

How to Support Patients in the Dream-work Process

Dreams spotlight important personal issues and emotions. When these issues and emotions are acknowledged and cared for, then their energy is transformed and can be directed toward healing and growth. Our basic premise is that all dreams, including nightmares, help bring about balance and renewal to the mind/body/spirit connection.

When a health care provider listens to a patient's dreams, it is an opportunity to support the patient in finding new ways of being with unsettling issues and conflicting emotions. *Please remember that a key tenet of the program is that the dreamer is in control of the process at all times. Your insights are valuable, but are best presented as suggestions from your perspective, not interpretations.* That's why we use the non-threatening "If it were my dream" approach.

If you have just one minute, you might say: "Often our dreams help us know what we need to focus on during treatment. Are you remembering any dreams?"

If the answer is "no" and your minute is almost up: "I encourage you to try to remember. Tell yourself you want to remember and then put a pencil and paper by your bed. Jot down anything—even a fragment. You might want to share with (name the social worker or chaplain or staff member who can spend more time). We hope to start a dream group and you may want to come."

If "yes" and your minute is almost up. "Wonderful! I encourage you to write them down and share them with (name a staff member who can spend more time). We'll be starting a dream group soon and you may want to come."

If you have five minutes, you might add: "All dreams, including nightmares, put us in touch with issues and emotions that we need to tend. Would you like to tell me a dream or about your dreams?"

After listening with empathy, you might ask: "What are your feelings *in* the dream? Is there a something in waking life or from the past that stirs the same feelings?"

If the dreamer speaks of "negative" feelings, you might say: "If it were my dream, I feel the dream may be inviting me to face my (anger, loneliness, jealousy, etc.) and may be trying to show me a new possibility for responding. This is what dreams do—show us new possibilities."

If the dreamer speaks of "positive" feelings, you might say: "If it were my dream, I feel the dream is inviting me to bring these positive emotions into my waking life—into the healing process."

When we integrate healing dream experiences into waking life, we are making an intentional response to becoming a creative, active participant in the journey through cancer. This is a primary goal of all cancer support programs.

If the dreamer speaks of conflicting emotions, you might say: “If it were my dream, I feel the dream is putting me in touch with inner conflict. Since working with dreams can help with conflicting emotions, I would want to explore the dream further.”

If you have 10-20 minutes, you might guide the dreamer in further exploration:

“What part of the dream feels the most compelling to you—character, setting, objects, action? Describe the most compelling image. What is its function? What does it do? What do you associate with it? What do you like or dislike? What feelings are evoked and how are you responding?”

“If it were my dream, I’d ask myself—what is like this in my waking life? I’d trust that working with symbols and metaphors of the dream and connecting them to my waking life will help me to discover new possibilities.”

When a patient has nightmares, affirm that when confronted and explored, both the imagery and the energy will change and the energy will be freed for growth and healing. Share with them that when we give attention to an image, it changes. When our intention is to participate in the process of transformation, then disturbing imagery and the energy it carries will evolve in a direction that moves the dreamer out of a place of fear and despair and into a direction of hope and a sense of meaning and new direction.

Evolving dream imagery corresponds to the transformation of emotions and attitudes.

The personal imagery of dreams provides powerful impact on mind, body and spirit when it is used in meditative activities such as guided imagery, meditation, art therapy, yoga, etc. Encourage them to take advantage of the various mind/body programs available, and to integrate their dream imagery into them.

Dreamers can use these transformed images as personal “medicine” any time they choose. Through relaxing and imagining the impact of the energy on the body, mind and spirit, the dreamer can become a full participant in the healing process.