

Workbook Chapter Thirty-Eight Work With Your Dreams

Self-Assessment Tools:

A Step-by-Step Process for Interpreting Your Dreams Barry K. Weinhold, PhD

The steps below are from Jungian psychotherapist, Robert Johnson, who wrote *Inner Work: Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth*. "I read this book years ago, but had no interest in writing about it until now. According to Johnson, here is how to interpret your dreams:

Step 1: Write the Dream in Detail

Write your dream immediately after waking up. Otherwise, you will forget. I recommend keeping a dream journal. Write down all the dream details even if they appear unimportant: setting, people, objects, dialogue, smells, sounds, color, and your "internal talk" and emotions while dreaming the dream.

Step 2: Make Associations

The next step is to make associations. Think of the dream image and then write down everything that comes to mind. For example, in my dream, the "work setting" symbolized drudgery, stress, and competition. Do this for every dream detail you wrote down in your journal.

Don't consult a dream dictionary. Dream symbols are unique to you, so there is no sense in asking other people or reading about it. The only exception is if the dream contains archetypal motifs common to the human race. These would include characters like father, mother, child, wise old man, hero, maiden, or trickster. With archetypes, it doesn't matter whether you are white, black, or brown. We all come from the same ground and live and die under the same blue sky, so the meaning of archetypes will likely be the same.

Step 3: Connect Dream Images to What's Happening Internally

Just like when reading mythology, dreams are not meant to be interpreted literally. The language of dreams and the unconscious is the symbolic image. As young children, we store memories in images. These are in our personal unconscious or our collective unconscious. Therefore, the unconscious borrows images from your external environment to symbolize things in the dream. For example, in my dream about the Monster discussed below, it does not actually refer to the real counterparts. He represents something else. Thus, dreams are usually about the interior world rather than the external one.

Step 4 Interpret the Dream

Taking all the things you wrote before, interpret the dream. Remember that a dream is a coherent message from the unconscious cloaked in symbolism. When you interpret the dream and arrive at an interpretation that “clicks” or makes you say “a-ha,” then you’re on the right path.

A couple of caveats: Your unconscious will not send you a message that you already know or are conscious of. Thus, the dream’s message should be a surprise to you. If you arrive at a dream interpretation that is self-congratulatory and self-inflating, then that interpretation is probably incorrect.

If you arrive at an interpretation that blames others, then that interpretation is also incorrect. Dreams are about you and not others. Remember that all the characters in your dream represent aspects of yourself, even if they look like somebody you know.

Step 5: Do a Ritual to Make the Dream Concrete

After interpreting the dream, honor it by doing something physical (and not just thinking about it). By doing something physical, you integrate the dream, which was unconscious, into your conscious waking life. The ritual is a way to send the message to your unconscious that you heard it. Write in your journal, pray, light a candle, or make art out of it. The physical act should not be loud or expensive. The smaller and the more intimate, the better.

Case Example:

This is an example of how I used the tool of Active Imagination to process a dream. In using AI, the story is always told in the first person: The “I” is always there. It is important to also engage your feelings and emotions in the dialogue. There are four distinct steps to the AI process. They are as follows:

1. issuing an invitation to your unconscious,
2. dialoging and experiencing what emerges from your unconscious,
3. an ethical element that involves examining your values and beliefs and
4. the enactment of some sort of a physical ritual to make the experience more concrete.

As a child, I had recurring nightmares where I was being chased by a monster. They were very vivid and real for me. The monster would come into my upstairs bedroom and chase me down the hall. It was about to grab me just as I reached the top of the stairs. I could feel the monster’s hot breath on the back of my neck and I would leap off the top stair and fly through the air landing on my feet at the bottom of the stairs. I had been very curious about these dreams and I never understood their significance. Finally, I decided to do an Active Imagination dialogue with my monster. I will use this to illustrate the four main steps of the Active Imagination process that I used to process my dream.

Step One: The first step in AI is to invite the creatures from your own unconscious to come to the surface and contact you. To do this you need to clear your mind of

all external thoughts, focus inside and wait with an attentive attitude. If you do this, some image will usually appear. There are several ways to help the process. The first is by turning a passive fantasy into an AI process.

A second is by focusing on a dream figure that interests you. Others include imagining that you are in a symbolic place and becoming some part of you that annoys you. I sat quietly and asked the monster to appear in my imagination. As this happened, I began to draw a picture of the head of the monster. I drew a picture of this fire-breathing monster that looked like a gargoyle with pointed teeth, fire coming out of his mouth and blood red eyes. It had horns on the top of its head, like the devil.

Step Two: The second step in AI involves an actual dialogue with an image of a part of you that rises up from your depths. You can begin by asking what the part wants from you or what it would like to say or do with you. You need to write down everything this part tells you even if you don't like what this part is saying or doing. If that happens, you need to say so and risk an argument or conflict with this part.

If your inner part refuses to speak, you may need to draw it out with questions or by sharing how you feel. The expression of your feelings often gets a dialogue going rather quickly. If you express your feelings, your inner part will usually do the same. It is important to stay with one inner part until you feel complete.

After I finished the picture, I began to dialogue with my monster. My first question was, "Who are you and why were you chasing me?" He answered, "I am one of your protectors. The reason I was chasing you was to get you to grow up fast. I saw how you were being treated and I knew how much you were suffering under this treatment. It was not safe for you to stay in that environment any longer than you needed to. I hoped by chasing you I could get you to leave that environment as soon as possible."

I replied, "I never realized that was what you were trying to do for me. I thought you were an enemy or a monster that was just trying to capture me and torture me. I was really afraid of you." To this my monster replied, "Well, I'm sorry that I scared you so much, but I thought that it might be the only way to get you to grow up fast and get out of there."

Step Three: In AI this step involves revelations from this inner part about inconsistencies in your ethics or beliefs. As you bring this ethical conflict to the light of day, you may realize that it has been there for some time and you may decide to welcome it into the light of day. Because of such challenge from your unconscious, you may be able to change some of your deepest values or beliefs. This kind of challenge can raise your consciousness and build ethical strength.

I thanked the monster for trying to help me and asked it to return to wherever it had come. As I reflected on this AI session, I felt sad about the way I was treated and I remembered thinking, "Why are these people treating me this way?" I thought, "What bad things must I have done to deserve to be treated this way?" The dialogue was very surprising and I had no idea that this monster was trying to help me. It made sense to me, but in my wildest dreams I never imagined that this monster was actually my friend and protector.

Step Four: The fourth step involves taking the dialogue with your part from an abstract level and grounding it in concrete form. This usually means doing something to integrate it into your daily life. You may draw a picture of the internal part, framing it and hanging it in a prominent place. You might also make a clay figure of this part and keep it visible in your home. This can help you integrate the valuable information you gained from the AI experience.

There was still something left in this process for me. The monster had to have a 3D reality. The picture I had drawn was not three dimensional, so I decided to make the head of the monster out of a piece of clay. I got a rather large chunk of clay and shaped it like a head. Then I focused on the image of the monster and I took my two thumbs and made eyes and with my index finger made a mouth.

I was shocked that only took me about 5 seconds to complete the clay sculpture of the monster's head. I stepped back and looked at the head and said, "Yes, this is it." That clay sculpture sat on my nightstand for many years after that. Every day I could look at it and remember how it tried to save my life.

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Case Example:

I have used AI on a number of occasions personally and I had to use it in the midst of an intense relationship crisis. with a couple. The woman had just discovered that her husband was having an affair with another woman. She said she was angry enough to kill him. She claimed that a demon inside her was telling her to kill him and that she was afraid this demon would take over and she would actually try to kill her husband.

After getting her to agree that she would use nonviolent methods to resolve her conflict with her husband, I asked her to draw a picture of her inner demon and engage in a dialogue with it. She placed the picture of the demon that she drew on a pillow in front of her and then she carried on a dialogue with the picture using Active Imagination tools. Mostly, it involved her asking her inner demon questions and then waiting for the answers. The dialogue lasted over 20 minutes.

Much to her surprise (and mine), she discovered through the dialogue with this demon that it served a useful purpose in her life. When she asked the demon why he was in her life, he replied, "I've been waiting for 900 years for you to work on this issue." Then she asked what the issue was, it said, "You need to learn how to give up control. It was your need for control that led your husband to have an affair."

The demon added, "I'm here to help you let go and I'm very patient." Eventually she asked the demon to help her work on this issue and she began individual therapy to uncover more about her control issues. She began to see how her husband's affair provided her with another opportunity to learn how to give up the illusion of control over him that was pushing him away.