

New study claims obsessive thinking good for your health

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Problem keeping you up at night? A new research study published this week suggests the solution may be as simple as following the old adage to "sleep on it".

A two-year study entitled "The Effects of Obsessive Thinking on Unconscious Problem Solving", was conducted by Weber State University Behavior Science Researchers who claim that the dreaming mind is an untapped resource for anyone struggling with a problem stumping the waking, conscious mind.

"We tend to be more honest with ourselves when we are asleep because safeguards controlled by our conscious minds are inactive," Researcher Dr. Samantha Dawson said. "Letting the unconscious mind work on worries or problems is like bringing in a neutral party able to look at an old situation with new eyes or remember things repressed within the recesses of one's mind by the conscious self."

The WSU team designed an experiment to test to see if the capabilities of the subconscious mind could be harnessed and the sleeping mind trained to work on and solve problems while the dreamer and conscious mind slept.

Tracy Alvarez participated in the study and volunteered to discuss her experience. "When I first signed up for the experiment, I was really skeptical," Alvarez said. "I had misplaced an important family heirloom and had looked everywhere to find it without luck, so I didn't think there was any chance I

would dream where it was, but the first night that is exactly what happened. I couldn't believe it."

Alvarez was so encouraged by her first attempt that she continued using the technique on her own. "I have gotten better at it over time, it really works for me," Alvarez said. "It is so simple, yet so effective; I use it all the time now."

On average, all humans dream three to five times each night during the Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep stage while brain waves are faster and eye movements more rapid than in other stages of the sleep process. According to the parameters of the study, a dream is simply a succession of images, thoughts, and emotions passing through the mind during sleep which everyone experiences, even if most individuals never remember dreaming.

Dawson is not the first to experiment with unconscious problem solving. Alfred Adler's research in the early 1900's concluded that there was a connection between sleep and wakefulness and that the function of the dream is a working through of unresolved problems from waking life.

Sigmund Freud believed dreams were from recent experiences and daily events which he termed "residues" and a research study performed by D. Foulkes as early as 1966 explored the topic of creative problem solving in dreams using "hidden reserves" in the unconscious.

More recently, Dr. Stanley Krippner, a professor of psychology at San Francisco's Saybrook Institute, has witnessed many of his patients over the years "accidentally" dream answers to their problems. "I believe in some instances the brain puts together a lot of little pieces of information collected by the waking mind

and comes up with a dream conclusion that is sometimes very accurate," said Krippner.

Building on the research of her predecessors, Dawson's experiment involved college-aged and young working adults who were currently dealing with personal problems which they felt unable to resolve using conventional methods. Each individual was interviewed and asked to describe their problem. They were then encouraged to think obsessively about their problem for a 24 hour period, making it the last thing they thought about before falling asleep. Participants were instructed to set their alarms 10 minutes early in an effort to help them remember their dreams better and were given tape recorders to speak into immediately after waking to describe all of the dreams they could remember, in as much detail as possible for the next 24 hours.

All information was recorded on surveys and in a second interview subjects were asked if they had any new insights into solving their problem. Although participants in the study are anonymous and Dawson could not speak about individual cases, she did say that a myriad of problems were addressed and successfully resolved using the technique from losing a loved one or a possession to dealing with a difficult step-child and choosing a career.

Even after just one night, 41 percent of participants in the study reported having a dream that they described as giving them insight into solving their problem. An additional 19 percent were unable to remember a specific dream, but reported new insight into solving their problems after the sleep experiment. "The important thing is not the form in which solutions come in, but that the individual identifies the dreams or thoughts as solutions and has some resolution in which they feel better about the problem that was bothering them," Dawson said.

Overall, the initial data indicated a 60 percent success rate. These numbers were replicated consistently over the next two years in several additional experiments conducted by Dawson and dealing with a variety of personal problems and logic puzzles. The results of the experiment showed much higher success rates for subconscious problem solving when participants were allowed to choose their own problem, opposed to giving them an abstract logic puzzle to solve.

"Early on I began noticing that answers seemed to follow a pattern," Dawson said. "The key to triggering a solution seemed to be that the problem was of a significant and personal nature to the individual."

Dawson also discovered that solutions to problems tended to follow long periods of immersion, or "obsessive thinking" and that answers varied in the forms in which they are manifest to the solution seeker. "Sometimes answers are direct, other times they are symbolic," Dawson said. "My research showed that an individual usually follows trends, either dreaming specifically about the people, events, and situations associated with their problem, or always in symbols."

According to Dawson, not all unconscious problem solving involves total resolution of an issue. "Often times respondents reported feeling better, but had no explanation why or specific dream to tie their resolution to," Dawson said. "Unconscious problem solving appears to be more of a coping mechanism than a cheat sheet offering solutions to all of life's problems."

Dawson says that while the findings are encouraging, dream therapy is not a cure-all. "Often the problems keeping people up at night don't have clear cut solutions, the amazing part of the

process is that by tapping into the subconscious mind, subjects were often able to find closure or come to terms with something bothering them like divorce or the loss of a loved one," Dawson said.

In a later study conducted by Dawson of individuals in the process of a divorce, those who dreamed specifically or angrily about their spouses also reported getting over the loss of separation much quicker and in greater numbers than those who dreamed about unrelated issues and primarily reported feeling lonely and depressed. Later studies also extended the time period from 48 hours to a week, two weeks and even a month to see if participants would experience higher problem-solving success rates over an extended period of time. According to Dawson, many participants encouraged by the early success of the experiment continued to use unconscious problem solving and reported success in being able to train their sleeping minds to solve problems, on demand.

Dawson said that although dream therapy is a long way from being recognized as an alternative to psychological therapy or medication, she hopes her work will help to change the way people approach daily problem solving. "There is a disturbing trend in the westernized world that the only way to solve our problems is through expensive counseling and the use of mind-altering meditations," Dawson said. "My hypothesis from the beginning was that untapped resources lie inside of each of us which offer a healthier and cheaper answer to solving many of our daily worries."

According to FHP accountant Ed Hill, using modern medicine to solve problems is not cheap. On average, his company spends millions of dollars a year on mental illness care and treatment. "In Utah alone, (where Dawson's study was done) our company

spends \$52,000 a month on psychiatrist and over \$100,000 a month on therapist, with treatment inside the hospital costing thousands of dollars a day," Hill said.

Dawson is the first to admit subconscious problem solving is a learned technique which does not work for everyone and is not a substitute for the treatment of chemical imbalances or serious psychological ailments. Dawson hopes her studies and findings will inspire more research on the subconscious mind and offer additional solutions for successful personal problem solving not found in a pill bottle.

"Dream incubation, through obsessive thinking, teaches the cultivation of dreams for the purpose of solving waking problems," Dawson said. "No longer are the therapist's couch and the formal doctor's office the only places to look for solutions to personal problems... The research suggests many of the solutions to our problems exist within our own minds and are only as far away as the next night's sleep."

