

Imagery Rehearsal for Nightmares

Nightmares are frightening and depressing. If you are having more than 1-2 per week it could be making you more depressed and anxious. These steps will reduce the frequency and intensity of nightmares.

The work involves imagining the nightmare each day, but with a different ending. What ending? Anything you want. The point of this exercise is to put you back in control of your imagination, so the nightmares are no longer steering the car. Many people find success with just a few minutes of this imagination exercise each day.

Close your eyes and fully picture the nightmare that you want to reduce. Next, develop a new dream that you want to have instead. You can alter the plot of the old dream, or simply develop a new dream containing any imagery and events that you want. Imagine the new dream in its entirety. Imagine each sense - vision, smell, sound, etc - as you rehearse the dream in your mind. Rehearse the new dream like this each night or during the day. This repetition will help set down new tracks in your brain so that the old nightmare fades away.

This therapy was developed by a sleep researcher, Barry Krakow, MD, and tested over many years in patients with PTSD, depression, and stress. Learn more in his book, *Turning Nightmares Into Dreams*.

–Chris Aiken, MD, Updated 8/28/2025