll never see her any other way.

Those who have recurrent nightmares after a death may need specialist help. The dreamer on p44, whose close friend had been shot, worked on her dreams over many months since they were so disturbing she was afraid to sleep. However, she recognised that she needed to face the pain captured in the dream images, which she did. She concluded, 'These dreams helped me to get rid of pent-up feelings and to accept that he was gone and nothing would bring him back.'

Using dream catchers with traumatised children

Sally, an eight-year-old girl, was having trouble sleeping following the murder of her sister. In her nightmares Sally knew her sister was there though she couldn't see her face. She was terrified yet none of the professionals who saw the child asked her about these frightening nightmares. It was only later when a dream therapist helped Sally and her mother to work on the dreams by drawing, listening and making a dream catcher that Sally was able to move on from her 'stuck' grieving position²¹.

Dream catchers originated in North America where the first natives would construct a circle with a web of strings across it, decorated with beads and feathers. They believed these trapped bad dreams and protected people from nightmares. In making a dream catcher with a child you give the opportunity to talk about disturbing dreams and to help them recognise that they can exercise an element of control over them. By discussing the dreams and trying to understand their message, or

the waking events that triggered them, you can enable the child to feel more empowered.

The spiritual dimension of dreaming

In many cultures dreaming is highly valued²² and dream reporting is the norm. For example in the Arab culture in Gaza and Galilee, children grow up thinking about and narrating their dreams and many studies have shown the efficacy of working with dreams^{23, 24, 25}.

The matrix which makes dreams in us has been called an inner spiritual guide, an inner centre of the psyche. Most primitive people just called it God, or a god. The highest god of the Aztecs, for instance, was the maker of dreams and guided people through their dreams.' (Marie-Louise von Franz²⁶)

Dreams can offer spiritual solace to those who have been bereaved. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross²⁷ called dreams of the dead 'true contacts on a spiritual plane.' For some people, such dreams bring them closer to the sacred and the transcendent can that inspire and guide waking life²⁸. They can bring some comfort after a seemingly meaningless, random event such as accidental death or murder. Where the dead person is cared for by God or angels or other revered beings in dreams, then the bereaved often feel relieved. We need to take spirituality, faith and belief into account when working with dreams and the bereaved.

As we saw earlier, it is not unusual for people to remark that the dead appeared in dreams just as they were in life which furthers their belief that life does not end here on earth. Symbolically, they are often on a journey, as is the case in the following dream:

Shortly after my father's sudden death I dreamt that I stood on a river bank watching my father preparing for a boat trip. In the dream my father was about twenty years younger than his actual age at death. I felt happy about his trip and he departed cheerfully. When I woke up I felt much more at peace about my father's death – it seemed to mark a turning point in the grief process.

Dreams of the spirit separating or the person going away, of being on a different path, as in the golf green

dream earlier, can bring relief that the dead person has moved on, but this is frequently wrapped in the anguish of lack of contact. Dreams of an afterlife, in which the dead live on, often help those left behind to move through their grieving, bonds intact yet free to carry on with their own life.

Dreams of the dying

Whilst there is not the space in this article to do justice to the subject of the dreams of those who are approaching death, these too offer a valuable healing resource.

Decathexis, the process of letting go as death approaches, may bring dreams in which companions come to assist the dreamer to the 'other side'. These 'companions' are usually people who were close family members or friends who, in dreams, may sit beside the dying person's bed or explain that it is time to go. They may appear to be ready to set off on a journey with the dying person. Such dreams often bring comfort and pleasure at seeing former friends once more. Traditional symbols of light and rebirth are often found. Marie von Franz, a noted Jungian analyst, found that travel images are common in the dreams of the dying. She states, 'In my experience the image of the journey in dreams is also the most frequently occurring symbol of impending death'²⁶. This does not mean that all people who dream of travel are about to die, rather that it is a common image.

Dream work is a valuable therapeutic tool which can be used with all ages and in a wide variety of settings. In bereavement care it enables us gain insight into the world of the bereaved, to understand the emotional issues facing them and helps us to identify appropriate support. By discussing, working with and reflecting on these dreams you will enable the bereaved to explore their feelings more extensively²⁹. ●

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WEBWATCH

Loss through suicide

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LOSING SOMEONE THROUGH

SUICIDE brings many additional difficulties to those going through the grieving process. Not only are they facing the usual issues that follow bereavement, but they have to come to terms with how and why the person took their life, the legal complications, and the emotions that follow which may include guilt, anger or frustration.

There are several websites for those affected by suicide and, though none are particularly extensive, all have some support to offer. **Survivors of Suicide (SOS)** at www.survivorsofsuicide.com is an independently-operated site based in the USA. Links on the home page offer information on various topics. An article by a clinical psychologist, 'Understanding suicide - common elements', discusses some of the characteristics associated with 'completed suicide', with the aim of helping survivors to understand more about the purpose, stimuli, emotions and state of mind that lie behind the act. 'How to help a survivor heal' offers ways of providing support and understanding, with a useful section on avoiding simplistic explanations and clichés. Although many of the suggestions here would be relevant to the support of any bereaved person, the site does also address particular issues associated with suicide.

Visitors following the link for **SOS Poems for the Heart** can read the work of other survivors. Existing poems can be read free of charge, but only after registering (\$32.95) can visitors add their own. The **Directory of SOS Support Groups** leads to a list of email support groups and discussion boards, and a drop-down menu allows visitors from the USA to find groups in their locality.

The site is not apparently associated with any specific group, organisation or religious affiliation and there is no

information, apart from a few attributed quotes, about who writes and maintains the content.

The UK-based charity, **Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS)**, at www.sobs.admin.care4free.net has information about its services. This self-help organisation offers group meetings, residential events, bereavement and information packs, and a national helpline available for 12 hours each day. Many of the supporters are themselves bereaved by suicide. Click on Enter to access the main page, which contains links to information about the SOBS groups, other UK and Irish agencies and related websites.

On the **Contact Information** link is the number of a Welsh-speaking supporter and those with a hearing impediment can access a Minicom or Typetalk operator. The latter is a really useful feature of this site, enabling survivors to communicate without the use of an interpreter, an important aspect of bereavement support that is not always readily available.

Finally, I would like to mention the **American Association of Suicidology**, which can be accessed at www.suicidology.org. Although the organisation, and much of its site, exists to offer support on the prevention of suicide, there is a link from the home page to Survivors of completed suicide. This provides statistics on suicide, together with a link to a **Resource Page for Survivors**, where a range of **Fact Sheets** and suggestions on surviving suicide can be found, together with a **Bibliography**. Towards the bottom of the page is a link to a search engine for support groups in USA and Canada. Back on the home page, **Links of Interest** takes visitors to a list of sites which offer specific support on 'Surviving suicide', 'Crisis centers', 'Professional organisations' and other topics.