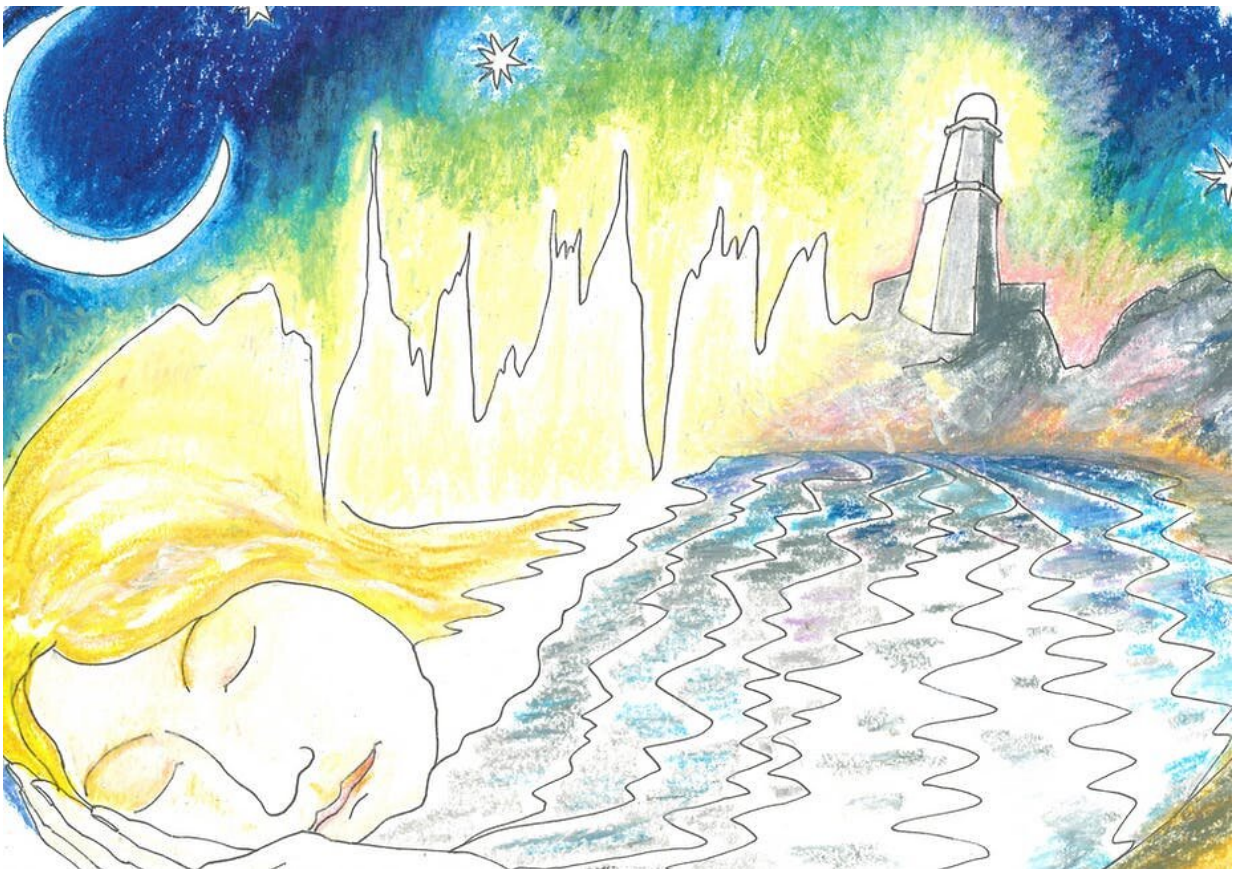


The science of sleep: How sharing your dreams could help to improve your relationships

May 13 2020, by Mark Blagrove and Julia Lockheart



Storytelling and empathy – the power of sharing your dreams. Credit: Julia Lockheart/Sleep Lab

When you wake up from a strange or particularly memorable dream, how likely are you to share it? Maybe you might tell your partner about it over breakfast or text a friend to tell them the details and ponder over its meaning.

Research shows that [about 15% of dreams are shared](#) – mainly with romantic partners, friends and relatives. And if you don't currently share your dreams, you might want to start thinking about it, as research also suggests that it can help to improve [relationship intimacy](#).

This echoes our [recent research](#) at the Swansea University Sleep Laboratory which shows that sharing your dreams and listening to other people's dreams can help to improve your [empathy](#) levels. Indeed, we found that when people share dreams with each other, the person discussing their [dream](#) significantly increases their empathy towards the person they are sharing the dream with.

There is much evidence that sleep benefits the [processing of important and emotional memories](#). And we often dream of our waking-life emotional experiences and concerns. So some researchers have suggested that our dreams have a role in, or reflect, the neural processing of emotional and important memories in sleep.

The Swansea University Sleep Laboratory has undertaken many lab studies on the relationship of dreams to [memory and emotional processing](#). But we also look at the effects of the dreamer discussing their dream content and [relating it to their waking life](#).

We have found that discussing a dream for approximately an hour with trained experimenters can result in "aha" moments for people. These can include realisations of where items of [dream content](#) came from in waking life, and of metaphorical references to particular concerns, issues or events—that may not have been easily seen or understood during

waking hours.

Dream drawings

We quickly realised how much people seem to enjoy sharing their dreams, so we set up a science art collaboration, called [DreamsID](#) – Dreams Illustrated and Discussed.

We hold public events with discussions of people's dreams. Simultaneous with each discussion, artist Dr. Julia Lockheart paints each dream so the dreamer has a permanent reminder of it. The dreamer can then discuss it at home with family and friends.

It was Sigmund Freud who first traced the links between [dreams and memory](#), so Lockheart paints on to pages torn (with publisher's permission) from Freud's book [The Interpretation of Dreams](#). Since the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, we are doing this online with healthcare and key workers. This enables live participation from around the world.

One example, illustrated below, shows the dream of nurse recovering from COVID-19: "I tried to warn people in a party of the dangerous forest outside but they would not listen. I then saw a dead body in a nearby hospital-like room, and an old ventilator, and a cat jumped on my face and was suffocating me".

Hearing and discussing dreams in this way over several years was the inspiration for research into dreams and empathy. We found that the sharing of dreams had a powerful effect on us as well as on audience members and family and friends of the dreamer. And it was this that got us wondering about the importance of dream sharing and relationships.

Closer connections

We recruited pairs of people, already in a relationship or friends, who would be tested for their level of empathy towards each other. For this we used [an empathy questionnaire](#) with statements for participants to agree or disagree with—such as:

- My friend's/partner's emotions are genuine.
- I can see my friend's/partner's point of view.
- I can understand what my friend/partner goes through.
- When I talk to my friend/partner, I am fully absorbed.

One member of each pair then shared and discussed one or more of their dreams with the other member of the pair, over a two-week period. Both people then completed the empathy questionnaire again after each dream discussion. And we found that the person discussing their dream had significantly [increased empathy towards the person sharing their dream](#).

Research shows that engaging with [literary fiction](#)—which includes films and plays—can also increase one's empathy. This is because you get to understand the world being portrayed and take on the [perspectives of the characters](#). We believe that dreams act in a similar way—as a piece of fiction. So when the dream is explored by the dreamer—and by those it's shared with—it induces empathy about the life circumstances of the dreamer.

As sharing our dreams enhances emotional disclosures between people, it may also be that, from an [evolutionary perspective](#), the storytelling aspect of dream-sharing helps in terms of social bonding.

Dreams and lockdown

Under lockdown, some people are sleeping for longer, and wake without

alarm clocks or an immediate schedule. Many people are also reporting having stranger dreams. So there is an opportunity here for dreams to be recalled and held in [memory rather than forgotten](#).

There is also likely to be more time than usual for couples or families to share their dreams—and with it, to boost their [empathy levels](#). This could be a helpful tool given that, with limited personal space, relationships may be feeling a little fragile right now.

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