



Lucid dreaming is the state of becoming aware of one's dream as it occurs.

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SCIENCE | MIND, BODY, WONDER

You can learn to control your dreams. Here's how.

Lucid dreaming has been shown to reduce insomnia and anxiety, and even help people process their grief. But for most of us, it doesn't come naturally.

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If you've ever felt like you were in a movie *and* watching a movie at the same time while you were dreaming, you have probably experienced lucid dreaming. But you may not have known that's what it was called—or how it can benefit your health and well-being.

Simply put, a lucid dream is one in which the person is aware that they're dreaming and can either exert some control over the dream, or passively observe its unfolding while maintaining awareness that it's a dream. This gives the dreamer an opportunity to potentially influence their dream life—perhaps by consciously interrupting a nighttime narrative to rescript a new outcome—which can be especially helpful for reducing the frequency of nightmares in those who have them, according to [research in a 2023 issue of *Encephale*](#). Research has also found that engaging in [lucid dreaming can](#)

help people reduce the severity of their insomnia, along with symptoms of anxiety.

“Some people who lucid dream don’t want to alter the dream—they want to explore the dream and see what it offers them,” notes Antonio Zadra, a professor of psychology at the University of Montreal and co-author of *When Brains Dream*. “It’s a way of exploring your own mind and opening opportunities to engage with different parts of your psyche.”

There’s also entertainment value in lucid dreaming, says Benjamin Baird, a cognitive neuroscientist and a research professor at the University of Texas at Austin. “It’s like having your own form of virtual reality.”

History of lucid dreams

While awareness of dream states dates back centuries, it wasn’t until 1913 that the Dutch psychiatrist Frederik Van Eeden coined the term “lucid dream,” based on his own experiences. In the 1970s and 1980s, researchers, including Stanford psychophysicist Stephen LaBerge, proved that lucid dreaming was a phenomenon during REM sleep, when dreamers were asked to move their eyes in distinct patterns when they became lucid during their dreams.

Meanwhile, practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism have long believed that people can train to be lucid while dreaming through a practice called dream yoga.

“All dream yoga is lucid dreaming,” explains Michael Sheehy, a Tibetan Buddhism scholar and director of scholarship at the Contemplative Sciences Center at the University of **Virginia** in Charlottesville. “The difference is, in dream yoga you’re intentionally performing contemplative techniques while you’re in the dream. You are aware of what you’re doing while you’re dreaming and you’re doing things you can’t normally do when you’re awake.”

These intentional actions include conjuring unusual objects to appear in your dream, transforming the dream’s environment or location, or transforming one item into another, he explains.

After the dream, “you may experience cognitive flexibility, realizing how easily you can change your thoughts and mindset or how you perceive your circumstances. And you can imagine new possibilities, perspectives, and situational outcomes,” Sheehy says.

The breadth of benefits

The neurobiological underpinnings of lucid dreaming aren’t well understood, says Ken Paller, a neuroscientist at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. But preliminary research suggests there’s greater activity in the brain’s prefrontal cortex—which regulates executive functions, such as thinking and problem-solving, and emotions—and the parietal cortex, which plays a role in processing and integrating sensory information and attention.

Using electroencephalograms (EEGs), which measure electrical activity in the brain, researchers have shown that lucid dreaming “constitutes a

hybrid state of consciousness” with aspects of brain activity that are features of both waking states and REM sleep.

As far as the potential benefits of lucid dreaming go, Baird says they range from the scientific to the personal to the therapeutic.

“Traditionally, it’s been very difficult to study dreams—you’re trying to correlate reports of dreaming with what was going on physiologically in the brain,” says Baird. With techniques developed to induce eye movements and lucid dreams during REM sleep, researchers can essentially mark the start and end of a lucid dream, “which allows for precise alignment with subjective reports and brain physiology reports, [which] used to be impossible,” he explains.

On a personal level, lucid dreams can enhance creativity and contribute to people’s well-being by helping them learn things about themselves that they wouldn’t otherwise know. “They can learn skills, come up with answers to problems, and experience spiritual transformation,” says Paller.

Christopher Mazurek heard about lucid dreaming when he was in high school and tried for a year and a half to do it based on a book he read. It wasn’t until he volunteered in Paller’s lab in 2018, as a college student at Northwestern, that Mazurek had his first lucid dream. The lab uses the targeted memory reactivation technique, in which specific sounds are used to provoke a lucid dream while the person is asleep.

Once he was able to do it, Mazurek’s lucid dreaming was particularly healing; his grandparents had recently passed away and he was able to talk to them in his lucid dreams. “It was powerful and it helped me process my grief,” says Mazurek, who is now a research assistant at Northwestern University. “It was a very exhilarating, rewarding experience.”

Lucid dreaming also offers people opportunities to practice their skills. Research has found that practicing motor skills in lucid dreams is a form of mental rehearsal that improves subsequent performance in sports or games in real life.

Meanwhile, on a therapeutic level, lucid dreaming has been found to help with insomnia and nightmares. If someone has recurrent nightmares and learns how to engage in lucid dreaming, they can recognize that they are dreaming, that what they’re experiencing isn’t real, and possibly change the dream’s outcome. “This can be a powerful transformative experience, helping them reach some level of resolution or healing,” Baird explains.

Learning to have lucid dreams

If you don’t have lucid dreams naturally (most people don’t), you can learn to induce them through a variety of techniques—but there can be drawbacks.

In a study published in the journal *Sleep Advances*, researchers examined and analyzed 400 posts on a lucid-dreaming discussion forum and discovered both positive effects and negative experiences. On the upside, many people reported dream enhancement, waking up in a positive mood, and fewer nightmares.

On the negative side, people reported feeling paralyzed—unable to yell or move—or having trouble distinguishing whether they were asleep or really awake, and less restorative sleep.

“Some people don’t want to have lucid dreams—they just want to sleep,” says Remington Mallett, a cognitive neuroscientist at the Center for Advanced Research in Sleep Medicine at the University of Montreal.

If you decide to try lucid dreaming, a prerequisite is to have fairly good dream recall, experts say. “If you keep a dream journal, you will start to have better dream recall,” Mallett says.

The techniques used to induce lucid dreams have varying degrees of success and there isn’t one that works for everyone. “It’s a learnable skill but people make it sound much easier than it really is,” Zadra says.

Among the more proven techniques are cognitive ones that are performed during the day, or while you’re falling asleep.

With the reality testing technique, you stop what you’re doing at regular intervals throughout the day, and ask yourself whether you’re in a dream or reality then go back to your usual activities, Zadra explains. The idea is that these “reality checks” eventually can become incorporated into “a person's dream, enabling them to distinguish between sleep and wakefulness realities, which in turn induces dream lucidity,” according to [research published this year](#).

A technique called the Mnemonic Induction of Lucid Dreams involves rehearsing a dream during the day and visualizing becoming lucid while telling yourself, *the next time I’m dreaming, I’ll recognize that I’m dreaming*.

With the Wake-Up-Back-to-Bed technique, the person sets an alarm clock to go off after about six hours of sleep, stays awake for approximately 30 minutes, then goes back to bed with the intention to become lucid if they start dreaming. Another one, called the Senses Initiated Lucid Dream technique, involves waking up after about five hours of sleep and repeatedly shifting your attention between visual, auditory, and physical sensations before going back to sleep.

Of these three techniques, a 2023 study found that rehearsing a dream during the day [was the most effective](#).

Through a process of trial and error, you could see which one works for you. Or, “you can stack them up and use them all,” Baird says, because they can work together.

Regardless of the frequency, lucid dreaming can help people gain a sense of “agency or control over their dream content,” Mallett says. Which is helpful, he adds, “because the effects of dreams can carry over into waking life.”
