

CLINICIAN PRACTICE HANDOUT

Nightmare Rehearsal

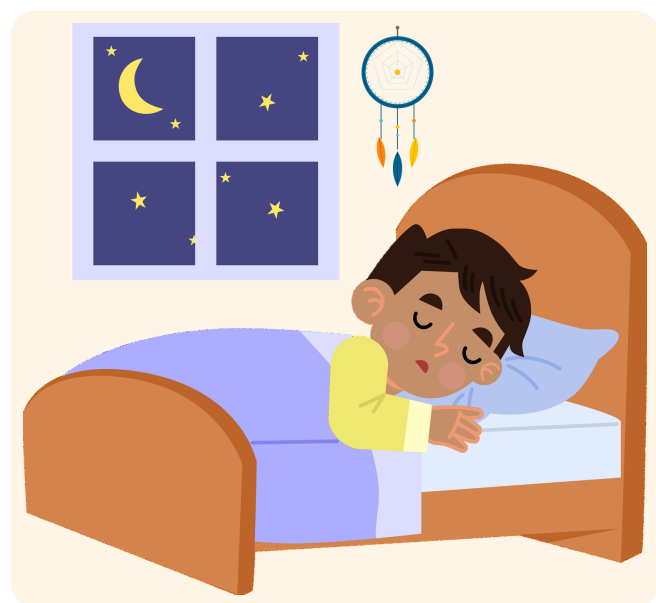
Put bad dreams to bed: an image rehearsal intervention for children's repetitive nightmares

Image rehearsal is one of the most effective tools for repetitive nightmares. The child describes the bad dream, then rewrites it, replacing the frightening ending with one where they are safe, powerful, and often a little silly. Rehearsed nightly, the new dream retrains the sleeping brain.

COMPONENT: COGNITIVE COPING

Technically a Cognitive Coping skill. It may also be introduced earlier in the model as a coping skill for this specific symptom.

THE INTERVENTION



The child rehearses a new, safe ending each night at bedtime with their caregiver. A dream catcher can be lent as a temporary, borrowed helper the child returns when it is no longer needed.

BACKGROUND

Image rehearsal therapy comes from the work of **Dr. Barry Krakow**, with additional suggestions by Ashley Fiore, LCSW. Learn more at nightmaretreatment.com.

This technique is ideal for **repetitive nightmares**. If the client has different nightmares that share similar scary themes, have the client pick the most recent nightmare to work with.

For children, enlist the parent's support so nightmare rehearsal is practiced at home.

MATERIALS

Computer and printer

Art supplies: markers, crayons, colored pencils

Paper · Large mailing envelope

Dream catcher (optional)

A dream catcher can be purchased or made with beads, feathers, and string wrapped around a cut-out CoolWhip lid, with string stretched across the inside to form a web. Hang feathers from the bottom.

THE METHOD, AT A GLANCE

1

Describe the dream

Capture full sensory detail.

2

Cut before the scary part

Stop at the scariest moment.

3

Rewrite a safe, silly ending

The child solves the problem themselves.

4

Rehearse it nightly

Read at bedtime until it sticks.



⚠ CAUTION

Help the client create a funny or peaceful ending. A vengeful ending can raise a child's cortisol levels and may call for your clinical guidance.

Keep the new ending playful and empowering. Silliness is doing real work here: it signals safety to the nervous system. Bonus points if the caregiver can join in on the funny or peaceful ending. It is also protective to pull in themes of community support for the child in the new dream.

HOW TO FACILITATE

- 1 **Describe the dream.** Have the client describe the disturbing dream in detail, including thoughts, feelings, and actions. Include sensory information: sights, sounds, smells, and tactile sensations. As the client describes the dream, type out every detail. You may need to prompt: "And then what happened? What could you see? Smell?"

When the client finishes, read it back to them. Have them identify the scariest part of the original dream.

- 2 **Cut before the scariest part.** Copy the dream up to immediately before the scariest moment. Tell the client: "Now we are going to write your new dream. In this one, **you** solve the problem yourself. No one else can fix it for you. You have to be safe, and you can do things you might not normally do in real life, because this is a dream. This works best if you can make it funny."
- 3 **Model it (optional).** If age appropriate, you may show the client the Boggart-in-the-closet scene from *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, where students use the "Riddikulus" charm to make their fears look ridiculous and less frightening.
- 4 **Rewrite the ending.** Have the client rewrite the nightmare into the dream they want instead. The child must be the one to defeat the problem: no one can do it for them. They move from powerless and helpless to the most powerful figure in the dream, overpowering the scary figure in whatever way they wish. They can have superpowers.

Note: A silly component helps, such as using silly string to capture the bad guy. Invite the parent to join in building the silly ending. It also helps when the child's family or community cheer them on. For example, after the scary person is arrested, the neighborhood lifts the child onto their shoulders as a hero while the bad guy rides off to jail with the siren blaring. This builds a new positive association with the dream.



KEEP IT VIVID

The new dream must feel just as **real** as the nightmare. Full sensory detail is what lets the brain rehearse a different outcome.

Reread the new dream aloud so it is experienced as vividly as the original.

HOW TO FACILITATE

Continued

- 5 Make it sensory.** When rewriting, include thoughts, feelings, and actions, plus sights, sounds, smells, and tactile sensations. Reread to capture every detail the client wants. Invite the parent to add funny touches that support the child's creation.
- 6 Print and practice.** Print the new dream. Young children can draw the happy resolution. Place the dream and illustration in an envelope. Have the parent guide the child through reading it together each night, after the regular bedtime routine, so it is the last thing before sleep. Predict that the nightmare will not return. Some children report having the new dream instead, and if that happens, it will be funny.
- 7 For teens and adults.** An adult client can have someone read the dream to them, or record themselves reading it and listen each night. Teens may also record and replay it nightly. The client and family should keep rereading until the nightmare goes away.
- 8 Follow up.** Check in with the client and family after a week. If the nightmare persists, the new dream may not be powerful enough, so add more detail and power elements.

ASHLEY'S CLINICAL TIP

Lending a child a dream catcher to "catch" the nightmare works as a gentle placebo. Frame it as a borrowed helper they will return once they no longer need it, so another child can use it too. This gives the child a concrete signal that the bad dreams are ending.



A New Ending

See how one child turned a scary dream into a dream where they win.

A WORKED EXAMPLE

Sample Old Dream

I'm in my room. I see my flower blanket and my pillow on the bed. My brother tells me to come here. He says it in a mean voice, and I see he's glaring at me. He has a lighter in his hand. He reaches out to burn me with it and **(stop here: scariest part)**

The nightmare is cut at its most frightening moment. The client rewrites everything after this line.

Revised as the "New" Dream

I'm in my room. I see my flower blanket and my pillow. My brother tells me to come here in a mean voice, glaring, with a lighter in his hand. He reaches out to burn me and I scream, "Not today!" I karate chop it out of his hand. The lighter flies up, falls, and burns his hand. He blows on it like birthday candles.

I kick him up into the sky. He hits every branch of a pine tree on the way up, then lands in a cactus bush and looks like a pin cushion. "Ow, ow! Jenny, do you have any tweezers?" I hand him mine and he picks them out one by one, making a funny face with each tug.

FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

1. Have younger kids put the new dream under their pillow to sleep on, reinforcing the idea that the child is influencing the new dream's success and the nightmare's extinction.
2. On the outside of the envelope, have the child draw a picture of themselves triumphant in the new dream.
3. Lend the client a dream catcher to "catch" the nightmare. Frame it as a temporary, borrowed support they will return once they no longer need it, so other kids can use it too. You can also make a dream catcher together in session, and suggest the technique works for everyone who uses it, as a way to predict success.



Silliness is the secret. The sillier and safer the new dream, the more the sleeping brain believes it. Let the child lead the funny parts.



You are the hero in the new dream. Draw or write what happens when **you** win.

