



Recovering from a Nightmare

Many people with PTSD have frequent nightmares. These may be of things that actually happened to you, or anxiety dreams about things that could happen. It is common to awake from nightmares feeling distressed and disoriented. Some people report that they are not sure where they are, or whether the trauma is happening again right at that moment. Obviously this can feel terrifying.

There are a number of things you can do to help yourself recover from a nightmare. The first step is to reduce any sense of disorientation. The second step is to reduce your sense of threat.

To reduce any sense of disorientation

- You need to remind yourself 'where' and 'when' you are right at that moment when you wake up. Your memories may be tricking you into thinking you are somewhere else in the past – you need to remind yourself that you are safe in your bedroom, or wherever you are, in the present moment.
- You can use sensory grounding such as splashing your face with cold water or using a soothing smell – anything which brings your attention back to the present moment.

To reduce your sense of threat

- You need to remind yourself that you are safe now. It is often helpful to find a way to 'prove' this to yourself – for example, remind yourself of pre-prepared reasons why you are safe now, or remind yourself of good things that have happened since the trauma which remind you that the trauma is over.
- To reduce your sense of threat you can use exercises to physiologically soothe yourself such as relaxed breathing, muscle relaxation, or peaceful imagery.

Instructions for preparation

Waking up from a nightmare isn't an exercise we can practice easily. What we can do, though, is prepare. First, I want you to write down some reasons why you know you are safe now. Pause this recording if you need to find a pen and paper to make some notes. First write some information that will reduce any disorientation. This needs to be information about 'where' and 'when' you live now.

- “I live at 32 Hilltop Road.”
- “I live on my own – nobody can hurt me” or
- “I live with my family.”
- “The year is 2017.”
- “I was just having a nightmare – a memory from the past
– I am safe in the present moment now.”

Pause this recording if you want to make some notes.

Now write down some reminders to yourself about what sensory grounding strategies will work for you if you wake from a nightmare. These might be:

- Keeping a bowl of water by the bed to splash your face,
- Having your grounding smell nearby to focus your attention on the here-and-now.
- Keeping a glass of water close to hand.
- Opening a window to get some fresh air.
- Pause this recording if you want to make some notes.

Next, write down some statements you can say to yourself that will calm you down if you wake from a nightmare. These might include:

- Facts you know about memory in PTSD like “The nightmares are just memories from the past – I am safe now.”
- Facts you know about the trauma and whether it is over, like “The trauma happened ten years ago – I know that I am safe now.”
- Ways you can ‘prove’ to yourself that the trauma is over, like “I know the trauma is over because my daughter is 5 now, and she wasn’t even born when it happened.”

Think about what a good friend would say to you now if they knew you were upset or anxious – would they agree that you need to be this scared?

Pause this recording if you want to make some notes.

Finally, write down some soothing exercises that you could try to calm your fight-or flight response. These might include:

- Relaxed breathing exercises
- Muscle relaxation exercises
- A peaceful place exercise
- Making yourself a warm drink
- Reading something comforting

Pause this recording if you want to make some notes.

Now that you have some strategies that you can use, the important thing is to make them easily accessible when you wake up, distressed, in the middle of the night. Some good options include:

- Make a flashcard with all of the important statements written on it – and keeping it on your bedside table.
- Keeping some grounding smells or objects next to your bed.
- Making an audio recording of you reading through some of the notes you have just made – and making sure this is to hand when you wake up.