

Dreams in Recovery: “Using” and Relapse Dreams – What Do They Mean?

by Rita Milios

In early recovery, it is common for people to have dreams about using their former drug of choice. A well-known study by researchers George Christo and Christine Franey, of the Centre for Research on Drugs in England, reported in *Substance Use and Misuse* (Jan. 1996) that, at seven weeks of abstinence, 84% of former drug users involved in their study were having drug-related dreams. More “using” dreams were experienced by abstinent subjects than by subjects who were still actively consuming drugs. Although the using dreams began to rapidly diminish after seven weeks, about half of the study subjects still experienced some using dreams into their sixth month of abstinence.

Sometimes using dreams include the idea that the dreamer has actually relapsed, and this is only proven untrue when the person awakens—usually quite relieved, but shaken. *Why do relapse dreams and using dreams occur? And how do they affect recovery?*

The Impact of Using Dreams and Relapse Dreams

Unfortunately, the prevalence of using dreams and relapse dreams may be correlated to the likelihood for relapse.

In the Christo/Franey study, at the six-month follow-up, subjects who had numerous using dreams and relapse dreams were more likely to have greater drug cravings and to return to active drug use. A later study (*Neuropsychanalysis*, 2004) confirmed these earlier findings. However, these studies looked at heroin and cocaine use, where more intense cravings are common.

Some studies of alcoholics who had using dreams found an opposite effect. In one study, *Dreams as a Prognostic Factor in Alcoholism* (S.Y. Choi, *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 1973), the alcoholics who had an abundance of using dreams were more likely to remain abstinent. Several other studies have suggested that using dreams may have a “compensatory” effect, allowing a person to deal with urges and cravings in a safe way.

While research discrepancies persist, one relevant viewpoint stands out. Many researchers now believe that it is more important to look at the subjects’ *responses* to their using dreams or relapse dreams than it is to consider the prevalence of such dreams, or the actual dream content. Subjects who respond to using dreams with disappointment and frustration, upon finding out that they are not real, tend to be more prone to relapse. Subjects who wake up feeling relieved that the dreams weren’t real tend to become more motivated to remain abstinent.

Should You Try to Eliminate Drug-Related Dreams?

It is not likely that one's efforts to stop using dreams or relapse dreams from occurring would prove effective, and such attempts could even backfire because of the increased stress.

Instead of resisting drug-related dreams, it may be better to attempt to determine what, if anything, they are trying to tell you. Some possible theories of what such dreams may mean are listed below. However, if you want to take your best shot at eliminating them, try falling asleep with a calm and positive mindset. Reading some uplifting or spiritual material just prior to falling asleep may help.

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Possible Functions of “Using” Dreams and Relapse Dreams

Today, researchers are more often viewing drug-related dreams as a process of the subconscious mind, with many possible objectives. Using dreams and relapse dreams may be a sign that:

- ***You are readying yourself for change.*** Dreams of using may simply be your inner mind's way of “practicing” how to deal with the frustrations that are part of recovery—dealing with cravings, releasing a familiar coping strategy, etc.
- ***Your addicted brain may be trying to reset itself.*** While using, you likely did not have normal dream activity. Substances are known to suppress REM (rapid eye movement) sleep cycles, which are necessary for dreams to occur. Since REM sleep is so important to a healthy brain, when REM sleep has been suppressed, the brain will attempt an “REM-rebound” once the suppressing factor has been removed. Because you are then dreaming more, and because your brain's reward center has been over-stimulated, it is possible that these factors are uppermost in your subconscious mind. And dream content is extracted from the subconscious.
- ***Your cravings may have become intensified.*** Dreams can be said to give you your “state of your state of mind message.” If you have experienced increased stress, or are faltering in your resolve for abstinence for any other reason, your dreams may be indicating your innermost feelings of ambivalence. Still, just because you crave, it does not mean you have to use. It is better to be aware of your increased vulnerability and to take steps to bolster your resolve, rather than be caught unaware in a weak moment.

Dream Imagery as a Therapeutic Tool for Self-Awareness

Dream images can tell you a lot about what you are thinking and feeling at your deepest levels. Dreams use symbols to share a message, because the subconscious mind communicates more easily with pictures than with words. By analyzing your dream symbols and their meaning to you, you may uncover valuable insights about not only your recovery, but your life situation in general, as well.

Here are a couple of tips to consider when attempting to decode your dream imagery:

- All dream symbols are a part of you. Your mind, especially your subconscious mind, has *you* as its main agenda. Except for “logging-in” dreams, where your subconscious is doing the work of cataloguing the day’s activities, dream images generally reflect your innermost feelings or attitudes. So look at dream images and ask yourself, *what feeling or attitude does this image hold for me, and where in my life today am I currently experiencing this same feeling?* For instance, “failing” imagery (failing in school; can’t find a classroom, etc.) often indicates that you may feel that you are failing in some area of your life. During recovery, such a dream could alert you to a concern about your ability to maintain your recovery efforts. In such a case, remember it is subconscious *feelings* that are being reported, not facts; and being forewarned is being forearmed.
- While you are likely the best interpreter of your dream imagery, it is also a good idea to discuss your dreams with a trusted advisor, friend, or counselor. Talking can help you “wash out” residual feelings of cravings, or it can neutralize inappropriate guilt about having had craving dreams.

In the end, dreams are simply a potential source of information about your deepest feelings. But what you *feel* is not as important for your recovery as what you *do* about your feelings.