

Nightmare Numbers Surprisingly High

Before you curl up in bed tonight and doze off peacefully, here's some eye-opening news to ponder: Nightmares, at least among young adults, apparently occur more than twice as often as scientists previously thought. Furthermore, emotionally stable people have about the same number of nightmares as highly anxious individuals.

These findings, reported in the February *JOURNAL OF ABNORMAL PSYCHOLOGY* by James M. Wood and Richard R. Bootzin of the University of Arizona in Tucson, challenge the long-standing view that frequent nightmares in an adult reflect deep-seated anxiety and are a possible symptom of mental disturbance.

"We were stunned when we looked at our results," Wood says.

In the Arizona team's view, anxiety usually does not cause nightmares, but nightmares may often cause anxiety. Only as the frightening aspects of the unconscious drama play out in the dream do feelings of anxiety emerge, the team suggests. If further research supports

this contention, then researchers and clinicians may need to reevaluate their reliance on frequent nightmares as a primary sign of anxiety and stress disorders in general, and of post-traumatic stress disorder in particular.

In three previous studies, other researchers examined nightmare prevalence by asking college students to estimate the number of nightmares they had during the past year. Between 10 percent and 25 percent reported at least one nightmare per month, with an annual average of five to 10 dreams per student. Two surveys of the general population, also based on nightmare recollections for the prior year, led to estimates that as many as one in 12 people experience a current problem with nightmares.

Wood and Bootzin had 220 undergraduates estimate the number of nightmares they had during the previous year. Students also filled out questionnaires on anxiety and artistic interests, since heightened creativity has been linked to frequent nightmares. The students also

kept a dream log for two weeks. On waking each morning, they recorded whether they had had a nightmare and, if so, how many. None of the earlier studies used daily logs.

The researchers defined a nightmare as "a dream that frightens the dreamer," thus excluding some upsetting or sad dreams some view as nightmares, Wood says. Nearly 47 percent of the students reported at least one nightmare in their dream logs. Based on the logs, the estimated average annual number of nightmares for each student totaled 24—about 2½ times the annual frequency estimated from the retrospective reports.

Neither anxiety nor creativity was linked to a greater number of nightmares, the researchers report. Previous studies had found a modest link between anxiety and nightmares. "The data suggest anxious individuals don't have more nightmares, but they may be more likely to remember and report nightmares retrospectively," Wood maintains.

In another recent investigation, a team directed by Ernest Hartmann of Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston concluded that people with persistent, frequent nightmares are emotionally vulnerable, sensitive and creative and have some schizophrenic-like oddities of thought (SN: 1/17/87, p.37). But Hartmann recruited his subjects through newspaper ads and thus studied only those most anxious to talk about their nightmares, Wood says.

Hartmann finds the nightmare frequencies reported by Wood and Bootzin "somewhat surprising" and says people may overestimate the number of nightmares when told to pay attention to them on a daily basis.

Wood says nightmare reports were indeed slightly inflated during the first few days the students kept logs, but then leveled off. After statistical correction for the initial jump, daily logs still indicated twice as many nightmares annually as retrospective reports.

Preliminary studies by the Arizona researchers and others indicate that nightmare frequency, as well as dream recall, decreases during adulthood and stabilizes at around age 40.

Nightmare intensity, rather than frequency, may be critical for those who are distressed by frightening dreams, Wood says. It is worth examining the theory that trauma victims do not have a surfeit of nightmares but instead are sensitized to the content of their dreams and react with heightened anxiety, he adds, noting that researchers have yet to study nightmare frequency among people with anxiety disorders.

— B. Bower

Health groups find consensus on fat in diet

The National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP) this week urged all Americans, including children aged 2 and older, to eat diets lower in saturated fat and cholesterol.

The report drawn up by NCEP's panel on population strategies is not the first to advocate a heart-healthy diet. The American Heart Association and a report issued last March by the National Academy of Sciences make similar recommendations. But the NCEP advisory marks the first time the medical establishment has reached a consensus on what constitutes a healthy diet for young children.

Claude Lenfant, director of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, which administers the NCEP, says the guidelines in the new report go beyond previous recommendations and should resolve public confusion created by last September's publication of *Heart Failure* (1989, Thomas J. Moore, Random House). The book's author, a journalist, argues that reducing high blood cholesterol does little to ward off heart-disease risk in children, women and the elderly—a conclusion Lenfant calls misleading. "The overwhelming international consensus among medical researchers is that high blood cholesterol is strongly associated with heart disease," Lenfant says.

Noting that saturated fat raises blood cholesterol and can lead to the development of coronary artery disease, the

panel recommends that everyone, including children over 2, limit the calories derived from saturated fat to less than 10 percent of their total caloric intake. The panel's recommended diet derives an average of about 30 percent of its calories from total fat intake and includes less than 300 milligrams of cholesterol per day. Red meat and dairy products rich in butterfat represent the major sources of saturated fat and cholesterol.

The American Academy of Pediatrics joins other major medical associations in supporting the NCEP guidelines, even though it has voiced concerns in the past about feeding children low-fat diets (SN: 10/8/88, p.234). Ronald E. Kleinman of Harvard Medical School in Boston, says a diet with 30 percent of its total calories derived from fat is an appropriate goal for children age 2 or older. But he cautions that parents shouldn't go overboard, because children need 30 percent fat in their diet to grow properly. The NCEP panel and the academy do not advise parents to feed restricted-fat diets to children under age 2.

The report's suggestions could save lives, says panel chairman Richard Carleton of Brown University in Providence, R.I. "Such a population approach should reduce the average blood cholesterol of Americans at least 10 percent and should result in an approximate 20 percent reduction in coronary heart disease," he says.

— K.A. Fackelmann