

## Dream Interpretation: Case Study

Dr. Neerja Pandey<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor Psychology AIBAS, Amity University Uttar Pradesh Lucknow Campus, Gomti Nagar Extension, UP, India.

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-7495-2413

**\*Corresponding Author:**

Dr. Neerja Pandey

Email ID: [pandeyneerja@gmail.com](mailto:pandeyneerja@gmail.com)

Cite this paper as: Dr. Neerja Pandey, (2025) Dream Interpretation: Case Study. *Journal of Neonatal Surgery*, 14 (18s), 1382-1386.

### ABSTRACT

This single-case qualitative study explores the psychotherapeutic application of dream interpretation in addressing recurrent nightmares experienced by young adult female client during transitional phase of her life. As the client prepared for marriage and relocation abroad, she sought psychological clarity and resolution. The frequency and intensity of her nightmares had been increasing which were later understood to reflect unprocessed emotional conflicts. The structured dream analysis and therapeutic session facilitated access to latent emotions, specifically sadness, fear, and betrayal, rooted in early familial relationships. The process illuminated unresolved familial conflicts—specifically, longstanding resentment toward her mother and a perception of betrayal by her younger sister—which had subconsciously shaped her emotional landscape and interpersonal relationships. The intervention facilitated emotional catharsis, leading to cognitive and emotional reframing. Ultimately, the client gained insight into how repressed emotions had influenced her life, enabling her to move forward with greater emotional clarity and resilience. This case highlights the value of symbolic exploration in dream content as a transformative tool for intrapsychic integration and emotional healing.

**Keywords:** *dreams, interpretation, nightmares, unprocessed emotions, betrayal.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Horton (2020) has opined that dreams are recollection of mental content during sleep. According to Kumar (2024), dreams offer valuable insights into the dreamer's deepest emotions and hidden desires, with interpretation focusing on recurring themes and their connection to the individual's feelings and life experiences. Fogli et al. (2020) used a tool to automatically score dream reports and found that dreaming plays a significant role in improving waking life with dreams reflecting a continuation of daily experiences. In the therapeutic context, the primary aim of dream analysis is to help individuals tackle real-life challenges. Ruby P.M. (2011) argues that focusing on the uniqueness and personal meaning of dreams is essential for effectively addressing issues in cognitive neuroscience. Roesler (2020) found that majority of the dreams can be categorized in few structural patterns one of them being related to the ego. Ego faces a need, it copes with the challenge, and completes the task. Edwards et al. (2013) have opined that sleep facilitates cognitive insight and REM sleep, especially, helps in consolidation of emotional memory. They further discuss that the metaphorical representations of waking life can give new insights. Roesler (2023), summarised the discussion of dream theories around the function of dreams, wish-fulfilment through dreams, and content of dreams. It proposes to attempt a new framework to understand nature and purpose of dreams. Hughes, J. D. (2000), in his published article, mentions that dream interpretation was regarded as an art needing intelligence and divine inspiration in the ancient civilizations like Egypt, Greece, Rome, and Mesopotamia, etc. Moreover, it was considered a science by philosophers and physicians equally. Yu, C. K. C. (2016) has presented some directions for dream interpretation.

### 2. THE CASE

Ms. DP, 25-year-old first born with a younger sister and a brother, used to have nightmares during which she used to shout in her sleep. She was more prone to shouting when living in college hostel. The general theme of her dreams was of running away from something, or of being attacked, or of being chased and stabbed from behind. The most recent dream that the client remembered clearly on similar theme was discussed in detail and it was used as the Imaginary Bridge for Regression

that facilitated the interpretation. She saw the dream in venting out stage (there being three stages viz., Wishful Thinking Stage, Precognitive Stage, and Venting out Stage).

### 3. RE-LIVING THE DREAM

In the initial and first phase, the client verbally recounted the dream to the therapist consciously recalling its elements in linear and coherent manner. This served as the foundation for the subsequent exploration. During the second phase, the client was gently guided to revisit the dream with closed eyes emphasized a deeper sensory and emotional engagement, as the dream sequence was played back in slow motion. Here the therapist encouraged her to reflect on symbolic imagery and emotional response to them. The third and final phase focused on therapeutic intervention and interpretation. In this critical stage, key aspects of the client's subconscious were examined, specifically the emergence of Inner Children (ICs)—symbolic representations of unresolved emotional needs or past traumas. Through empathetic guidance, these ICs were identified, acknowledged, and emotionally integrated through healing techniques. This process not only fostered inner reconciliation but also brought clarity to the client regarding the underlying psychological themes or core issue illuminated by the dream.

Would you like this adapted for a specific context, like an academic paper or clinical case report?

### 4. LITERAL CONTENT OF THE DREAM

“The client is going somewhere sitting pillion on a bike. The rider is a male. He takes a right turn into a lane because she asks him to. They reach a dead end in that lane and suddenly they see a huge elephant in front of them. So, slowly and quietly, the rider takes a U-turn and starts driving fast in opposite direction to come out of the lane. But the elephant sees and chases them. Elephant is not visible to them by the time they reach the main road. The rider has to go somewhere, so, on her request he drops her on the main road (she recognizes the area in real time) and goes away. The client sees the elephant again which starts chasing her, she runs and enters a red-coloured building, goes to the washroom and hides there. The elephant is banging on the closed door. She looks through a crack in the door and sees a few girls sitting and chatting. She shouts for help but no one listens. In fact, one girl looked toward the washroom door but immediately turned away to continue talking and laughing. The client threw a stone or something towards the girls to distract the elephant. It actually got distracted and turned around to face the girls. She opens the washroom door and runs out – here she wakes up screaming.”

### 5. SYMBOLIC CONTENT OF THE DREAM

When guided to focus on the rider and get an impression who or what he represented, the client felt that this was a tall person of about 6 feet height with medium built. She was guided to keep looking at the man, and then came the aha moment - ‘feels like dad!’ (this revelation was noted by the therapist). She further focused on herself and she got the impression of being a teenager. It was the age when she was studying in standard 9 when she had wanted to spend more time with her father but couldn't. Dad had dropped her at the crossroads because he had to run a pressing errand. This was the first Inner Child (IC) that was identified.

When she focused on the girls, she saw three girls through the crack in the door and one of them seemed like her younger sister. In fact, her sister had looked towards the door and then away from it making the client feel betrayed. Here she mentioned that she actually had felt betrayed many times by her younger sister in real time. This was the second Inner Child with feeling of betrayal.

The client was guided to look into the eyes of the elephant and get an impression what it represented. The angry red eyes converted into her mother's angry eyes. Mother was very angry scaring her. The client was frightened and felt like she was a young child studying in standard 3. The memory of that event surfaced when her mother had been furious because the child had brewed tea to surprise the mother. Actually, one teacher, that day, had taught them how to make tea but had not said anything about the use of ginger in it so, the little one had not put ginger in the tea. Mother saw her and shouted saying, ‘What if something had gone wrong?’ (*Kuch ho jaata toh?*). ‘What if you had burnt yourself?’ (*Jal jaati toh?*). Then she took a sip of the tea and threw the liquid in the basin. The child was frozen in this scene and this was the third Inner Child who was sad and frightened at same time.

### 6. THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION

The client was encouraged to recall a time when life felt joyful and she was happy. The vision of herself at age of 2 or 3 playing happily surfaced (this represented her Happy Inner Child). The adult of today, her present adult version, interacted with the happy inner child, bonded through play and earned her trust. Eventually, she embraced and integrated the happy Inner Child, reflecting on how her life had unfolded this far without this happy part. This integration brought a sense of completeness, as the Happy Inner Child settled in the naval area where maximum fear had been stored. It also paved way for more self-realizations and integrations.

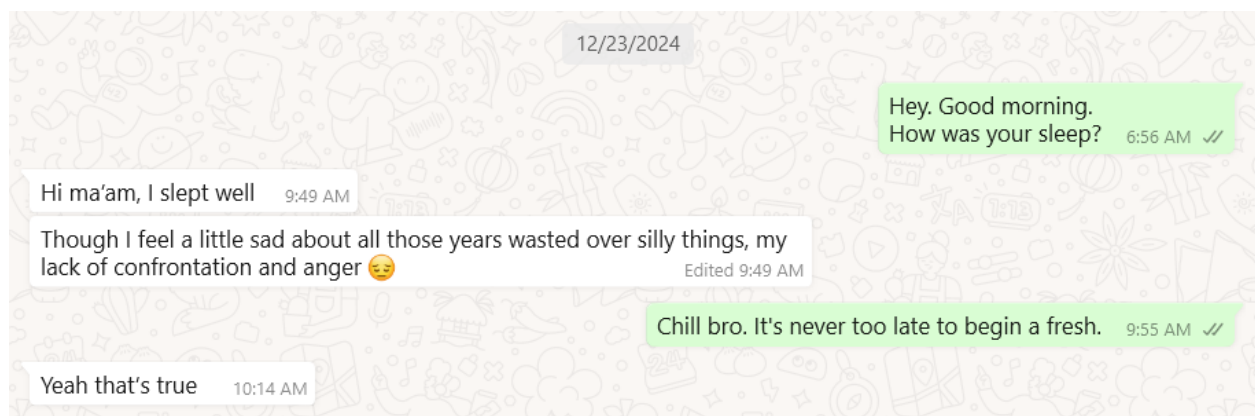
The client revisited all the three major life events one by one, starting with the conflict involving her mother and the anger in her eyes. The adult of today, i.e., the client, while reliving that childhood memory, gained a new perspective on her

mother's concern for her young child. She recognized that the feeling of "I am not valued," which had originated from this incident, had shaped her relationship not only with her mother but with others including her ex-boyfriend and colleagues along with her supervisor. This realization helped her to let go of the fear and anger she had harbored toward her mother. She also acknowledged the years that were wasted which she had spent dwelling on these emotions, and how it had negatively affected her relationships. Furthermore, she understood her younger sister's behaviour, who had often defended their mother. The client became aware of how her lack of confrontation had influenced her career as well. With these insights, she was now ready to move forward in her life with renewed confidence.

## 7. DISCUSSION

The dream was completely psychological in nature with predominant emotions of fear, anger, and betrayal. The frequency and intensity of the dream increased during college hostel stay where she was living alone and facing challenges namely, adjustment in new environment having different language and culture, making new acquaintances, and adjusting to the new pressures of living alone away from parents. It was a venting out dream wherein the client's sub-conscious mind was reliving and communicating the trauma. Because the client could not process it, hence the need for therapy was felt.

What lingered most in the dream were the emotional undercurrents and unresolved inner conflicts due to the sense of betrayal, a heavy sadness, and a creeping sense of fear resulting in the decision that 'I don't have anyone'. The emotions of not having anyone burdened with sadness, betrayal and fear was being vented out during the recurrent dreams. Not acknowledging these deep-rooted emotions while running away from the core issues had resulted in recurring venting out dreams. Difficulties faced in personal and professional life had triggered the dreams.



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