



COMMON LANGUAGE for PSYCHOTHERAPY (clp) PROCEDURES
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DREAM INTERPRETATION

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Definition: Attributing to the content of a dream a meaning related to the dreamer's concerns, aspirations, behaviour, or life episodes.

Elements: Dream interpretation starts with elements of the dream report and leads to new ideas associated with these that the client considers relevant.

Psychoanalytic dream interpretation concerns clients' *free associations* to dream content, which the analyst relates to psychoanalytic *metaphors* e.g. oblong objects may represent a penis, and to *topics* such as transference, sexuality, and early child-parent relationships. In Hill's dream interpretation the client is asked to describe the dream in detail and to re-experience associated feelings. Next the client is asked '*What could your dream mean?*', and after this interpretation is asked how s/he would like to change the dream and corresponding aspects of waking life.

Montangero's cognitive-behavioural dream interpretation has three steps. 1. '*Please describe your dream again with everything you saw, or felt was present but didn't see, concerning its setting, action, characters and feelings*'. 2. '*Now say what memory comes to mind about elements of your dream, not necessarily as they were in the dream, e.g. about a blue car you saw*'. 3. '*Next, can you reformulate your dream in more general terms, describing it sentence by sentence with your meaning of each element (e.g. instead of 'my neighbour' - 'an uninteresting housewife') or its encompassing category (e.g. instead of 'going down stairs' - 'changing level') or its function (e.g. instead of 'the door' - 'something giving access). I may make suggestions, but only you can decide what is relevant*'. A doctor reformulated his dream of 'Two "gangs" competing in a flower market by spraying flowers to refresh them' as 'Two groups competing in their task to cure'. Reformulation helps clients interpret how their dream applies to their experience - the doctor said it applied to two groups of doctors each claiming superiority for their competing type of treatment. Such interpretations suggest helpful topics to discuss e.g. feelings or ways of relating not mentioned before (e.g. guilt, or avoidance of intimacy with a partner).

Interpretations may also raise awareness of distorted thinking, e.g. a depressed young man dreamt about people who were either omnipotent (devils, his rich influential landlady) or hopeless (someone homeless, prisoners). Discussion of this made him aware that he judged people unrealistically in all-or-nothing terms (either complete winners or total losers). Dream interpretations may also raise awareness of a 'schema' - a belief underlying distorted thoughts, e.g. commenting on her dream of feeling terribly embarrassed when her boss came late to care for a client, a young woman said she could never do that: 'I must do everything for other people, and immediately, otherwise they won't love me'. Finally, dream interpretation allows the therapist to underline a client's resources e.g. a woman dreamed she was driving and was stopped by a barrier that she managed to lift up, but further on her car stuck in the mud and she had to get out and walk to go on. She interpreted her dream pessimistically: "It shows my life is full of difficulties". The therapist pointed out that her dream also showed she knew she could go on in spite of obstacles.

Related procedures: Psychodynamic interpretation of slips of the tongue, cognitive restructuring, free association, reframing.

Application: Psychoanalytic and psychodynamic therapy, occasionally in cognitive-behaviour therapy - usually individual.

1st use? Freud S (1900)

References:

1. Freud S (1900). *The interpretation of dreams*. 1965 New York: Basic Books
2. Hill CE, Rochlen AB (2002). The Hill cognitive experiential model of dream interpretation. *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 16, 75-89.
3. Montangero J (2007). *Comprendre ses rêves pour mieux se connaître* (Understanding one's dream in order to improve self-knowledge). Paris : Odile Jacob.

Case illustration in cognitive-behaviour therapy (Montangero 2007)

Charles came for help with his gambling dependency. In session 6 he reported dreaming of seeing a chamois (wild mountain goat) rubbing its horns against a tree trunk, but they were deer antlers, not chamois horns. Asked to *fully describe* what he saw, felt and thought during the dream, he said the rubbing helped the chamois get rid of the antlers. Asked what *memories* came to mind about a chamois and then a deer, Charles said he remembered seeing chamois during his experience of great freedom when hiking in the mountains before he married. He also remembered a friend telling stories of hunting deer, and of deer rubbing their antlers until they lose them even though the rubbing is painful.

Charles *reformulated* the dream report *in more general terms* as: "A symbol of freedom (the chamois) tries to get rid of (rubs), a feature of victims (deer are victims of hunters)." He immediately added his interpretation: "This applies well to me now, to my effort to get rid of my gambling dependency." His interpretation steered therapy toward reinforcing Charles's desire for freedom. Charles was asked to list every aspect that freedom could take for him, then every way in which gambling restricted his freedom, and was encouraged to feel free to make changes in his life. He got another, more interesting, job, and resumed hiking accompanied by his wife. This gave him a new sense of control over his life that he was keen to keep by not gambling again. The dream interpretation also led him to address painful aspects of not gambling and of being in therapy, which Charles had denied until then.