

When nightmares reveal existential anxieties during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Summary. Due to the high speed of spread and lethality of the corona-19 virus, as well as the prolongation of the pandemic, various aspects of our personal, social and professional life underwent major changes. There is evidence that these changes still continue to impact the mental health and wellbeing of a consistent part of the population. While underway, the pandemic caused people to fear infection and dying from this virus. It actually made thinking about death inevitable, which caused death anxiety to rise among a wide range of people. According to the authors, one of the ways death anxiety, as a fundamental existential anxiety of humanity, then expressed itself were nightmares and dreams related to the corona virus. The authors show that these dreams, although apparently negative, should be understood in their deeper message. On a deeper level, it seems that these dreams can play the role of a “painful healer”, i.e. they can help alleviate existential anxieties, especially anxieties about death and loneliness. They sometimes also communicate that the individual is avoiding mental issues that instead should be coped with in order to preserve mental wellbeing.

Keywords: Corona pandemic, Dream interpretation, Death anxiety, Existential anxieties, Existential Therapy

1. Introduction

Throughout history, dreams have been thought to contain important and mysterious messages for humans. Thus, dream interpretation has been of strong interest to all societies. In most of the ancient courts of the kings, for instance, people who interpreted dreams held a prestigious position among courtiers. A famous example is the story of Joseph in the Jewish Old Testament According to this part of the Bible, Pharaoh Akhenaten had a dream that no one could interpret until his chief cupbearer remembered that Joseph had interpreted a dream for him when he was put in prison two years earlier. So, Joseph was “brought from the dungeon” before the Pharaoh where he told him that his dream of seven fats and seven starved cows meant that there would be seven years of abundance in the land of Egypt followed by seven years of famine (Hendel, 2011).

Although in ancient times dream interpretation was highly respected, it was Sigmund Freud who stably implemented dreams in the fields psychology and psychotherapy. In his famous book *Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1900, he explained his point of view on how to work with dreams in psychotherapy sessions. Freud claims that interpretation of dreams is the royal road to knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind (Freud, 1900) and that the meaning of every dream is about the fulfillment of the individual's suppressed desires and wishes. One may experience calmness when fulfilling their hopes and desires while dreaming, and

dreams can reveal suppressed desires. Yet, when dreams conflict one's desires, they become nightmares (Dumitrescu, 2019).

Today, in addition to psychoanalysis, other psychotherapy approaches such as Gestalt therapy (Holzinger and et al, 2015), client-centered therapy (Barrineau, 1992), family therapy (Bynum, 1993), psychodrama (Casson, 1999) and even cognitive-behavioral (Montangero, 2009) also use dreams in therapy sessions.

The most famous psychologist who explored the role of dreams in psychology after Freud was Carl Gustav Jung. Although Jung does not completely reject Freud's model of dream interpretation, he believes that Freud's theory that dreams are necessarily related to the dreamer's unfulfilled desires is too simplified. Jung proposed that the process of collecting the associations linked to a dream can provide awareness and insight into the mental and psychological complexities of a person. So, according to Jung's belief the scope of dream interpretation is much wider than what Freud had thought as dreams express all the complexities of the dreamer's unconscious mind (Jung, 1984).

Dreams can play an important role in psychotherapy, and it seems that they should not be interpreted solely referring to instinctual dynamics and not only in psychoanalytical sessions. One of the psychotherapy approaches that includes dream interpretation but is less known for doing so, is the existential therapy approach (Akbari, 2019).

In existential psychotherapy, dreams are not evaluated on the basis of fixed symbols and can have several different meanings. It is quite a complex task to explore these different meanings. Dreams contain key information about the individuum, which requires a deep examination of the dream content and its specific meaning for the dreamer. In this approach, dreams vehicle valuable information about the client's relationship with the self, with others and him/her existence as a living being (Moon, 2007). Existential psychotherapy is based on the idea that every human being faces four fundamental categories of anxiety which refer to the issue of death, loneliness, meaninglessness, and

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freedom (Lantz, 2007). Sometimes, one or more of these fundamental anxieties reveal itself in a dream. The well known existential psychotherapist Irvin Yalom uses dream in his therapy – with the value and role of dreams in therapy actually being the only issue that finds him in agreement with Freud. Yalom suggests that we should not look for a complete interpretation of dreams as he considers this as an impossible task but he states that dreams give us deep and otherwise unavailable information about clients and are able to accelerate the treatment process (Yalom 2002).

Death anxiety seems to be one of the most common existential anxiety that we may encounter in dreams and it seems that issues like war, threat, trauma and pandemics can affect our dream contents for a long time (Barrett, 2023).

As to pandemics, there is evidence that the spread of the corona virus all over the world has had a negative impact on many aspects of human life among which mental health (Penninx and et al, 2022). Research has shown that the corona pandemics is associated with suicide increase (Efsthathiou and et al, 2022), depression (Mazza and et al, 2022), anxiety (Santomauro and et al, 2021) and sleep disorders (Marvaldi and et al, 2021). This virus infection seems to have exacerbated some of the existential anxieties as well. For instance, due to long quarantines, people felt lonelier as they had less opportunity to interact with family members and other people, (Altena and et al, 2020).

Given that the corona virus proved to be potentially lethal, many people feared that contracting it would kill them. It therefore seems that this virus has had an intense impact on one of the most common existential anxieties: death anxiety (Menzies and Menzies, 2020). Since often people seek to escape from death not only by appropriate actions but also by avoiding thinking about it, a phenomenon might occur which C.G Jung described as awakening when one looks inside themselves (1984).

Dreams may be a way of expressing death anxiety for those who “look outside”, i.e. for those who seek to suppress this anxiety while awake. At first glance, the dreams which show this existential anxiety may be considered as unpleasant ones and give the dreamer an uneasy feeling which lasts for some time. Yet, if we look deeper, this category of dreams may impact positively health and well-being. It may even bring relief from illness.

In the following case study, we'll try to illustrate how dreams express our existential anxieties and how their interpretation can improve the clients' mental health.

2. Case Report

P.M. (pseudonym) is 48 years old male, single and Muslim (Shia Islam). He has a high school diploma, wears glasses, is of average height, has no scars or burns on his face, and his age appears to match his appearance. P.M. lives by himself. He has left his original family almost two decades ago and is financially independent. He refers a normal childhood and adolescence, has no history of serious mental disorders, has never been hospitalized nor taken psychiatric medication. He was born in a relatively poor family and considers himself to be an intelligent person. Despite his scholastic intelligence he left school at young age and sought to earn money working in a grocery store. At the age of 35 he was able to buy a small shop and now, at the age of 48, he owns a large grocery store that employs several workers. P.M. considers himself economically successful.

Onset of sleep disorder

During the spread of the corona virus, the suspension of business activities and the empty streets increased the experience of social and personal isolation. Probably, the feeling of isolation was more intense for those who lived alone. P.M. also reported feeling lonelier with the start of the corona restrictions. He would have liked to have a companion for the long hours of forced stay at home, someone to talk to who made this enforced loneliness more bearable. A few months after the onset of Covid infection in Iran, when the number of deaths reached more than a hundred people every day, he felt even more alone. He started wondering why he hadn't got married during all these years and why he hadn't started a family for himself. No matter how successful he was in his job, he now felt that he was a failure in his relationships.

P.M. also started to feel anxious when considering what might happen if he got infected with corona. Who would take care of him? Did anyone care about his health, did his health or illness matter to anyone? As it seems he realized that the loneliness he had been comfortable with for years can be scary in other situations. All these anxieties impacted his sleep at night but he tried very hard to not think about them while awake. Yet, after a few weeks, he had a first nightmare about contracting the corona virus. Due to the intense emotional load and various impressive symbols in the dream, P.M. states that he remembers the entire dream quite accurately.

First nightmare related to Corona as reported by the client himself

“Coming home from work I take a lot of food with me, much more than I use to take with me in reality, as if I planned to eat it all by myself, It's difficult to open the front door as the key unlocks with difficulty. Once I am able to open the door, I notice that all the lamps in the house are off, just like the previous days, but this time I feel sick because of the darkness and because no one is waiting for me. I turn on all the lamps, even those that I haven't turned on in months. With all this illumination, my mood seems to improve.”

I choose some cherries, which are my favorite fruit, and wash them in the water that comes out of the faucet. I look closely at the water noticing how clear and clean it is. Afterwards I put the cherries on a plate and one of them falls off. I put the plate on the table next to me, yet I can't find the cherry that fell on the ground. I put on my glasses, search a little longer and go to wash the cherry again. As I start washing, the cherry changes its shape and looks like a scary virus. The water flowing out of the faucet, which a few moments ago I had seen as clear, now looks like blood. I scream and wake up.

After waking up, I was so scared that I left the house leaving all lights turned on, and stayed awake in the yard until morning. I was afraid that I would fall asleep if I back into the house. I went to work and for the first time it felt good not be alone at work. Although I tried to look normal, everyone noticed that I had unusual feelings. I think my fear was externalized. After that nightmare, I became sensitive to any news or symptoms related to the corona virus. I was constantly checked the news and followed

the number of new infections and deaths every day. For a short time my anxiety about dying increased significantly. Later on, I had other scary dreams related to death and corona, but none of them was as deep and impactful as this first dream."

Dream interpretation from an existential viewpoint

Existential crisis is a term coined by Erikson (1970) and refers to a state in which a person is placed in anxiety-provoking situations of life and about oneself. In these situations, questions about the purpose and meaning of life may arise or internal contradictions have to be faced. Although these anxieties can be very scary and paralyzing and are often accompanied by a feeling of absurdity, sometimes they turn out to be a turning point which leads to an increase in the sense of personal validity (Robinson and et al, 2017).

Existential crises may affect life in different ways. Although it seems to occur more often in middle age, there is no specific age range involved. The interesting thing about the case reported above is not only that M.P. faces an existential crisis, but that he does so through a dream with a subconscious message. As Sigmund Freud rightly pointed out, dreams are the highway to access the unconscious. Therefore, it seems that in dreams we are more likely to face existential anxieties, especially death anxiety. In waking life, the ego may avoid existential anxieties. Yet in dreams, existential anxieties that one may have been avoiding can emerge.

In the reported case, we tried to explain the unconscious language in facing existential anxieties and shared our ideas with the client. There are actually a number of symbols in the dream that guide our understanding. First, the person has bought more fruits and food than his normal daily consumption. This amount of food is clearly intended for more than one person. This may indicate that the client wishes to have a family or friends at home to share this food with. It also shows how lonely and isolated he may be feeling (loneliness is one of the main existential anxieties). Our impression is that the dream goes further and vehicles the indirect message that the dreamer should overcome his condition of loneliness and get rid of it. As he said while telling the dream, one of the big issues he was then facing was the question why he hadn't gotten married yet and started a family for himself. If we examine this statement a little deeper, beyond to the unconscious desire to produce offspring and the human desire for immortality, we find that the important topic he was facing was not marriage, but that he should find a solution for his loneliness. Subsequent follow-ups showed that he recently proposed dating to two women, although both of them refused. Yet, according to him, none of them deserved him as they didn't understand his success and value (he laughed while saying this).

The next detail to explore within the dream is how his favorite fruit suddenly looks like a virus and seems to attack him. Maybe the unconscious message is that M.P. should face the virus in this way, and maybe the dreamer's favorite fruit was chosen, so that due to this impressive switch the dream content of the dream was difficult to forget. Another reason why the cherry fruit appears in the dream could be its colour, red, which reminds of blood and thus of death. Often indeed, when the individual is unable to directly receive a message, symbolic representations are used in dreams.

Another interesting detail is that M.P. watches the clarity and purity of water, something that he had never noticed before, and then suddenly the clear water turns into blood. Maybe if the dreamer had not paid so much attention to the clarity of the water first, the switch to blood would have been less effective. Blood is associated with injury, wound, risk of death, and the subconscious message may be that death can occur completely suddenly and cannot be foreseen or predicted. So, here too, the subconscious message seems to finally face death anxiety.

In our view, some dreams also express the unconscious desire to resolve the existing situation. For example, turning on the lights in the house that have been off for a long time may express the advice that M.P. should pay attention to parts of his life that he has neglected for a long time. As said before, the dreamer was very interested in studying as a child. He still has great respect for people who study, write, invent and explore. So, the therapist suggested that he should resume studying the subjects he likes. M.P. accepted this suggestion without any resistance and now wants to enroll in the university.

The client is now better off than before. He has proposed several women to meet and is thinking of going to university. But still his fear of death has not disappeared as death anxiety is one of the most resistant existential anxieties. But it seems as if the awareness of it helped him a lot. For instance, he now knows that he will never have time again for what he has not done. He knows that he cannot determine or predict the time of death. He now understands more about the importance of being alive and healthy. He gives less importance to financial competition and likes to pursue his interests. His nightmares have lessened. M.P. seems to be subconsciously content with the process for now.

3. Conclusion

The corona pandemic has caused many changes in the patterns of life and social interactions. Studies have shown that sleep disorders and nightmares have increased since the pandemic. It seems that one of the most important existential anxieties, i.e. death anxiety, manifests itself through dreams during the corona pandemic and even afterwards. Through analyzing and interpreting dreams, one can better understand the language of dreams and use them to explore existential anxieties, especially death anxiety. Although dream interpretation is generally thought of as characteristic of Freudian psychoanalysis or of the Jungian approach, our case report tried to show that the world of dreams and their messages can be accessible also to existential approaches to psychotherapy. It seems that the world of dreams is a meta-approach world.

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