

## ORIGINAL ARTICLES

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# Examining The Healing Process Through Dreams in Bereavement

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**Study Objective:** To investigate a woman's two and a half year dream journal throughout her grief process which related to the loss of her father.

**Method:** There were a total of 16 dreams written down immediately upon awakening and dated. Nine of the dreams had the deceased loved one present in the imagery. The dreams that had the deceased present in the imagery were scored using Garfield's themes (7). Characters, as well as positive and negative dream elements (of all the dreams) were analyzed using Hall and Van de Castle (24) scoring guidelines. Seasonal changes in dream frequency for all of the dreams were examined by obtaining the date that each dream was recorded.

**Results:** Dream content showed time-dependent changes as dreamer happiness and appearance of family/relatives (alive and deceased in waking life) increased over time, while animals decreased over time. Additionally, dream themes changed according to Garfield's theory of healthy changes in grief (7). Furthermore, the dreams examined occurred during specific times that related to the memory of the deceased in a meaningful way, and were not sporadic throughout the year.

**Conclusions:** Time-dependent changes were observed in both dream themes and dream content, which can show the waking day progression through the healing processes in bereavement. This appears promising in the clinical and applied fields when working with dreams in relation to grief and bereavement. There is still further need for research in this field to assist those who support the bereaved. (*Sleep and Hypnosis* 2014;16(1-2):10-17)

**Key words:** Dreams, dream content, deceased imagery, grief, bereavement

## INTRODUCTION

Research suggests that the death of a loved one is one of life's most significant stressors and the level of stress caused by bereavement

has been associated with significant deficits in immune system functioning (1-3). Furthermore, it has been found that in the early months of bereavement, increased mortality and morbidity of surviving spouses or parents are frequently reported (4). Cognitive stress theory suggests that the death of a loved one is stressful because it is a disruptive event that necessitates a considerable level of adjustment (5). Successfully adjusting to a world without the deceased loved one is one of the main focuses of The Task Model of Mourning developed by Worden (6).

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With regards to coping with bereavement, research suggests that dreams which involve the deceased loved one can provide the bereaved with experiences that may help them overcome areas of complication and help with adjustment (7–10). Additionally, Worden (6) suggests in The Task Model of Mourning that to cope with the loss more effectively it is important that the bereaved find a way to remember and remain connected to the deceased (without it negatively affecting their life). These dream experiences can help the bereaved cope with the loss more effectively than they would have otherwise and can provide a space to remain connected to the deceased loved one.

Frequently reported dream images during the grief process include having the dreamer awaken with a feeling that they have had actual contact with the spirit of the deceased (7,8,10,11). The sensation of having contact with the deceased can lead the bereaved to awaken with a deep sense of awe, self-renewal, and a feeling of peace (6,8,10). These ‘visitation’ type dreams can be beneficial in one’s adjustment after the loss, as the dreams can both promote a deeper conviction of life after death and assist in finding personal meaning (7,10,12,13). It should be mentioned that not all dreams provide this positive affect, as there are some types of dreams that can cause discomfort upon awakening (for example seeing the deceased loved one dying again [7,8])

Common imagery also includes the deceased not physically appearing in the dream, but being mentioned by another character in the dream (7,14). However, it does seem to be common to have at least one dream following the death of a loved one where the deceased is present in the imagery; research suggests approximately 58% of individuals report having a dream of the deceased following their death (15). Although having one dream of the deceased may be common, the frequency of these types of dreams may be important in the healing process – but as of yet, this has remained uninvestigated.

With regards to examining dream content,

many gender differences exist in dream imagery that can complicate analysis (16). Gender differences appear at an early age in dreams and continue into adulthood (16). These gender differences then remain consistent over time (17). Differences exist in terms of quality; for example, men tend to dream more about aggression, failure or success, unfamiliar characters and groups of people than women, whereas, women tend to dream more about friendly interactions, familiar characters, and interacting with dream characters one on one than men (16). Gender differences also exist in terms of quantity; for example, the overall frequency of dream recall is generally higher for women than men (18).

Just as there are gender differences in dream content, there has been support for gender differences in bereavement. A review article on gender differences in spousal bereavement by Stroebe, Stroebe, and Schut (19) found that bereaved men suffer greater than bereaved women in terms of negative health consequences, mortality, depression, and mental illness after the death of a spouse. While gender differences seem to appear both in dreams and in bereavement, research exploring dreams in bereavement has not frequently separated dream samples by gender (7,8,20).

In terms of empirically measuring dream content, there is great range in the number of dream themes (or categories) reported; research by Garfield (8) utilized as many as nineteen themes, while Barrett (20) used as few as four. Garfield (7) hypothesized that different common dream themes would occur under the three general phases in grief (numbness, disorganization, and reorganization). The first phase (numbness) is seen as shock or denial of the death (7). The second phase (disorganization) is when the numbness starts to decrease and the repressed emotions begin to surface (7). The third phase (reorganization) is when the bereaved start to positively adjust to the new environment where the deceased is not present (7). As healing begins to occur after the loss, the dream themes should change in a manner that

corresponds to the Continuity Hypothesis of dreaming (the theory that states that dream imagery reflects the dreamer's waking life [17]). It has been theorized by Garfield (7) that Alive Again themes occur in the first stage of grief (the numbness phase). In agreement with this, research has found a tendency for Alive Again dreams to occur earlier in the grief process (21).

With regards to previous research on dreams that have the deceased present in the dream imagery, a comprehensive literature search yielded only one previous investigation examining longitudinal changes in dream imagery that accompany coping with (or recovering from) the grief/bereavement process over time (21). Belicki et al. (21) investigated a widowers' 16 year dream diary (106 dreams), and found the majority of dream themes being that of Dying Again and Passionate Encounter (with nine other common themes being found). The study did not comment on how the bereaved felt about the loss of his wife – however, previous research has suggested that one's grief is an important aspect for understanding dream content during bereavement (22,23).

It has been theorized by Garfield (7) that Dying Again themes occur in the first stage of grief called the numbness phase. If this is any indication about an individual's state of grief (as per the Continuity Hypothesis [17]); it might be suggested that the widower may be having difficulty adjusting after the loss (since Dying Again dreams did not cease early on in the diary). In agreement with this notion, research by Hinton et al. (23) found that, as complicated grief symptoms and PTSD severity increased, the frequency of dreams of the deceased also increased. Further research has also suggested that if grief becomes complicated, dream imagery is affected. These effects have been noted by Germain et al. (22), who found that for women, as anxiety, grief intensity, and depression scores decreased, the frequency of friendly interactions in dream imagery increased.

Additionally, the male dreamer in the study by Belicki et al. (21) had new wife dreams

within 17 months after the loss of his spouse which the authors commented were brought on by the establishment of a new relationship. The exact time frame of him finding a new relationship, remarrying, and getting divorced after the loss is not given (only commented on) but this could suggest that he remarried as a way to cope with the loss which could have been counterproductive in the healing process, as the negative dream theme supports. It can therefore be argued that this study with all its strengths of being the only study to investigate the longitudinal changes in dream imagery for the dreams in bereavement lacks clarity as to the dreamer's state of grief.

In order to both explore how reflections of grief in dream imagery change over time following the death of a loved one, and to provide a more detailed analysis of the characteristics of dream imagery in women during bereavement, an exploratory case study was conducted to examine time-dependent changes in dream imagery during bereavement. It was hypothesized that time-dependent changes would be observed in both dream themes and content, which should reflect waking day progression through the healing processes in bereavement. Specifically, dream content should increase in positive elements (such as friendliness, success, good fortune, and happiness).

In addition, Worden (6) states significant occasions (such as the anniversary of the death, birthdays, significant holidays, etc.) can trigger dreams with the deceased physically present. However, this phenomenon has not been extensively explored by previous research. To explore the effects this phenomenon might have on dream imagery (about the deceased loved one) over long periods, it was therefore also hypothesized that dreams (about the deceased loved one) examined during a long period of bereavement would not be sporadic throughout the year, but instead would occur during specific times of the year that relate to the memory of the deceased in a meaningful way.

## METHOD

### Participant

The participant was recruited through her volunteer participation whilst attending the annual conference of the International Association for the Study of Dreams (IASD). The dreams examined were from a two and a half year dream journal kept by a woman (age 47) that lives in the United States of America, who lost her father on September 1, 2000. The woman selected out all the dreams she felt specifically were related to the loss of her father. Her father passed away suddenly from thyroid cancer at the age of 75. The participant indicated that her grief was not complicated in any nature, and stated that by the last dream in the journal she had worked through the loss and felt a sense of resolution.

### Procedure

All dreams were written down immediately upon awakening and dated. A total of 16 dreams were written down that were selected by the bereaved to be about the deceased loved one. Only the first dream of the 16 did not have the deceased present as a character/topic in the dream (but the dream theme referenced his cancer treatment). Dreams included those that had the deceased physically present as a character (N=9) and those where the deceased was mentioned by another character in the dream (N=6). Ethics approval for this study was granted by the tri-council committee at Trent University (Peterborough, Canada).

### Measures

Dream themes (which had the deceased physically present) that were investigated in this analysis were chosen from previous research by Garfield (7) who theorized that each would be located among the three phases of bereavement. The 11 common dream themes that were analyzed were: 1) Alive Again, 2) Dying Again,

3) Saying Goodbye, 4) Taking-a-Journey, 5) Disapproval, 6) Telephone-Call, 7) Young-Well-Again, 8) Approval, 9) Advice-Comfort-Gift, 10) Passionate-Encounter, and 11) Daily-Activity. Only those dreams that had the deceased physically present in the imagery (N=9) were grouped into one of the eleven themes according to the methods used in previous research by Garfield (7).

Dream content was analyzed using Hall and Van de Castle (24) guidelines for content analysis (a text-based method for quantifying written dream reports to allow statistical analysis of dream imagery). The Hall and Van de Castle dream categories are used to obtain an overall score for each dream which contains the occurrence of each operationally defined category. The Hall and Van de Castle content analysis scoring system has been found to be a reliable approach to analyzing dream imagery, as it has been shown in previous research to have acceptable inter-rater reliability (16). Since the coding system has demonstrated acceptable inter-rater reliability, it continues to be the one of the main coding systems frequently used in dream research today for content analysis. After reviewing the dreams, the dream categories coded for were positive and negative elements, as well as characters. Specifically, the dream categories were: Emotions (Happiness, Anger, Apprehension, Sadness, and Confusion), Social Interactions (Aggression and Friendliness), Success and Failure, Good Fortune and Misfortune, and Characters [Strangers, Family/Relatives (alive in waking life), Family/Relatives (deceased in waking life), and Animals].

Seasonal changes in dream frequency for all of the dreams were examined by obtaining the date that each dream was recorded. Specifically, the dreams with the deceased physically present were investigated separately to investigate any other patterns of seasonal change.

### Procedure

These themes of Garfield (7) have only been investigated for reliability by Belicki et al. (21)

who discovered that most of the themes could not be reliably scored for. This may be due to the themes themselves, or from the types of dreams that the individual had occur. Therefore, the inter-rater reliability of the coding system was of concern in this research. In order to verify the reliability of the scoring system, all of the dreams that had the deceased present (N=9) were coded by two judges.

The first judge was the main researcher who had experience with content analyzing Garfield's (7) dream themes before. The second judge was not experienced in content analyzing Garfield's (7) dream themes before and was told that the dreams came from different people with all of the dates of the dreams taken off. The second judge was trained in Garfield's (7) dream themes and when the judge felt comfortable distinguishing each theme from one another, the woman's dreams were given. After reading each dream, a category was chosen that best represented the dream theme. To measure the level of agreement between judges, Cohen's kappa was investigated as it provides a chance-corrected measurement for agreement. Cohen's kappa ranges on a scale from -1 to 1 where 1 indicates a perfect agreement, 0 indicates an agreement equal to chance, and -1 indicates a perfect disagreement.

## RESULTS

Each dream was scored by the two judges to determine the inter-rater reliability of the coding system of Garfield (7) which was found to be statistically significant with the Kappa value equaling 1.00 ( $p < 0.001$ ). This value shows that the order of the all the dream themes of the second author coincided in the same order of the first judge's (main researcher) order. The high inter-rater reliability may be due to the straight forward nature of the dreams as opposed to the dreams Belicki et al. (21) investigated which may have been more complex due to the individual's grief.

Of the 11 themes investigated, only three

themes were present in the sample: Alive-Again (30-97 days following the death), Advice-Comfort-Gift (115-802 days following the death), and Daily-Activity (842 days following the death). There were a total of two Alive Again dreams (deceased appears alive again), six Advice-Comfort-Gift dreams (deceased gives advice, comfort, or a gift to the dreamer), and one Daily-Activity dream (deceased is seen performing normal routine activities). The dream themes in this sample were mutually exclusive, although it can be common to have more than one major theme in a dream (7). The analysis revealed that there were consistent time-dependent changes in dream themes.

In terms of dream content, dreamer happiness in dream content was positively correlated with time since the death ( $r = 0.50$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ); happiness of the dreamer increased with time since the death. The appearance of family/relatives (who are alive in waking life) in dream content was positively correlated with time since the death ( $r = 0.52$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ); the appearance of family/relatives (who are alive in waking life) increased with time since the death. The appearance of family/relatives (who are deceased in waking life) in dream content was positively correlated with time since the death ( $r = 0.51$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ); the appearance of family/relatives (who are deceased in waking life) increased with time since the death. The appearance of animals in dream content was also negatively correlated with time since the death ( $r = -0.51$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ); the appearance of animals decreased with time since the death.

The frequency of all the dreams were: January (1), February (0), March (0), April (0), May (1), June (0), July (0), August (0), September (2), October (3), November (2), and December (7). Specifically, the frequency of dreams where the deceased was physically present in the dream imagery in each month were: January (0), February (0), March (0), April (0), May (0), June (0), July (0), August (0), September (1), October (2), November (1), and December (5) (See Figure 1).

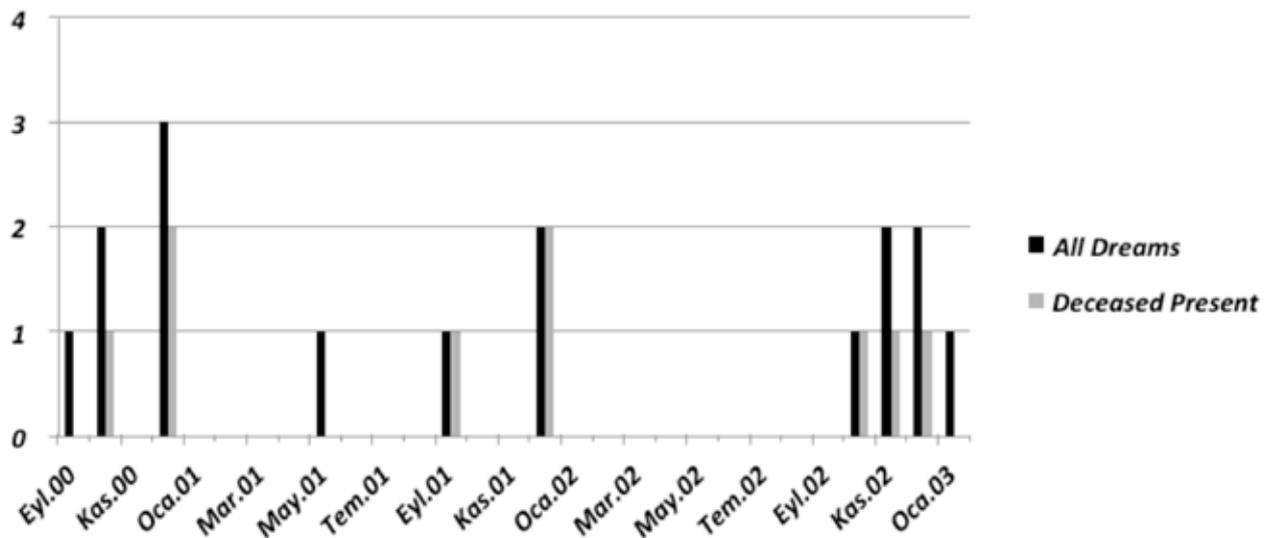


Figure 1. Seasonal changes in frequency of the dreams in bereavement with the dreams that have the deceased physically present being highlighted.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the investigation suggested that there were three themes that occurred in a time-dependent sequence of Alive Again, Advice-Comfort-Gift, and Daily-Activity. These themes tend to occur in a specific order with Alive Again themes occurring first in the sequence (rather than different dream themes occurring simultaneously and irregularly within the given time period). Garfield (7) hypothesized that Alive-Again dreams would occur in the first phase of grief (numbness). Garfield (7) stated that these dreams usually have the deceased loved one commenting on the death being unreal, but these dreams had the deceased alive again, but commenting or portraying the death being real. These dreams where the deceased acknowledges the death being real is more characteristic of the theme called Back-to-Life developed by Barrett (20). The theme of Back-to-Life has been stated to be very closely related to Garfield's (7) Alive-Again theme (21). This finding is in agreement with previous findings by Belicki et al. (21), who found that Alive-Again and Back-to-Life dreams tend to occur shortly after the loss of a loved one.

Advice-Comfort-Gift dreams occurred next in the sequence. This is also in agreement with

previous research findings; Garfield (7) theorized that this type of dream would occur in the second phase of grief (disorganization). Lastly, Daily-Activity dreams occurred last in the examined time sequence. This is also in agreement with Garfield's (7) research, which suggested that dreams of this type should occur within the later stage of grief (reorganization). The dream themes appear to follow a direct sequence of grief phases hypothesized by Garfield (7), and may be indicative of the healing process that occurred over the first two and a half years following the participant's loss.

While investigating dream content using content analysis, it was found that the appearance of family/relatives (who are alive in waking life), family/relatives (who are deceased in waking life), and dreamer happiness increased with temporal distance from the death. The increase in dreamer happiness supports what one would expect if the bereaved was healing following the loss. This is in agreement with previous findings by Peasant and Zadra (25), who demonstrated that when the participants' psychological well-being changed positively over time, their dream content showed an increase in positive emotions.

In addition to these findings, it was also found that as time increased after the death, there was a decrease in animals present in

dream imagery. While this does not immediately appear relevant, previous research has suggested that frequent incorporation of animals in dream imagery is related to heightened levels of anxiety (26). While the biological mechanism responsible for this phenomenon is currently not understood, the results of the present investigation suggest that the decreases in animal imagery over time may be a further reflection of the positive changes in mood and coping that accompany healing over time. These results further suggest that, in agreement with the continuity hypothesis (17), longitudinal changes in the content of dreams about the deceased loved one during bereavement may reflect the waking-day changes in mood and coping that accompany the healing process.

The frequency of the dreams in bereavement were not found to be sporadic throughout the year, but instead focused around certain months with three dreams that had the deceased physically present occurring each year. Further examination revealed that each dream occurred during months that related to the memory of the deceased in a meaningful way. The majority of dreams were clustered around the deceased father's birthday (May), the anniversary of the participant's father's death (September), the anniversary of her deceased grandmother's death (deceased father's side) (October), Veteran's Day (a memorial day that held special significance for the deceased) (November), a special dedication ceremony for a camp shelter

that was built in memory of her father (November), and Christmas (December). The frequency of dreams where the deceased was physically present was restricted to the last four months of the year (September to December). These results suggest that dreams where the deceased is physically present (rather than mentioned by another character) may occur only during the group of months that are most strongly associated with the loss. These results are in support of the hypothesis that dreams of the deceased reflect seasonal patterns of grief surrounding dates that relate in a meaningful way to the memory of the deceased; this is also in support of the Continuity Hypothesis (17).

Although this case study represents an in-depth analysis of a long series of bereavement-related dreams in one woman participant, the use of this type of analysis limits the generalizability of these findings. Difficulties in collecting large numbers of bereavement-related dreams over a long period of time from single participants results in unique challenges to analyzing time-dependent changes in dream content following the loss of a loved one. Future research should explore a larger sample of participants over time and even separate them by their relation to the deceased in order to gain a greater understanding of these types of dreams and how they relate to coping with grief. This study, however, appears promising in the clinical and applied fields when working with dreams in relation to grief and bereavement.

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