

Journey to the land of lockdown dreams

May 29 2020, by Isabelle Arnulf



Still from the film *Dreams* by Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. Credit: Warner Bros.

As the COVID-19 crisis has unfolded, [billions of people in the world](#) have learned just what the word "lockdown" means. As the days stretched into weeks and even months, sleep was one of the rare escapes from confinement—but maybe not even then. Ask around and you will probably find that others in your circle of friends and family feel the same way: while locked down, our dreams can seem more intense, and

even more troubling. But why should this be?

Throughout our lives, sleep provides the brain with crucial time needed to rebuild, repair, and prepare for the next day. Hippocrates himself thought that a good night's sleep was key to [good health](#), along with a healthy diet, exercise and a fulfilling sex life. Our current knowledge substantiates this: sleep plays a role in many major physiological processes, including eliminating waste, boosting immunity, consolidating memory and even maintaining positive mood. A good night's sleep really does wonders.

Yet our obligations—our pastimes, even—are often detrimental to our sleep. Those who must get up early each day to drive an hour to work frequently miss out on some sleep. Massive amounts of screen time lead to chronic sleep restriction, with longer-term consequences, including raising rates of obesity, diabetes risk and high blood pressure. Even a small daily sleep deficit affects our concentration and attention, and this deficit is only partially offset by sleeping more over the weekend.

Longer nights, deeper sleep

The residents of France emerged from the country's [lockdown](#) on May 11, many having spent 55 straight days inside. They emerged to find a city streets strangely quiet, as if in a dream. Under lockdown, many had been able to savour a pleasure usually reserved for weekends or retirement: an extra hour of sleep. Those able to work from home no longer have a daily commute, and could rest a little longer. Nights in the city were also quieter, with fewer cars and motorbikes to disturb the silence—in the morning, you can even hear birdsong in the heart of Paris. And the less interrupted our sleep is, the better we remember of our dreams.

The extra hour of morning sleep we have during lockdown is chiefly

rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, where the bulk of dreaming takes place. The longest episodes of REM [sleep](#) occur at the end of the night, and can last between 30 and 60 minutes. This means people living under lockdown dream more, as they might when on holiday, and their dreams are longer, [as was shown recently by Perrine Ruby](#), a research fellow at the Lyon Neuroscience Research Centre.

But is there anything unusual about these dreams?

The stuff our dreams are made of

Outside of lockdown, what are our REM-state dreams like? Large surveys of dreams show that the content of our night-time adventures is fairly ordinary, visual and auditory. Dreams are filled with emotions, but they are more often negative (fear, anger, sadness) than positive.

Although we frequently have human interactions, they're only rarely of a sexual nature. The content of our dreams is largely sourced from our daily lives: we see our loved ones and colleagues, move through familiar settings, go about our work and rehash our day-to-day worries.

Ordinary events from the previous day or two feature heavily, but in a troubled and somewhat dramatized form. The majority of our dreams follow this continuity between the dream and the [real world](#), although we sometimes dream of worlds we've never seen and actions we've never taken. Who hasn't experienced the thrill of flying in dreams? These eccentricities are rare, yet they make a lasting impression and lend the word "dream" its extraordinary connotation.

According to Freud, dreams in lockdown should feature the things we lack. Deprived of freedom of movement and our loved ones, we might dream of open spaces, social events or the kinds of food we can no longer eat. Research has shown that this may not be the case, however. For example, in a 1970s study, California researcher Bill

Dement restricted subjects' water intake for 48 hours to see if they would start [dreaming of fountains](#). They did not.

So, what do we dream of in lockdown?

What we dream of in lockdown

It's important to note up front that we are in the realms of anecdote and clinical experience rather than hard science. For that, we will have to wait for the results of properly regulated studies currently underway.

As can be expected, the content of dreams in lockdown varies. Recent daily life and those close to us have always been an intrinsic part of our dreams, and while dreams in lockdown sometimes feature idyllic countryside escapes, the threat of the virus has invaded our days (and, for doctors, our work in the hospital) and so has also invaded our dreamscapes.

Over the course of the lockdown, the masked faces and blue scrubs of hospital staff have started to appear in our patients' dreams. Many people—and by no means just those experiencing the most stress—wake up suddenly at night feeling as if they're choking, have a fever, or have barely escaped some catastrophe. Bad dreams are common in stressful situations, and lend credibility to a recent theory that one of the purposes of dreams is to virtually simulate threats so as to be able to [better face them during the day](#).

Almost all [medical students](#) at the Sorbonne University dream of failing their competitive exams the day before. In their dreams, they show up late, are suddenly struck with appendicitis, can't find their way to the exam room, can't understand the questions, or don't know the answers. Yet we have demonstrated that the [more they fail in dreams, the better they perform on the exam](#). It is if, after such a nightmare, students were

less stressed under real conditions, or were able to anticipate, like chess players, the twists fate might have in store.

Dreams of difficulties and failure abound in all professions: before an important stage debut, actors dream of forgetting their lines; the day before the Olympics, athletes dream of losing their running shoes; taxi drivers find themselves on unknown streets, or far from destinations.

And when a virus threatens humanity, we [dream](#) of the virus. In this way, too, we are fighting it.

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