

Sleep Issues: Insomnia, Vivid Dreams, & Co-Sleeping



After the death of a loved one, many people experience three common sleep issues: insomnia, vivid dreams, and co-sleeping. These sleep issues are normal after a death and most will resolve naturally. However, if any of these problems continue for a prolonged period of time (more than six months), please consult your primary doctor, psychiatrist, or a counselor.

Insomnia is not just the inability to fall asleep, but it also includes waking up frequently, having trouble going back to sleep when awakened, relying on medication to stay asleep, experiencing daytime drowsiness, and waking up too early. Unfortunately, insomnia is one of the more common physical side effects of grieving. If you are experiencing insomnia, consider these tips:

- **Create a sleep routine.** Develop a sleep routine by associating certain actions with sleep. This can include lighting a scented candle, listening to soothing music, taking a warm bubble bath, doing bedtime yoga, or drinking hot tea.
- **Limit bed/bedroom use.** Use your bed/bedroom only for sleep by limiting your time in bed while awake. Additionally, make sure your bedroom is quiet, dark, and cool. Noise, light, and heat can interrupt your sleep, so it might help to use a sound machine or earplugs, get some blackout curtains, and turn your fan on high.
- **Practice mindfulness.** Three mindfulness activities that can prepare your body for sleep are progressive relaxation, meditation, and abdominal breathing (deep, slow breathing). Progressive relaxation means tensing sections of your body, holding that tension for 10 seconds and then relaxing those muscles. Continue to do this for every muscle group in your body until you reach your head.
- **Create a sleep journal.** Keep track of things that could be instigating your insomnia. Try writing down what you eat, drink, think, or do during the day, and then record your sleep experience the next morning. The goal is to pinpoint certain behaviors that may be causing you to stay awake.
- **Strive to include...** A healthy dose of natural sunlight, exercise, restorative yoga, or a massage during the day. Good sleep begins with taking care of your body. Restorative yoga is the realignment of your breath and body by practicing stillness or gentle movements for a long period of time.
- **Try to avoid...** Caffeine after 3 p.m., excessive alcohol, napping during the day, eating large late-night meals, and using tablets, phones, or laptops in bed. The bright screen from your electronics stops the production of melatonin, a natural occurring hormone in your body that enables you to fall asleep easily.

Vivid dreams are common in both children and adults that are grieving. A **vivid dream** is a dream that is of higher intensity or emotional content, sometimes even waking the sleeper because it feels so real or because the body reacts as if under threat and the dreamer feels jolted awake. Many bereaved people also experience visitation dreams, which is the experience of having the deceased come to you in your dreams. These dreams can appear hyper-real and may trigger stressful or joyful emotions. Whether they are frightening or comforting, there are actions you can take to explore the meaning behind these dreams:

- **Be prepared.** Holidays, birthdays, and the anniversary of your loved one's death may trigger visitation dreams. Try to be aware of this vulnerable time in order to reduce the shock of experiencing a vivid dream.





- **Explore the interpretation of your dream.** What your dream means to you relies on your interpretation of symbols and the frequency of the reoccurring dream. Is this a dream in a long series of dreams? Is there a theme? Do any colors or shapes hold special meaning for you?
- **Notice your feelings.** Either during the dream or when you wake up, it may be helpful to notice the feelings you are experiencing. Even if your dream doesn't make sense, your emotions in the dream may be telling you what you are feeling consciously or subconsciously. A good way to remember your feelings is to write down the dream and your reaction to it when you first wake up in the morning.
- **Pay attention to dream fragments.** Even if you only remember pieces of your dream, these pieces can still be helpful in your grief journey. Keeping track of these dream fragments may be helpful in piecing together a more cohesive story of your grief.
- **Try to be nonjudgmental.** If you want to experience dreams about your loved one, but have yet to do so, understand that this in no way implies a lack of love for the deceased. Even if you do not dream of your loved one you can still find messages of comfort through other symbols while you're awake.

It is common for children to **co-sleep** in the same room or bed with their parent(s) after the death of a loved one. This may stem from a fear for the safety and well-being of the surviving family members, a sense of responsibility to protect other family members, or nightmares and insomnia. Consider the following tips for dealing with your children in co-sleeping situations:

- **Have a family discussion.** Open a family dialogue to talk about everyone's fears specifically concerning any sleep issues. Children may not be able to comfort themselves the same way an adult can; therefore, starting a conversation that allows for those fears to be heard is a good place to start.
- **Offer reassurance and comfort.** Reassure your children that you are alright. Before bed, spend some quality time with your children talking about any positive plans for the next day, telling a funny story, reading an uplifting book, or giving big hugs, backrubs, and kisses.
- **Prepare your children for good sleep.** The first step is to help them get in the habit of a nighttime routine: take a bath, put on pajamas, brush teeth, lay out clothes for tomorrow, and read a book. Helping them relax when it's close to bedtime will enable them to associate safety and comfort with sleep.
- **Find a physical representation of protection.** Protective symbols can be a stuffed animal or making a dream catcher together. Giving your children something they can physically hold or see at night can remind them that they are loved and not alone. If these do not work, try telling your children that you will check on them in 10 minutes, this may make them feel safe enough to relax and fall asleep before you even come back.
- **Use caution.** Be careful of using your children as a source of comfort when co-sleeping. It is okay if co-sleeping is comforting to you for a short period of time, but it is important to make sure your children's fears are being directly addressed, and that your children do not feel responsible for taking care of your emotional needs.

Further Reading:

- *Grief Dreams: How They Help Us Heal After the Death of a Loved One* by T.J. Wray & Ann B. Price
- *Yoga for Grief Relief: Simple Practices for Transforming Your Grieving Mind and Body* by Antonio Sausys
- *The Path Through Grief: A Compassionate Guide* by Marguerite Bouvard with Evelyn Gladu
- *Teen Grief Relief* by Dr. Heidi Horsley and Dr. Gloria Horsley





- *Mindfulness for Prolonged Grief: A Guide to Healing after Loss When Depression, Anxiety, and Anger Won't Go Away* by Sameet M. Kumar

References:

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