

Why You're Still Having School Anxiety Dreams...Years after Graduation

Dreams of taking an exam in a class you haven't attended all semester, losing your locker combination or forgetting your class schedule are surprisingly common, even decades later.

In my dreams, I'm wandering a vast maze of high school hallways, knowing that class starts at any minute. It's the first day of school — I can't be late. But I have no idea where my first class is. My schedule has gone missing. I keep wandering around, quietly panicking, knowing class is starting but powerless to figure out what to do.

And then I wake up in a cold sweat and remember I haven't been in high school in more than a decade.

My school anxiety dreams are far from unique. People years further than I from graduation day report nightmares about showing up unprepared to exams, losing their locker combination or discovering they never actually graduated from college. Though research suggests these dreams fade with age, they are still common among people in their 50s and beyond. In fact, studies in Canada, the United States and Japan regularly find that dreams about school, teachers and studying consistently rank in the top 3 most common subjects for dreams.

But why? Why should lockers and hallway mazes and course credits haunt us long after we've slipped from the educational system's grasp?

Dream time

To answer that question, I first had to find out how frequent school dreams really are.

Turns out, there's a scientific questionnaire for that — and it reveals that the prevalence of school dreams is no illusion. The Typical Dream Questionnaire, developed in the 1950s, lists 55 dream themes and asks research participants to check each that they've experienced, and to identify the most common. School-related dreams are on the top of the list across several cultures. In [a 2003 study of Canadian college students](#), dreams of schools, teachers and studying ranked 4th-most-common, after dreams of being chased, dreams of sex and dreams of falling. The dream of failing an exam came in 10th. In [studies conducted in the 1950s](#) in American and Japanese college students, 71 percent of Americans and 86 percent of Japanese reported school-related dreams, which again made these dreams the 4th-most-common type reported, after being attacked or pursued, falling or trying again and again to do something.

University of Montreal psychologist Tore Nielsen and colleagues have administered the Typical Dream Questionnaire to more than a thousand American, Japanese and Canadian college students, as well as to sleep-disordered patients of all ages. They've found that these percentages are remarkably consistent, as Nielsen and colleagues wrote in a commentary [in the journal Behavioral and Brain Sciences](#) in 2000.

Across all populations, the researchers wrote, school and studying dreams rank 3rd-most-common, with 73 percent of people reporting experiencing them. Another 47 percent say they've dreamt about failing an exam, making those dreams 10th-most-common on the list.

Other common dreams contain themes that overlap with anxiety-ridden school dreams. Dreams of being late rank 5th overall, for example, and trying again and again to do something rank 6th.

Jonathan Barclay, a 38-year-old from Oklahoma (and, full disclosure, my brother-in-law) illustrates this overlap well. Barclay has school anxiety dreams at least twice a month, he said, and they often center on frustrating attempts to get something done: "forgetting to go to class, having car trouble so I can't get to class, wandering around looking for my classroom, forgetting what time the class starts or on what days it occurs, not being able to find the guidance office to get my complete schedule ... the list goes on and on."

"I really hate these dreams," Barclay added.

Less-scientific surveys also find lots of people dreaming not-so-sweet school dreams. Three years ago, Lauri Loewenberg, an author and dream analyst based in Florida, surveyed 5,000 dream enthusiasts through her thedreamzone.com newsletter and found that school dreams ranked as the second-most-common (right after dreams of one's partner cheating). The three most common school dream themes, she said, were being unable to find a classroom or locker; being unprepared for a test; and having to retake classes or credits.

The reminiscence bump

All of these findings might suggest that we're collectively holding on to a lot of high school trauma. Or you could go with the pop-psychology interpretations of these dreams: If you're dreaming about not getting credit for college biology, for example, maybe it means you feel like you're not getting enough credit for your contributions at work.

"Job stress, job issues usually manifest in school dreams more than they do in dreams about your actual job," Loewenberg said.

Certainly, some people say they get school anxiety dreams more often when real life is stressful (though others say they come at random). But either way, why school? Why not job interviews or client presentations or family reunions or any of the other myriad scenarios in which adults could humiliate themselves?

The reason might have to do with a quirk of memory called the reminiscence bump. In older people, memories from late adolescence and early adulthood tend to be the strongest, according to studies stretching back to the 1980s. Researchers aren't sure why these years loom so large. Perhaps the novelty of these years lends itself to sharper memories; perhaps this time period is so crucial to self-identity that the details stand out; or perhaps we're cognitively at our sharpest in youth, so memories are encoded more effectively.

There's some evidence that the reminiscence bump might play into our dreams. Older people (age 60 to 77) report more dreams with references to their early adolescence and adulthood than to childhood or later adulthood, [according to a 2005 study](#). However, it's not clear whether most "typical dreams" follow that pattern, or whether positive and negative emotions surrounding these youthful experiences might influence their dream recall, the University of Montreal's Nielsen [wrote in a later study](#).

Anecdotally, other teen memories do intrude in later dreams. Loewenberg said that people tell her that they often dream of their first loves, even years later when they're happily married.

"It's like our first experiences in life kind of get imprinted into our subconscious and become part of who we are," she said.

The continuity hypothesis

Michael Schredl, the head of the sleep laboratory at the Central Institute for Mental Health in Mannheim, Germany, isn't buying the reminiscence bump theory. Rather, he thinks the universal experience of going to school and being tested is simply a convenient way for the brain to express real-world anxieties.

"The examination dreams are triggered by current life situations that have similar emotional qualities," Schredl said.

This notion fits with the "continuity hypothesis," which holds that dreams reflect people's waking concerns. Although this hypothesis is widely accepted among members of the public, scientists actually debate it quite a bit. Some researchers concede that yes, people [often dream about quotidian daily events](#), but that dreams that are more complex or bizarre don't fit that pattern. One alternative dream hypothesis is called the activation-synthesis hypothesis; it holds that as we enter [REM sleep](#), neurochemical changes occur. The brain then throws together strange narratives and bizarre imagery in an effort to make sense of the biological changes it's experiencing.

Very little research has looked at whether seemingly bizarre dreams might be metaphorical, as non-academic dream analysts like Loewenberg argue. One 1969 study [published in the Archives of General Psychiatry](#), however, suggested they can be, in the weirdest way possible: The researchers had young men watch erotic films and then report their dreams. Those who'd watched the films said they'd dreamt about more phallic imagery than those who'd watched non-raunchy movies.

Helpful anxieties?

Many people who have school dreams tie them to their specific histories and anxieties. Mike Cronin, a reporter at the Asheville Citizen-Times, used to ignore his math homework all semester in both high school and college, only to cram at the last minute. Today, at 46, he's haunted by dreams of going about his life, knowing that math homework is piling up. The dread in these dreams builds like a rollercoaster car being pulled to the top of the incline, Cronin said. Others who reported their school anxiety dreams to Braindecoder made a point of mentioning that they graduated with honors or had multiple graduate degrees.

In fact, school anxiety dreams might sometimes be beneficial — when they're relevant to school-related tasks at hand. A 2014 study queried would-be medical students about their dreams in the nights leading up to a huge qualifying exam for medical school. Of 719 students who responded to surveys, 60 percent dreamt of the exam the night before taking it. In 78 percent of those dreams, the students dreamt of forgetting answers, being late, or otherwise screwing up.

But a more surprising finding also emerged: Students who dreamt about the test the night before got better scores, the researchers reported in the journal [Consciousness and Cognition](#). It's possible that the more high-strung students both studied harder and worried more about the exam, so much so that it penetrated their dreams, the researchers wrote.

Or, more provocatively, perhaps the dream episodes helped the students "rehearse" for the stressful event, allowing them to work out their anxiety in a safe place.

"The dramatization of concerns during dreams may train the brain," the researchers wrote.

The question of whether dream "practice" counts is an open one, and researchers are even studying whether athletes could [rehearse physical movements in their sleep](#). But the next time you wake up panicking about your college course credits, give yourself a break. Maybe the reason you relive this moments in sleep is the same reason you really did graduate in your waking life.

And whatever the case may be, remember that you're not alone.

Assignment

Compare and contrast the two hypotheses presented in the article. Then give your own. Why do you think dreams about school reappear so frequently during adulthood?