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Addiction Medicine & Psychiatry

Drinking Dreams - A Nightmare and a Reminder

Ray, a 50-year-old recovering alcoholic airline pilot on a layover is asleep alone in his hotel room. He dreams that he is in a bar and drinking a beer.

He wakes up, sits up – and panics. He acts as if he has just had a nightmare. What makes this dream a nightmare is that Ray is a recovering alcoholic airline pilot with four months of sobriety. He has been back on flying status under the FAA monitoring program, a program which allows recovering alcoholic or drug addicted pilots to fly – after successful rehabilitation – while they are on a five-year, FAA monitored recovery program.

Oh, my God, he thinks. I broke my sobriety. I lost it all. I've let me friends in AA down. I've let my family down. How will I tell my therapist? There goes my career.

His heart is racing and he's drenched in sweat. Momentarily, he doesn't know where he is. He turns on the lights. He looks at the area code on the bedside phone. He is in Indianapolis. Of course, he now remembers, I'm in Indianapolis on a layover. Tomorrow morning I start the second leg of our trip. Or do I?

So, at least he knows where he is. But what about the drinking? Was it a dream? It was too real. It's like it really happened. He even feels a little drunk or hung over. He's had two dreams like this before. They happened when he was at home. But tonight, his wife is not in bed next to him to verify that he did not really drink last night. Did he actually have a drink? The doctor in the rehab hospital had warned him about drinking dreams. Such dreams are fairly common, he was told, especially in the first year or two of sobriety. And they can be terrifying, as he now knows.

He paces back and forth in his room. He has to make sure that it was only a dream. He looks through his travel bag. He checks out his shaving kit. There



are no telltale signs like in his drinking days: no miniature bottles from the airplane, and no beer cans in the trashcan. A little calmer, he smiles sardonically as he goes through his briefcase. He remembers the days when there was always an "emergency" supply of breath mints, eye drops and pep pills in his traveling bag.

Stop daydreaming, he tells himself. We have a real problem situation here. Let's do a checklist: I could only have drunk in the hotel bar. Ray goes downstairs and walks into the bar. The bartender is the only person present. "This may sound strange to you," Ray says to the bartender. "But please, just answer my question." Ray is scared about what he might hear. "Have you ever seen me before? I mean, was I in here tonight?"

"No. You weren't here tonight. I'd definitely remember you. It's been a dead night. Maybe four or five people all evening. Besides, you're one of the pilots. I'd know you guys anywhere."

Ray heaves a sigh of relief. "Thanks, Buddy, you really helped me a lot."

Talk about nightmares, he sighs. I guess it means that a part of my brain – my unconscious? – is still thinking about drinking. I'd better keep taking my recovery seriously. One day – and one night –at a time.

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