

Coping with Nightmares

Working with symptoms of trauma



Dublin Rape Crisis Centre Resource

Nightmares & the Impact of Trauma

Distressing nightmares and disturbed sleep are common symptoms of sexual violence and trauma. They can increase anxiety before going to bed and provoke intense fear on awakening. You might feel like you are reliving the traumatic event or doubt your sanity.

But for many survivors, they are a normal part of recovery and a way to unconsciously work through what has happened. Although nightmares can be extremely scary, there are ways to reduce their likelihood and intensity, and to access good quality sleep and healing.



Why am I having nightmares?

Dreams are an unconscious way of processing our day-to-day experiences, feelings and memories. But if those experiences are difficult and traumatic, then our dreams might be too.

Traumatic events can send our body into a continual state of **hyperarousal**. This means that even when there is no real threat, our nervous system remains always on the alert for danger. Being in this constant state of “fight or flight” can make it hard to go to sleep, and we might experience nightmares when we do, because our body is trying to work through the trauma.

What can I do to improve my sleep?

To help calm your nervous system, practice some (or all) of these actions regularly. Remember that **healing from trauma can take time, but it is possible**.

- ▶ **Establish a bedtime routine:** Your room should be a relaxing place, with comforting items nearby. Take exercise during the day to tire your body and eat early in the evening. Have a bath before bed, drink a herbal tea or write in your journal, then go to bed when you are tired.
- ▶ **Practice relaxation techniques:** Try slow-breathing, body-scans, mindfulness or yoga to calm the nervous system. Some people also find activities like singing, writing and drawing useful ways to release stress.

- ▶ **Reduce caffeine:** Caffeine is a stimulant, and drinking it in large quantities can make it difficult to sleep. Try to avoid tea, coffee, and energy drinks after 1pm.
- ▶ **Avoid screens:** TV, video games, and social media should be avoided at bedtime as they leave the brain in a stimulated state.
- ▶ **Avoid alcohol & other addictive substances:** Drugs and alcohol may seem to help reduce stress in the short-term, but they can have a negative impact on sleep, can increase nightmares, and can lead to longer-term difficulties.
- ▶ **Check your medication:** Some medication has the side effect of disturbed sleep and nightmares. Consult with your doctor and ask for alternatives if necessary.
- ▶ **Have a safe place:** Develop a 'safe place' in your mind where you feel safe and comfortable. Imagine the emotions, sounds, sensations and sights associated with it. It could be a real place or one from your imagination. Practise visiting this safe space when you are feeling good, so when you waken from a nightmare, you can go there easily.
- ▶ **Speak to a counsellor:** Counselling can provide a safe and supportive environment to connect with and process our thoughts, emotions, memories and fears and in doing so help us to move towards a more restful sleep.
 - National 24-Hour Helpline: 1800 77 88 88 – you can call to find out more about counselling or [read more on our website](#).

Mindfulness before bedtime



Before going to sleep, **read the text in the box on the next page out loud and with mindful awareness.**

With each sentence, **make sure that you are listening to yourself** and hearing what is being said.

Take your time: if it feels like a 'part' of you cannot hear what you are saying, give it time.

What age does this part of you feel like? Can you speak to this part directly? They might need a bit more care and attention.

Pre-sleep text

Tonight, I may have a nightmare and wake up feeling...

(name the emotions)

Sensations in my body may include...

(name some sensations e.g. my heart beating fast, tight-chest, difficulty breathing)

If that happens, I will tell myself that this nightmare is an effect of the abuse I have suffered and is not my fault.

(If you wish, name the trauma, but without details)

Then I will sit up as soon as I can, turn on the light, and look around the room. I will name some things in my room that I can see right now, like...

(look at and name several things you can see)

I will sit on the edge of the bed and feel my feet on the floor.

I will gradually slow my breathing.

I will take my comfort object and allow myself to be comforted.

I will tell myself that I just had a nightmare; that what was happening in the nightmare is not real and is not happening right now.



Mindfulness after a nightmare

The actions suggested below can help you feel safe and grounded after a nightmare. Afterwards, you might find it helpful to get up and move around, go to the bathroom, make a cup of tea, or read for a few minutes.

Things to try after you've had a nightmare

Light: Turn on a light.

Look: Look around the room, identify some familiar objects, and name them out loud.

Acknowledge: Allow yourself to acknowledge & name the sensations in your body.

Safe talk: Sit up when you can and say out loud that you are safe, fully awake and that the nightmare is not real. Maybe keep a phone recording, of yourself or someone you trust, offering reassurance. If your emotional self feels younger, soothe yourself as you would someone of that age.

Breathe: Take long slow breaths through your nose. Count to five as you inhale and count to seven as you exhale. Lengthen the breaths little by little.

Comfort: Take a comfort object and allow it to soothe you.

Ground: Ground yourself with each one of the senses.

- **Taste** something with a strong pleasant taste - maybe keep mints by your bed.
- **Touch** something with a rough, silky or fluffy texture.
- **Smell** something pleasant - maybe there's an oil or cream that you like.
- **Listen** to something that is comforting, like soothing music.



Dublin Rape Crisis Centre is there for anyone affected by sexual violence, including those supporting others. Call the [National 24-Hour Helpline 1800 77 8888](tel:1800778888) for non-judgemental information & support.

DRCC also offers [specialised training](#) on issues like secondary/vicarious trauma and sexual consent & healthy relationships – contact us at etadmin@rcc.ie or 01-661 4911 or check out www.drcc.ie.

Disclaimer: This resource is provided for general information only and is not intended as a substitute for professional advice or counselling. **Issued Jan 2022**

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