The Story Behind Your Dreams
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Have you ever wondered what a dream meant or why you had it? In this informational text, Ben Slivnick discusses why people dream. As you read, take notes on the different theories scientists have for why people dream.

You walk into school and realize you forgot your math homework. Then, the teacher starts the lesson. Some of it makes sense, but some parts leave you scratching your head. You turn to the student next to you for help and realize it's your best friend who moved away in second grade. Then, you wake up. You were dreaming.

Dreams can be exciting or terrifying. Often, they are complicated and confusing. And for much of human history, we've tried to make sense of them. The ancient Egyptians believed that dreams were messages from the gods. The ancient Greeks and Romans believed that dreams showed prophecies, or visions of the future. Later, in the 1800s, early psychologists believed that dreams centered on thoughts that people wanted to avoid, windows into what they called the “unconscious mind.”

Why We Dream

Today, scientists still aren't exactly sure why we have dreams, but a number of theories have emerged. One idea is that we dream to “practice” responding to problems. This is called “threat simulation theory” and might explain why our dreams so often involve stressful events such as forgetting your homework. Scientists believe that your brain might be preparing for how it would respond if you really do forget your homework. These scientists point out that humans aren't the only animals who dream; if you've ever seen a dog moving its legs while it's sleeping, it's probably dreaming about running.

Another theory says that dreams play an important role in keeping people asleep. Scientists have long known that sleep produces a number of benefits for people's moods and long-term health. Dreams might allow people to get the sleep they need, theorizes South African scientist Mark Solms. He compares dreams to Saturday morning cartoons; your dreams keep your mind entertained so that the brain can do important work in the background — just like how cartoons keep small children entertained so that their parents are free to complete work around the house.
More recent advancements suggest that dreams could serve as a way for the brain to organize our thoughts and memories. Scientists in Germany proved this when they studied the electrical signals in the brains of sleeping mice. As the mice slept, the scientists found bursts of electricity in two sections of the brain: the neocortex, which controls thoughts, and the hippocampus, which controls memory. The scientists theorized their brains were sorting out which thoughts to store as memories and which to delete. If you've ever noticed that you forget most of your dreams, this could be why; most of your thoughts and experiences aren't kept as memories. "We dream to forget," said the scientist Francis Crick.

However, some scientists still think that we dream for no reason at all. The "activation synthesis theory" says our dreams are random firings from memories, thoughts, and images within the brain. Supporters of this theory say that dreams don't provide advantages and don't have hidden meanings; they're just something that happens while we sleep. The "activation synthesis theory" states that the stories within our dreams largely come together within our brains after we wake up. The theory states the stories are formed only as we try to make sense our dreams' confusing twists and turns in the conscious state.

**Benefits**

Regardless of why we dream, scientists agree that dreams can have many benefits. One group of scientists proved that dreams could help people solve complex problems. These scientists provided a group of people with a difficult-to-solve maze. Afterwards, they allowed the group members to take a break, with half of the participants being shown a video and the other half being told to nap. Ninety minutes later, everyone returned to the maze. In general, the nappers and the video-watchers performed about the same when they returned to the maze. But the nappers who reported dreaming about the maze were ten times better at completing it than anyone else.

Dreams have also long been considered sources for inspiration. Paul McCartney, a former lead singer of the band The Beatles, said the idea for the famous song "Yesterday" came to him in a dream. He said he woke up thinking of the tune, and then immediately rushed to the piano to figure out the notes and write them down.

Similarly, in the late 1600s, the philosopher and scientist René Descartes spent all day in a heated room, searching for the best way to come up with new knowledge. Without a solution at the end of the day, he put down his work and went to sleep. When he woke up, he recalled from his dreams the scientific method — the same process for experiments still taught in schools today.

**Conclusions**

While scientists have many theories about why we dream, what we know for sure about them is still as hazy as dreams often are themselves. We know for sure that they are images collected from our brains' memory files. We know that for some people they can provide inspiration. Outside of that, a lot of what scientists think about dreams is just theorizing. Keep that in mind the next time you think you forgot your math homework at home.
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best expresses the central idea of the text?
   A. People have different dreams for different reasons, making it difficult for scientists to answer the question “why do humans dream?”
   B. Most of the theories that scientists have about dreams show their benefits; however, there are no concrete conclusions for why humans dream.
   C. Scientists struggle to understand why people dream as there is currently no way to see what goes on in the brain when someone sleeps.
   D. Since humans are the only creatures that dream, scientists believe that dreaming is an important part of humans’ advanced intelligence.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
   A. “You turn to the student next to you for help and realize it’s your best friend who moved away in second grade. Then, you wake up. You were dreaming.” (Paragraph 1)
   B. “Dreams can be exciting or terrifying. Often, they are complicated and confusing. And for much of human history, we’ve tried to make sense of them.” (Paragraph 2)
   C. “The theory states the stories are formed only as we try to make sense our dreams’ confusing twists and turns in the conscious state.” (Paragraph 6)
   D. “Regardless of why we dream, scientists agree that dreams can have many benefits. One group of scientists proved that dreams could help people solve complex problems.” (Paragraph 7)

3. What is the author’s main purpose in the text?
   A. to explore the different theories that attempt to explain why humans dream
   B. to prove the benefits of searching for meaning in your dreams
   C. to criticize scientists for how little they know about why humans dream
   D. to support the idea that dreams prepare humans for problems in the real world

4. How does the author’s discussion of Paul McCartney and René Descartes contribute to the development of ideas in the text (Paragraphs 8-9)?
   A. It shows how new and influential ideas can come from dreams.
   B. It proves that intelligent people tend to have more complex dreams.
   C. It demonstrates the importance of trying to understand our dreams.
   D. It supports the theory that your brain is organizing information as you sleep.
5. What is the relationship between people’s dreams and their actions when awake? Use details from the text in your answer.
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the text, the author discusses scientists’ limited knowledge about why people dream. What do you think could be the benefit of better understanding why humans dream?

2. What is the best dream that you’ve ever had? What made it the best? Why do you think you had this dream?

3. In the text, the author discusses different theories about why humans may dream. Have you ever had a dream that matches one of the theories? What was the dream? Which theory does it align with?