

Common Grief Dream Questions Answered

© 2019 Dr. Joshua Black
www.griefdreams.ca

What kinds of dreams might I have after my loved one has died?

There are 3 forms of grief dreams (dreams after loss):

1. Dreams that don't have the deceased present or mention them. The dream may be addressing feelings of the loss (e.g., running by a mountain and it collapses on you, searching for something and not finding it, etc.).
2. Dreams that don't have the deceased present, but they are mentioned or symbolized (e.g., a character in the dream talks about the deceased, visiting the hospital where the deceased died, etc.).
3. Dreams that have the deceased present in the dream (e.g. in human form or in another form).

In terms of this third type, the deceased is usually physically present in the dream, but they may sometimes use a device to speak to the dreamer, such as a telephone, cellphone, computer, or another person (such as a medium). There are many different themes that can occur with dreams of the deceased. In my research I have found 7 main themes (Black, DeCicco, Seeley, Murkar, Black, & Fox, 2016). Dream themes are not mutually exclusive (you can have multiple themes per dream).

1. Rationalization - The dreamer may look for and/or receive a rationalization from the deceased on how it is they are alive when they should be dead. The deceased may help the dreamer understand and comment on why they are alive (e.g., the death is explained as a mistake or they have come back). Conversely, the dreamer may not receive a rationalization from the deceased when asked (e.g., no answer is given), or the dreamer may tell the deceased to go away because they are dead (cannot rationalize their appearance).

2. Help-Crossing-Over -The dreamer provides actions (e.g., putting hand on a body to release the soul) or words (e.g., "It's safe to move on.") to the deceased to help the soul successfully cross over (either to or from the afterlife). Additionally, the deceased may ask for assistance in crossing-over (e.g., ask the dreamer to perform a certain ritual in waking life).

3. Dead, Dying, or Ill - The deceased may be dead in the dream, may die in the dream, or may be suffering from physical symptoms in the dream. Sometimes, the deceased is not seen suffering, but the dreamer may have a feeling that the deceased is ill and needs help.

4. Discomfort - The deceased performs actions or words that are distressing to the dreamer. Actions could include physical attempts to harm, gestures of disapproval, etc. Words could include criticism, demands, disapproval, etc.

5. Comfort - The deceased performs actions or says words that are comforting. Actions could include a wave, hug, kiss, etc. Words could include telling the dreamer they are OK, they love them, forgive them, approve of something, are happy, etc.

6. Healthy and Happy - The dreamer comments on the well-being of the deceased or implies it through the deceased's actions (e.g., describes the deceased as smiling or laughing). The dreamer may describe the deceased as being healthy (e.g., infirmities caused by illness or injury having disappeared, can perform actions not able to when ill, etc.) and/or happy (e.g., smiling, laughing, etc.).

7. Separation - The dreamer and the deceased are separated or get separated in the dream. Separation may be due to an obstacle between them (e.g., fence), or the deceased themselves not wanting them to be close (e.g., dreamer is not allowed). Additionally, they could also separate from each other by leaving or disappearing (either slowly or suddenly). It may also be that separation was discussed (e.g., "I have to go."), but the action was not fully carried out yet.

Is it common to dream of your loved one after loss?

There is limited research on the topic, but my research suggests it is very common for people to have at least one dream. I have heard from people that it sometimes only took a month before they remembered a dream of their loved one, while others report it took years. The frequency of these dreams of the deceased varies widely from person to person. Some people only have one their entire life, while others can have them monthly—and some have none. Dream research I have done after pregnancy loss and pet loss have found similar findings. Dreaming of the deceased seems to be a common experience for those with losses categorized as disenfranchised too. Dreams can have positive, neutral, or negative content.

Do children have dream of their loved ones?

Yes, children have similar grief dreams as adults. The major difference is how they interpret these experiences. This is why it is important to ask them about what dreams they may be having and how they feel about those experiences. You can use the children's picture book I co-wrote called "Dreaming of Owl" as a way to lead into discussion on the topic.

Why am I having negative dreams of my loved one?

Negative dreams of your loved one are common after loss. Dream research has shown that dreams represent our waking life (The Continuity Hypothesis). If you're happy during the day, you are more likely to have positive dreams. If you're sad during the day, you are more likely to have negative dreams. After loss you are experiencing many negative emotions and can expect many of your dreams to reflect that. In my experience, many people who have negative dreams of the deceased are having issues with their unresolved anger or guilt. Additionally, the death may have been traumatic and they may be reliving that traumatic event (e.g., seeing their loved one dying again). Research I have done supports these links (unresolved anger/blame and trauma symptoms) to negative dream content. If you work through your trauma or grief issues (I recommend seeing a professional), your dreams of the deceased should change to something more positive. Additionally, there are other ways to reduce negative dream, such as dream re-scripting.

The bereaved that are spiritual may take these negative dreams as being a haunting by the deceased. Be cautious about making that interpretation; instead consider carefully whether the dream imagery connects to your issues with the individual and/or your grief.

What if I want to have more dreams of my loved one?

There are many reasons why you may want a dream of your loved one: To see them one more time, hear their voice, relive a memory, etc. If you are spiritual you may want a dream to confirm they crossed over and/or still love you. I caution against any thinking that not having a dream is a sign of something wrong with the deceased (e.g., haven't crossed over) or something wrong between the two of you (e.g., doesn't love you anymore or is mad at you).

In my own research that investigated what variables predict recalling dreams of the deceased, I found the most important factor was how many dreams you usually recall in general. Some people remember dreams every night and some people never remember their dreams. Research has found most people remember one or two dreams a week. If you are the person who does not remember your dreams often, then it may be more difficult for you to remember a dream of the deceased (even though you really want to remember it).

Almost no one remembers every dream they produce while sleeping. So given this, it is highly likely that we are dreaming of the deceased more than we realize. A good way to increase your ability to remember dreams is to value them. One way to do that is to keep a dream journal for all of your dreams (not just the ones with the deceased). In my research of a woman's dream diary following the death of her father, I found that her dreams occurred during months that were meaningful (e.g., her father's birthday, the anniversary of his death, and Christmas) (Black, Murkar, & Black, 2014). Maybe you will be more likely to recall a dream on one of your meaningful dates. It is still a mystery why the mind only remembers certain dreams of the deceased and not others.

What if I want to have less dreams of my loved one?

If you don't want to remember the dreams of your loved one, I would first explore why. If it is because they are negative, please see my answer above regarding negative dreams. Maybe it is not that you need less of these dreams, but need a new way of understanding these dreams. However, if you still want to have less of such dreams, one way to proceed is to decrease your dream recall in general. This can be done by not keeping a dream diary, not talking about or thinking about your dreams, and not valuing them. How do you think less about dreams? When they pop into your mind, just shift your attention to something else. By decreasing your dream recall you should remember less dreams of the deceased.

What can we learn from our dreams?

As I have already discussed, we can learn from negative dreams about issues and concerns that perhaps we have not yet given enough attention to in our waking life. We can also learn from our positive dreams with the deceased. Many positive dreams can help resolve grief issues in waking life (e.g. a need for forgiveness, or to feel loved, to be reassured that the loved one is safe, a chance to see them healthy, etc.). These positive dreams can reflect your waking life concerns and what you're longing for. Whether or not you believe a positive dream is a visitation, it doesn't change that a positive dream can reflect your waking life.

Do you believe my dream is a visitation?

No one can ever tell you if a dream is a visitation or not (even though many people try). I only intervene if someone is calling their negative dream a visitation, as the research says it's more likely a product of your unresolved emotions. By believing this dream is literally true you may not only unnecessarily make yourself even more unhappy, but you may miss an opportunity to learn from your dream. If your dream is positive, then believe whatever your heart wants to. Only you know how that particular dream feels to you.

Do dreams change over time?

Yes, dreams seem to change over time. In one study I explored a dream journal following father loss and found that the dream content and themes changed as time went on (as the dreamer started to heal). Since dreams reflect our waking life, these dreams seem to change to reflect what we are currently going through. When you are grieving the death, these dreams can focus on your grief. As you start to heal these dreams of the deceased can focus on other issues you are going through in waking life (e.g. the deceased gives advice on your relationship issues). At the end-of-life these dreams of the deceased can focus on helping you with the transition from life to death.