

# Could we one day heal the mind by taking control of our dreams?

July 15 2016, by Adhip Rawal

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Take me to the stars. Credit: Aman Rawal

About [50 per cent of us](#) will at some point in our lives experience "waking up" and being conscious while still in a dream – possibly, we may even be able to act with intention in it. Such "lucid dreams" are not

only a vivid and memorable experience for the dreamer, they are also of huge interest to neuroscientists and psychologists. That is because they represent a strange, hybrid state of waking consciousness and sleep which could tell us completely new things about our inner lives and the subconscious.

Many of the traumas we experience in our waking life are processed in our dreams. This has led some researchers to ask a bold question: could lucid dreaming one day offer a way to treat psychological disorders – enabling us to tackle fears and change behaviour in the relatively safe surroundings of our own dreams? So far, such psychotherapeutic application is relatively untested – but it has been [used to treat recurrent nightmares](#), which are often associated with trauma.

Sleep and (non-lucid) dreaming perform a number of functions that are important for our emotional health. For example, over successive cycles of [rapid eye movement](#) (REM) sleep (the phase during which most dreaming occurs), an overnight mood regulation takes place which ["resets" emotional brain centres](#). For example, research has shown that we tend to become more sensitive to faces displaying angry or fearful expressions as the day progresses but that a period of REM sleep [can reverse this tendency](#). This kind of sleep is also known to help us find [new, creative solutions to waking life issues](#).

However, these processes can become interrupted or compromised, for example following [traumatic life events](#). More than [two-thirds of the general population](#) will experience events that they find traumatic in their lifetimes, in some cases leading to post traumatic stress disorder. Nightmares are among the most common debilitating symptoms of this condition.

But published case studies suggest that lucid dreaming can provide [effective relief from chronic nightmares](#). More controlled investigations

have also suggested that lucid dreaming, either as [a stand-alone technique](#) or as an [add-on](#) to other psychotherapeutic approaches, can be successfully applied to reduce the frequency and severity of [nightmares](#).

There is some evidence that [lucid dreaming can be induced](#), too. In such studies, participants are normally taught a number of techniques, such as questioning the nature of one's environment during the day – "Is this real or am I dreaming?" – which increases the chances of having a lucid dream. Participants are also asked before they go to sleep to realise that their nightmares are not real. However, it's not really clear which induction techniques are most effective

In the nightmare study, participants also planned what to do once they were lucid (this helps the dreamer be prepared and maintain clarity of mind when confronted with fearful material). This training reduced the occurrence of nightmares even when the participant didn't succeed in becoming lucid. Reports suggest that [simple alterations](#) – such as changing one item in the recurring dream – can significantly alter the emotional tone and experience of the dream, helping us realise it is not real and that we are able to exert control over it.



Credit: Untitled artwork by Julie Nauman-Mikulski. CC BY

It would be premature to endorse lucid dreaming as [the preferred approach](#) for treating nightmares at the moment. But once we've collected enough data about the short- and long-term effects on nightmares and general well-being, there's every possibility it one day

could be.

## Lucid dreaming as a behavioural therapy?

Trauma and the resulting nightmares are a feature of a number of other psychiatric disorders, including depression, anxiety or personality disorders, and [even ADHD](#). While we often think about traumatic experiences as being the deaths of loved ones, an accident or a disaster, many psychologists acknowledge that any experience that overwhelms our ability to deal with things [can produce PTSD-like symptoms](#). We tend to push these experiences away. However, recent research has shown that avoidance or suppression does not resolve unwanted feelings and thoughts. Instead, they tend to resurface in our awareness – including in our dreams. It may therefore be that our dreams can tell us something about the traumas we suppress.

We also know that there is a correlation between our thoughts and behaviour in waking life and those in our dreams – known as the "[continuity hypothesis](#)". So, if a person experiences fear or tends to act helplessly in waking life, they are more likely to do so in their dreams, too.

In this way, dreams can lead to insights into how beliefs may condition responses, or offer valuable information to clinicians. By extension, if a person can become lucid within the safe realm of their dreams, these insights can come about as the dream is occurring. The most important aspect of this is that the person could actually respond in the dream – perhaps by tackling their fears through trying new behaviours. This may be a lot harder to do in real life, so [lucid dreams](#) could be a powerful starting point. The behaviours rehearsed in the dreams may also start to filter through to waking life on their own.

Insight into – and the ability to step back from – one's current reality is



known as meta-cognitive awareness. This awareness [is what helps](#) certain people suffering from recurrent depression to get better through treatments such as cognitive behavioural therapy and mindfulness meditation. Brain regions involved in meta-cognition are [among the most activated in lucid dreaming](#). A [study has shown](#) that people who have lucid dreams frequently have better insight during the day. This suggests such dreams could potentially help us [cultivate self-awareness](#).

In principle, lucid dreaming may be a powerful tool for promoting insight and emotional change, as one gains moment-by-moment conscious access to the workings of the mind – including suppressed feelings. This may even offer a way to work with issues such as addiction, just as a hypnotherapist may approach a nicotine addiction by suggesting a conscious intent to the subconscious mind. This could help also people grow out of psychological blockages and dissonances, thereby reaching new levels of openness and psychological maturity. For example, lucid dreamers often report resolving waking life phobias, such as fear of flying, insects, heights, public speaking and so forth by acting in the relative safety of a dream.

While there are yet to be scientific studies on whether lucid dreaming could indeed help treat such phobias, it is nevertheless a tantalising possibility that should be explored. Such research could enable us to understand whether and to what extent lucid dreaming can become part of the psychotherapeutic toolkit of the future and what insights it can give us into the workings of the subconscious mind.

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