

Tapping into the
Wisdom of Your
Dreams
to Heal Chronic Illness

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Our dreams, nightmares, and waking dream-states reflect our whole lives: Our physical bodies, our health and well-being, our emotions, our thinking and behavioral patterns, and our spiritual world.

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Chronic illnesses can sap our strength and energy. When so much of our vitality is caught up in pain and fatigue management, we often feel that we don't have enough of our vital force left to enjoy our lives. One of my clients who struggled for years with fibromyalgia said that at its most debilitating she would frequently have "three-bath days," along with two to three naps in between. Today, she is a vibrant author, artist, mother of three and grandmother of two. She attributes much of her healing to the active integrative dreamwork we have done for the past several years, in addition to her supplements, energy work, and meditation. Dreamwork is a vital addition to our repertoire of healing modalities that allows us to tap into the wisdom of our own inner healer.

THE PARTS AND THE WHOLE: CONNECTING THE REALMS THROUGH DREAMING

Our dreams, nightmares, and waking dream-states reflect our whole lives: Our physical bodies, our health and well-being, our emotions, our thinking and behavioral patterns, and our spiritual world. According to both cybernetics and many (if not most) spiritual belief systems, a change in a part can effect

a change in the whole. A change in our dreaming can create a change in our lives, and vice versa. Many spiritual icons reflect this interface between realms: The Hamsa, (hand of Fatima) protects us from the evil eye. Medals of Christian saints offer protection according to the specific meaning or purpose of each saint. The Star of David, composed of two triangles superimposed (one upside down on top of the other) represents the message "As above, so below." So, if we connect into the healing potentials available in all realms, we optimize our healing. Our dreams can connect us with realms and energies that our waking minds are too busy or too skeptical to entertain.

Connecting to, decoding, and then putting into action the messages we receive through our Dreaming allows us to access places that our linear left-sided brains cannot access when we are wide awake. While asleep, (or in the in-between liminal states of the hypnopompic and hypnagogic zones as we are just waking, or just falling asleep) our intuitive and creative right brains take over the leadership of our consciousness. The parts of your being that are affected by chronic illness can show up in your dreaming, and so can guidelines and strategies to solutions.



A colleague of mine who has scoliosis dreamed that her body was slowly filling up with shredded cardboard that gradually was hardening into a thick inflexible paste that would take over her lungs and breath. This dream image reflected the process of her illness – in fact, left untreated, she could lose her ability to stand upright, and her breathing would become compromised. Among other things, the dream alerted her to the need to take action in her life to prevent this from happening. By attending to the imagery and unpacking its meaning, the dream guided her to explore alternative treatment modalities. She needed ideas to help her thin, loosen, and ultimately dissolve the pasty dream cardboard, and to “straighten up” parts of her life so she could breathe more easily.

MEDIC ALERT DREAMS

Some dreams come through specifically for the function of a medic alert, letting us know sometimes directly, but more often through metaphor and symbol that there is something awry in our bodies that needs to be attended to. These types of dreams are called prodromal dreams. Jack came to our dream circle for some months with dreams of dripping water that were escalating. In his first dream of the series, his sink faucet was dripping. The next one featured his tub dripping more intensely. Then his basement was flooded, and finally his ceiling and walls began to drip. In the dream group, we questioned him first on the symbolic and metaphorical levels: What does water symbolize to him? Is something escalating in his life that is threatening to get out of control or wreck his house? As water is often a symbol of emotion, we explored whether there was unresolved grief and tears in his life. While some of these queries resonated, they did not seem to get to the whole picture. Attending to the possible medic alert part of the dream, we wondered about his internal plumbing, and encouraged him to make a doctor appointment. Even though he felt fine, and a little foolish telling his doctor about these dreams, luckily the doc took him seriously enough to run some tests and discovered early prostate cancer. Left untreated it could have become very serious; but found so early, due to tending to the dreams and acting on their message, Jack was able to have a successful treatment and receive a clean bill of health at the end.

The national cancer foundation differentiates between chronic disease and chronic illness. The former is defined based on the biomedical disease classification and includes diabetes, arthritis, asthma, heart disease, and hypertension. Chronic illness then is the personal experience of living with the affliction that often accompanies chronic disease. Our dreams can help with both.

INCUBATING THE DREAM

“Often when we are ill, the ‘call’ from deep within invites us not to try to ‘fix the problem’ but instead asks us to let go, retreat to our quiet cave and receive the incubating gift of patient warmth. Ancient Greek incubation caves where the sick reclined were seen as places of access to the Underworld, the unconscious, dreaming depths of soul where warming energy and secretive alchemical work abound. To incubate then, is to surrender to the therapeutic wisdom of Nature that resides deep within our bodies and souls. It is a phase of ‘suspended animation,’ when life is gently held, slowed, and cocooned in sleep, rest, and dreams that may cast light on the nature of the gifts that are embedded in our wounds.” (Maureen B. Roberts, PhD.)

The short explanation of dream incubation is to put our dreams to work by inviting them to answer a question. This practice in many forms goes back to ancient times. In Greece, as referred to above by Roberts, supplicants seeking aid for both their physical and non-physical ailments traveled long distances to sleep at the famous temple of the god Asclepius, the god of healing. Once they arrived, they went through a process of ritual purification, and then were invited to sleep inside the courtyard of the temple for the purpose of having a healing dream. The priests and priestesses of the temple would then let loose small yellow-green nonpoisonous snakes to slither around the courtyard and whisper the healing messages into the ears of the sleepers, to be encoded in their dreams. When they woke, the dreams were shared and interpreted by the temple priesthood, and a prescription for action was offered. Many healings were reported and documented.

We can use a variation on this temple ritual in the privacy of our own bedrooms today, without the need



for travel or snakes! Dream incubation today means taking some time to think about and journal the issue or dilemma for which you seek guidance. Whether you spend five minutes or an hour, the key to receiving a dream that you can understand most easily is to end your journaling with a clear focused question. For example, if you are considering a treatment approach for your chronic illness but are not sure if it is in your best interest or not – ask your dreaming self. After journaling your thoughts, maybe your pros and cons, end with a question something like: “Is this protocol in my highest good and best interest?” Or, if you struggle with chronic pain, ask your dreaming self something like, “Show me what else I can do to relieve this pain and suffering.” Then, write your dream down on the same page as your question so you can go back and forth between the question and the dream to see how the dream response is connected.

WHO DECIDES WHAT YOUR DREAM MEANS?

Don't give up if you don't get an answer right away. You may need some time to practice and prime the dream pump. Just keep asking or refining the question until you get a dream in response, remembering that dreams often come through in symbol and metaphor. If you can't make heads nor tails of your dream, ask your partner, friends, or counselor to help you figure it out. You may need to get bossy with your dream guide - for example having your question be framed: “Send me a clear and unambiguous dream message that answers this question tonight.” That often helps. When you work through the dream, remember that the final authority on what it means is you yourself. You can get suggestions or opinions from others, but it must resonate as true to you, your own felt sense or bone knowing that this is what the dream is telling you. This is the reason I don't use the word “interpretation” when working with dreams, rather to speak of guidance, dreamwork, or dream exploration.

NEXT STEPS TO HEALING: ACTIVE INTEGRATED DREAMWORK

Once you have received a dream and have deciphered its meanings (there may be several simultaneously

true levels of meaning at the concrete, metaphorical, and/or spiritual levels), the next needed step is to take action in your life. By acting on the messages we receive from our dreams we are giving our wise unconscious the message that we are taking it seriously, and it is then more apt to continue to provide information for us. If the answer to one of your dream questions was a dream advising you to walk in nature, please do so! Even small local city parks. If your dream suggests that you change your diet in some way, try it for two or three weeks; see what happens. A significant number for healing addictions or breaking cravings is forty. Rain fell for forty days and forty nights after Noah boarded the ark before getting the rainbow promise, and the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years after slavery in Egypt until reaching the promised land. Perhaps this number will make itself known to you.


Activating your dream messages may also include a small symbolic act. Plant a flower to symbolize new growth; if your dreamscape was visited by a cat, buy a small stuffed cat; if your dreams tell you that blue is your healing color, add blue to your surroundings or wardrobe - the list goes on. Be on the lookout for the gifts of healing both in your sleeping dreams and waking life. And may it be so. €

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