

Image Activation Dreamwork

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Dreamwork, or working with your dreams, can take on many forms. Many popular approaches aim at simply understanding the “meaning” of a dream. The better approaches relate the dream to feelings and situations in your waking life. Other approaches focus on experiencing the dream in various ways without cognitive understanding, including dance, body work, artistic expression, drawing the dream, or journaling. Those which are aimed at therapy, take the dreamer deep within themselves to reveal emotional issues, conflicts and traumas that might lie at the source of the dream. I prefer a dreamwork approach which is aimed at understanding your dream in relationship to your waking life situation; one that further reveals some of the underlying issues and conflicts in a safe manner; and finally one which uses the dream to work through these underlying issues. One such approach, which has its roots in Gestalt therapy, is Image Activation Dreamwork. The complete approach can be found in the author’s book *Dream Language* available through links on the home page. A summary is presented here adequate for most everyday dreamwork.

Principles of Image Activation Dreamwork

Image Activation Dreamwork was developed on the premise that, although dreams address all levels of consciousness, everyday dreams tend to focus on life’s unresolved emotional situations. As the great luminaries Carl Jung and Fritz Perls observed, dreams follow a natural tendency towards completion and closure, and employ compensation as a means to reverse misconceptions that stand in the way of closure.

Understanding a dream (its meaning) can only come from information supplied by the dreamer, and the most effective dreamworking approaches are those that work with the dreamer to surface relationships between the dream and waking life situations and feelings. I discourage approaches that derives the meaning from outside the dreamer, such as “dream dictionaries” or methods that involve an “interpretation expert” or speculating and imposing one’s ideas of what the dream means on the dreamer.

The dream is our becoming conscious of a natural process taking place in the sleeping brain. The dream language is meaningful language of association, emotion and metaphor with which the sleeping brain communicates; a language that is bizarre only to the waking mind. If dreams are visual representations of emotional memories, decoding them should be a simple matter of reversing the process, determining what associations surface when envisioning the dream image. Indeed that principle is the basis of most dreamworking approaches. Many dreamworking techniques, however, only involve dialogue with the rational mind, where filtering and fear avoidance can hide the emotional memories contained within the dream. However, “Image Activation Dreamwork,” is a simplified Gestalt based approach, that occupies the rational mind in a role-play fantasy, while permitting the dream centers of the brain to “speak” and reveal emotional content. It uses a simple scripted role-play technique, affectionately called the “6 magic questions,” designed to reveal emotional memories within dream images, and associate them to waking feelings and situations.

The Procedure

Image Activation dreamwork can be used simply to explore the dream in relationship to one’s waking life situation, or fully applied to uses the dream to create a solution that can be acted upon. The exploration of the dream contains some unique role-play and color work, designed to reveal the deeper emotional

content within the dream elements without having to go too deeply into dialogue with the dreamer. It is useful in a therapeutic setting, but is highly scripted so that it can also be used for personal dreamwork when the guiding dialogue with a therapist is not available. Image Activation Dreamwork begins with recording and telling the dream, and then proceeds with a three stage process: 1) exploring the dream; 2) exploring the life issues revealed by the dream; and 3) using the dream for closure.

Stage #1 – Exploring the Dream

A brief review of the dream narrative, followed by a scripted Gestalt based role-play technique, explores the dream story in relation to your waking life story. The dreamwork can end here if the goal is simply to understand the dream, but the dream will usually reveal waking life emotional situations or conflicts that remain unresolved. Understanding the dream may only reveal the issues the dream is dealing with, it does not usually help you to resolve them.

1) **Record the Dream** – as if you are re-experiencing it.

2) **Obvious Dream/Life Connections:** Do any feelings or goals in the dream, or statements in the narrative, also sound like waking feelings and situations? Describe the situation.

3) **Imagery Work (6 “magic” questions):**

a) **Pick one or more** dream elements that feel important, curious or emotionally significant, perhaps a ‘thing’ or a colored image (color paints the image with emotion).

b) **Speak as the Dream Image:** ‘Become’ the dream image. Imagine how it might answer these 6 questions. Speak spontaneously and answer only in the first person present tense (“I” statements), recording them exactly as you spoke them (voice recorder or partner helps). As that dream element or image:

1) Who or **what are you** (name and describe yourself as the dream image)?

2) What is your **purpose or function**?

3) What do you **like** about what you are?

4) What do you **dislike** about what you are?

5) What do you **fear** most?

6) What do you **desire** most?

c) **Relate to Life:** Review each statement and ask, “does this also sound like a feeling or situation in my waking life?” Review who was involved, your feelings and any decisions you made. Ask: do the “I am/My purpose” statements sound like a waking role I am playing? Do the “I like/I dislike” and “I fear/I desire” statement pairs sound like waking life conflicts, fears and desires?

Note: If your dream character is a know person, then substitute for question #1: as that person a) describe your personality ___; b) in what ways are you like the dreamer ___; 3) in what ways you are different __? Ask: does some aspect of this character’s personality relate to a manner in which you are approaching the waking situation, or do they have a trait you wish you had more of, in order to better handle the situation?

Color Work: Image Activation Dreamwork also uses a research-based color questionnaire, designed to trigger your own emotional associations, adding another layer of self-understanding. The form of a colored dream image contains only a part of the meaning within the image – the color contains the rest. The technique for working with dream color can be found on this web site by clicking the Dream Color button or opening the articles on color on this web page.

Stage #2 - Exploring the Life Story

Exploring the situation that the dream is dealing with, helps you use the dream to understand some the core issues leaving you stuck or preventing resolution in waking life. These issues are often fears, past decisions that have been generalized, or inappropriate beliefs and misconceptions that leave you stuck in conflict. Once defined, then you have something to work with. You may realize that a problem is serious or long-standing, and requires the supportive assistance of a professional, but for issues that might respond to self-help, you can proceed to Stage #3.

4) Underlying Conflict: You may now understand what the dream is about, but to help bring closure, clarifying fears and misconceptions is required. As best you can you want to define the two sides of the situation that might be in conflict. Let the dream assist you by dividing the statements you “connect with” into positive and negatives, example: **Positive** = that which I desire or like; **Negative** = that which I dislike, need or fear. Contrast the two in a way that characterizes your waking life situation. Use your own words but put them in terms such as: “I am/I need/have to ___ because ___ BUT if I ___ then ___ will happen.”

Check it Out: Are these logical, healthy and appropriate beliefs, allowing progress, or are they exaggerations and misconceptions, holding you back?

Stage #3 – Using the Dream for Closure

The final step is to use the dream to create alternatives and define action steps that might help bring about resolution to the waking life situation that the dream is dealing with. Even if the conflict explored in stage 2 is not totally clear you should try this out. There are two approaches: the first is to look for an obvious compensating event in the dream and the second is a fun technique for spontaneously completing the dream, creating a new metaphor for closure assuming the dream did not conclude or end positively. These are evaluated as to their appropriateness as an analogy for a potential waking life solution. If healthy and appropriate next steps are defined.

5) Transformation: Go back into the dream, and review what you were trying to achieve and specifically how it ended. How might this be analogous to your waking situation?

a) Compensation: Look for an obvious compensating event: some form of guidance, a surprise, written or verbal words, humor, reversals, a new discovery or a positive dream ending. Review dream actions and thoughts before the event and how they changed after the event. Dreams rarely provide literal messages. Therefore, ask “how might the event or positive ending be an **analogy** for a way to deal with my waking situation?”

b) New Dream Ending: If the dream contained no obvious compensation, or ended badly or unresolved, try: a) Spontaneously (very first thoughts) imagine a new ending that resolves the dream satisfactorily. b) Fill in imaginary details regarding how it is achieved. c) How might that new ending, be an **analogy** for a new way to deal with your waking situation?

c) Check it Out: Is it a healthy, appropriate, practical resolution permitting progress; or does it leave you stuck again?

d) Next Steps: If healthy and appropriate, what specific next step(s) can you take in waking life, and when, to bring this solution about?

EXAMPLE

Dreamwork Example: *“I was running through a field trying to get away from people who were attacking me. I looked back, and from within each footstep I took, I could see flowers spring up.”*



Stage #1 – Explore the Dream (the “6 magic questions”)

1. “I am a *wildflower*”
2. “My function is to *attract bees to me to pollinate and nurture me.*”
3. “What I like about being this wildflower is *that I have so much beauty to show.*”
4. “What I dislike about being this wildflower is *people see me as a common weed*”
5. “What I fear most is *being torn out and thrown away or left to die.*”
6. “What I desire most is *to be admired for my natural beauty.*”

Stage #2 – Explore the Waking Life Situation

“I am an artist and this relates to my fears about showing my art in public. I want to show my work and be nurtured – BUT – if I do I am afraid my work will be seen as common and “weedy” and the judges may reject it - this will kill me.”

Stage #3 – Using the Dream for Closure

- 1) **Looking for the Compensating Message:** *The flowers springing up in her footsteps = “you create natural beauty, it springs forth with every step you take”.*
- 2) **New Dream Ending:** a) **Review the dream and the ending:** *“I am being attacked. The dream ends with me running away and looking back in surprise at the flowers;”* b) **New Ending:** *“I stop and pick a large bouquet and realize how beautiful the natural little wildflowers are. I give a bouquet to the people attacking me. They seem to enjoy them.”* c) **New Solution Metaphor:** *“Revealing my creativity is not something to fear, it is beautiful, and just needs to be presented properly.”*
- 3) **Check It Out – is it Healthy and Appropriate?** *“Yes it is healthy and allows me to progress.”*
- 4) **Next steps:** *“I will display my arts at the next show in a manner that highlights its wild natural beauty.”*