

JOSEPH A. PURSCH, M.D.

Addiction Medicine & Psychiatry



Relapse Dreams Reflect Recovery

Young men dream of sex, the poor dream of wealth, and dogs, one would presume, dream of bones. It should be no surprise, then, that alcoholics and addicts dream about getting drunk and getting high. After all, dreams are nothing more than wish fulfillment.

The stuff that dreams are made of.

Unfortunately, it's not that simple. As Freud taught us, dreams are the royal road to the unconscious. We dream not only of things we wish might happen; we also dream of things we fear might happen.

In clinical practice we use this idea to help us gauge the quality and progress of the addict's recovery. Before the addict enters treatment, the dreams are often nightmares: police stakeouts, being arrested, or hurt or killed by pushers. The addict's worst nightmare is being unable to get more drugs, or that somehow the drugs are no longer working.

In early recovery – since the addict's unconscious is still in denial – the dreams may still be pleasurable, as if the addict were saying sad, fond goodbyes to the good old days of booze and drugs. If such a dream is interrupted, the dreamer might get angry and try to jump right back into the dream. Why? Because the dream was enjoyable. Some patients report that – if in their dream, they realize that they have blown their sobriety, they decide to have a few more drinks or keep on using drugs. Their dream thought is: Might as well, since I have to start my sobriety from scratch, anyway. After such a dream, the dreamers often wake up ambivalent, or frightened. They don't know what to make of the dream, since, in their daily lives, they have been professing that they want to remain clean and sober.

How dreams reflect the stage of recovery.

As recovery progresses, the addict's unconscious starts to deal positively with the addiction. The dreams may become more vivid and frightening, but instead of dreaming about enjoyable, all-night binges,

the patients stop themselves – in their dream – after one or two drinks or hits of marijuana, then wake up suddenly with racing pulse and sweaty palms. They are scared and angry. The dream was so real that they are convinced they have actually broken their sobriety. When, after a few minutes of terror, they're fully awake and realize that this was only a dream, they feel greatly relieved. After such a dream, the addict usually gets out of bed purposefully and stays up long enough to ensure that the same dream won't continue.

If properly discussed in therapy, a relapse dream can be a turning point in the patient's recovery. An example is the following dream of a chronic relapse cocaine addict from Denver. He dreamed that while waiting to board a flight in Denver to come and see me for a follow-up treatment session in California, he found an ounce of cocaine in the airport lounge. Holding the bag of cocaine in his hand made him extremely nervous. His first impulse was to flush the coke down a public toilet because he was afraid to carry it through the airport security check, or – heaven forbid – to have it on his person while talking with me in my office. But then – still in his dream, he had second thoughts: What if somebody sees me flush the coke down the toilet? I could get arrested. So he decided to mail the coke to his Denver office . . . and fly on to see me in California.

“Working” the dream.

When we discussed the dream in detail in our next session in my office, he became aware that he wasn't really ready to stop cocaine use “for good.” What had made his recovery so difficult up to that point was that he was still putting the major burden for his recovery on my efforts as a doctor, rather than on his own work in therapy, and on his Step work in Cocaine Anonymous (CA) with his sponsor. “Now I understand,” he said “why, in my dream, I decided to mail the coke to my office. It was ‘cocaine smart’ to do that. My thinking was ‘Let me see what

happens in my session with Dr. Pursch. If the doctor succeeds again in keeping me clean and sober, I can still flush the cocaine the next day when the mail arrives in my office. If, on the other hand, the doctor fails to keep me sober, well . . . then . . . the coke won't go to waste.'"

For many recovering addicts such dreams stop after one or two years of abstinence and solid recovery. But some alcoholics or drug addicts, even after 20 years of abstinence, still have such dreams once or twice a year. But the dreams are different because they are no longer struggling with a viable neurotic wish or an emotional conflict. Such dreams in long-time sober people are brief, vague and not upsetting. The dreamers don't wake up until morning, then go on with their life without giving the dream much thought. Drinking and drug use are finally in their proper place.

Dr. Pursch's Office
949-499-5631

©2003 Joseph Pursch, MD
www.drpursch.com
