

## Imagery Rehearsal Therapy for Nightmares

### IMAGERY REHEARSAL THERAPY

---

The fears and negative emotions associated with nightly occurrences of bad dreams are believed to be treatable with the use of a simple technique called Imagery Rehearsal Therapy (IRT). When children have bad dreams, adults rarely have strategies to help them beyond offering words of comfort and using the phrase, "It was only a dream." Some children are upset by one dream in particular that comes to them one night and never returns. However, some children have a nightmare that continues to revisit them and frighten them with each reoccurrence. In addition, some children have multiple recurring nightmares.

If the child is suffering from multiple repetitive nightmares, select one nightmare to start with (typically it is best to select the nightmare that the child believes is the scariest) and follow the steps of the IRT process for that one particular dream. Use the process every night until the nightmare has been resolved. Once that nightmare has been resolved, repeat the process for other nightmares.

While children make up the general population of clients who benefit from Imagery Rehearsal Therapy, teenagers and even adults can benefit from this technique as well. Teenagers and adults might experience repetitive nightmares following the experience of a traumatic event – such as getting into a car crash, returning from war, or losing a loved one. Imagery Rehearsal Therapy works just as well with older individuals as it does with young children, but it is more likely that teens and adults will find alternative ways to cope with nightmares, or simply recover from them at a faster rate.

### IRT STEPS

---

#### STEP 1

Put the story of the nightmare into writing. Even if the story is extremely frightening, write it down and describe it in as much detail as you can remember.

#### STEP 2

Imagine a more positive alternative ending for the nightmare and write it down. Make the new ending happy and peaceful. Nightmares tend to be emotionally charged and ridden with raw anger or fear that has been provoked by a traumatic experience. The new ending is meant to soothe the emotions, instead of allowing the emotion to take the form of violence and revenge in the sub-conscious.

## Imagery Rehearsal Therapy for Nightmares

**Example:** *A girl was told by her parents that they were getting a divorce. She had a reoccurring nightmare that she was lost in an amusement park and when she called out her parents names, no one answered. In her dream, she ran and ran, and continued to call out the names of her parents, until she awoke out of breath and crying. So the girl decided that in her new ending, when she realized she was lost, she stopped and found a friendly amusement park employee to ask for help. When she asked the friendly employee to help her find her parents, the employee smiled and handed her a beautiful stone with the message, "have faith in the love your parent have for you," carved into it. When she looked up, her parents were in front of her, reassuring her with open arms. She woke up and the nightmare never happened again.*

### STEP 3

Rehearse the new version of the dream in your imagination each night just before falling to sleep. Do this right before lying down to go to asleep. Do not perform any other activities between the rehearsal and sleep.

### STEP 4

Perform a relaxation exercise immediately after the rehearsal, in order to facilitate a peaceful drifting off to sleep. Use a technique you already know, or try Progressive Muscle Relaxation or the Deep Breathing Warm-Up (two techniques that are described in detail later in this article)

### PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION (PMR)

---

The PMR technique teaches you to relax your muscles through a two-step process: tension and relaxation. After you deliberately apply tension to a specific muscle, release and stop the tension. Then turn your attention to noticing how the muscle relaxes as the tension drifts away. Often people find that when they notice their own physical relaxation, mental calmness and relaxation follows.

Practice tensing (or squeezing) each individual muscle for about 10 seconds. Then release and relax your muscle. Stay relaxed for about 15 seconds. Then repeat the tension-relaxation cycle with the next muscle in the progressive order. When you practice PMR, make a systematic progression from your feet upwards. Here is the most popular recommended sequence:

Right foot

Right lower leg and foot

## Imagery Rehearsal Therapy for Nightmares

Entire right leg

Left foot

Left lower leg and foot

Entire left leg

Right hand

Right forearm and hand

Entire right arm

Left hand

Left forearm and hand

Entire left arm

Abdomen

Chest

Neck and shoulders

Face

### DEEP BREATHING WARM-UP

---

Breathe in deeply and count in seconds the length of the breath in. Exhale and try to count to a number that is twice as long as the number you counted to when you inhaled. With each breath cycle, try to increase the length of your breaths in and out. For example, inhale counting, "One," exhale counting, "One, Two," inhale counting, "One, Two," exhale counting, "One, Two, Three, Four." Progressively move up the scale to six counts in and twelve counts out. Then reverse: six counts in, twelve counts out; five counts in, ten counts out; and so on, down to one count in, two counts out.