

The death of a family member (brother) reflected in a long dream series

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Summary. The death of a loved one is often a very impactful event in the life of a person, and 50% to 86% of persons who experienced a significant loss reported dreaming about the deceased. The present analysis is based on a long dream series (N = 14,520 dreams), including a period of three years recorded after the unexpected death of the dreamer's brother. The findings indicate that after the death of the brother the frequency of brother dreams decreased. Dreams in which the brother occurred as being dead were rare, more often the death of the brother is reflected in a general way, e.g., telling someone about his death, finding "old" stuff of the brother. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of collecting a series of dreams after loss as completely as possible and not focus only on the most memorable dreams people have of the deceased. Additionally, the findings indicate that many dreams of the brother seem to refer to past shared experiences and not refer to the death and/or the grief process. These types of dreams might be helpful in grief counselling as they reflect the close connection the dreamer had with the deceased.

Keywords: Death of a family member, Grief, dream series, continuity hypothesis

1. Introduction

The death of a loved one is often a very impactful event in the life of a person (Meagher & Balk, 2013). According to the continuity hypothesis of dreaming which states that dreams reflect waking-life experiences, especially the salient ones (Schredl, 2003), one would expect that the loss of a close person and the related grief is reflected in dreams of persons after experiencing such a loss. Indeed, 50% to 86% of persons who experienced a significant loss reported dreaming about the deceased (Black et al., 2019; Black et al., 2021; Germain et al., 2013; Wright et al., 2014). Interestingly, in a population-based survey, 20% to 50% of participants older than 60 years reported remembering dreams about deceased persons (Schredl & Piel, 2005), indicating that these dreams are often experienced by a person who has experienced loss.

Typical dream topics reported by the persons who experienced loss are Back-to-life dreams (deceased is alive again with the dreamer recognizing that she/he should be dead), dreams of illness and dying reflecting the waking-life experiences around the loss, saying-goodbye dreams (deceased is saying good-bye in the dream), daily activity dreams (deceased is doing typical waking-life activities), and advice dreams (the deceased is giving the dreamer helpful advice) (Barrett, 1991; Belicki et al., 2003; Black et al., 2016; Domhoff, 2015; Garfield, 1996; Wright et al., 2014). Belicki et al. (2003) put together a list of 28 different dream themes and

reported that reliably coding these themes can be difficult, that is, two independent judges agree on the presence or absence of a specific theme in the dream not very often. Most of the participants reported that dreams about the deceased are positively toned and comforting, despite this, negatively toned dreams that are distressing to the dreamer, especially if the loss was traumatic, can occur (Black et al., 2019; Black et al., 2021; Garfield, 1996; Wright et al., 2014). It has also been shown that working with dreams about the deceased can be beneficial in counselling and psychotherapy (Begovac & Begovac, 2012; Čepulienė & Skruibis, 2023; Hess, 2004; Hill et al., 2000; Kast, 1991).

The brief review indicated that the loss of a loved one is affecting dreams, thus, in line with the continuity hypothesis of dreaming (Schredl, 2003); but several questions are still unanswered. For example, how frequent are dreams about the deceased in regard to all remembered dreams? and does the frequency of dreams about the loved one change with their death? One might expect – similar to ending a romantic relationship (Schredl & Reinhard, 2012; Schredl & Wood, 2021) – that the frequency of dreams featuring the deceased decreases as sharing waking-life experiences are no longer possible. However, Hall and Nordby (1972) pointed out in their original formulation of the continuity hypothesis that dreams do not only reflect waking-life events but can also reflect waking-life thoughts, that is, thinking a lot about the deceased might be reflected in frequent dreams about the lost loved one. Several longitudinal studies (Black et al., 2014; Domhoff, 2015; Garfield, 1996) focused only on the dreams of the deceased occurring after the death and did not elicit dreams of the person prior to her/his death, so no information was provided about the change in frequency that might be caused by the event. This kind of data was provided by Gerne (1987) who analyzed a long dream series (N = 9,980 dreams); an English summary of this study was also published (Gerne, 1989). For example, the mother showed up in 20.1% of the 482 dreams prior to her death and in 19.1% of the 931 dreams after her death; the difference was not significant.

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Another open question is whether all dreams of the deceased show references to the actual death, for example, the dreamer knowing that the person who is alive in the dream is dead in reality (Garfield, 1996). Here is the problem that some studies (Black et al., 2019; Black et al., 2021; Black et al., 2020; Black et al., 2016) focused on analyzing the most memorable dreams about the deceased; and thus might have missed more mundane dreams that Garfield (1996) called daily activity dreams. These were the most frequent dreams (39%) after her father's death (Garfield, 1996). However, it was not specified whether she knew in the dream that he was dead. Barrett (1991) analyzed a sample of 1,412 dreams reported by 149 students and found that about 2% of the dreams included deceased persons (explicitly noticed by the dreamer in the dream that the person is dead in reality). Barrett (1991) estimated that deceased persons can be alive again in the dream without the dreamer knowing this in about 6% of the dreams, which was inferred from remarks that were added to the dream reports. This indicates that the deceased person can show up in dreams without any reference to the death or the dreamer's grieving process, possibly a reference to past waking-life experiences shared between the dreamer and the deceased. Dreams that include waking-life experiences or events from the past of the dreamer have been found repeatedly (Botman & Crovitz, 1989; Horton & Malinowski, 2015; Strauch & Meier, 1996; Vallat et al., 2017). Thus, the question of whether all dreams of the deceased after their death are related to the death and/or the grief – as reflected in the dream theme lists (Belicki et al., 2003; Black et al., 2016) – is still unanswered.

The present study is based on a long dream series of 14,520 dreams recorded over 35 years, including three years after the unexpected death of the dreamer's brother. Based on the continuity hypothesis of dreaming, it was expected that the frequency of brother dreams would decrease as the dreamer did not interact with his brother in waking life anymore. As the brother and the dreamer shared a very long history together, more than 50 years, it was hypothesized that the dreams recorded after the death of the brother not only reflect the loss of the brother but also their shared waking-life experiences.

2. Method

2.1. Participant and dream diary

The male participant kept an unstructured dream diary from the age of 22, beginning in September 1984 through September 2019. During this time, he recorded 14,520 dreams. The mean dream length was 140.53 ± 85.77 words (range: 3 to 760 words). The core family of the male participant consists of five members: father (born 1932), mother (born 1943), dreamer (born 1962), sister (born 1963), and brother (born 1965). Till the divorce of his parents in 1975, all family members lived in the same household. After that, the participant lived with his mother and his siblings. He moved out at the end of 1986 and kept regular but infrequent contact with his mother and his siblings. The relationships were overall harmonious, but not very close. The contact with his father was regular for one year after the divorce, then contact ceased completely with very few exceptions over the years. The brother died unexpectedly on August 31, 2016 at the age of 51. The cause of death was a heart attack.

2.2. Procedure

The dream reports were originally hand-written and were later – by the dreamer himself – typed and entered into a database, Alchera 3.72, created by Harry Bosma (www.mythwell.com). This database allows assigning keywords to the dreams, also a task carried out by the dreamer. Each dream was coded for the presence of a family member (father, mother, sister, brother). In addition, it was coded whether the dream was related to the brother without him being present in the dream. In a second step, the dreams with the brother as dream character were coded along several scales: Relation to the death or dying of the brother (Yes/No), dreamer interacts verbally with the brother (Yes/No), emotions of the dreamer regarding his brother (negative, neutral, positive), the brother is younger in the dream compared to waking life (Yes/No), the dreamer and the brother is part of the family but not interacting directly with one another (e.g., being in the same flat, being in a car together).

The Alchera software also provides a word count for each dream report. Dream reports did not include redundancies or words not related to the dream experience itself. The analysis unit was a single dream report. The data were exported into an Excel spreadsheet (Microsoft), and data analysis was carried out using the SAS 9.4 software package for Windows. As the number of dreams in 1984 was relatively small ($N = 20$), these dreams were combined with the dreams of 1985. The statistical tests for the comparison between the time period 3 years prior to the death of the brother and the time period 3 years after the death were carried out with the algorithm published by Klingenberg (2008). This approach was developed for binary time series with gaps. Using the SAS 9.4 for Windows software package, the statistician (second author of Schredl & Reinhard, 2012) applied the GLIMMIX procedure with a power covariance structure to implement an autoregressive Generalized Linear Mixed Model (AR-GLMM) with a logit link and serial correlation according to the formula of Klingenberg (2008).

3. Results

Overall, the brother was present in 1,330 dreams (9.16%), the mother in 1,386 dreams (9.55%), the sister in 1,026 dreams (7.07%), and the father in 307 dreams (2.11%). Figure 1 shows the course of the frequencies of the family members from September 1984 to September 2019. Prior to the death of the brother (August 31, 2016), the dreamer's mother, sister, and brother occurred with a similar frequency in the dreams (2015 and 2016), however, the frequency of the father dreams was lower. Comparing the frequencies of the different family members in dreams three years prior to the death of the brother compared to the 3-year interval after his death, the statistical analyses indicate that the frequency of brother dreams was significantly lower after his death, whereas the frequency of the other family members stayed the same (see Table 1). A post-hoc analysis showed that the frequency of father dreams increased significantly from 0.96% (January to August 2016) to 5.21% (September to December 2016) using the Klingenberg algorithm: $t = 2.8$, $p = .0053$.

In Table 2, different characteristics of the brother dreams are depicted. The analysis of the randomly selected dreams was taken from Schredl (2024), excluding the dreams that were recorded in 2016 to avoid overlap. The brother occurred in only two dreams as a character with the knowledge

of the dreamer that he is dead (see dream examples 1 and 2) after his death on August 31, 2016. However, the death of the brother was a topic in 13 dreams, without him being present in the dream (see Table 3). For control purposes, the dreams prior to the death of the brother were also coded for the presence of the brother as a topic but none of the dreams included this topic. In this time span, only dreams in which the brother is present as a person occurred. Putting both categories together (brother as dream character with the knowledge of him being dead and the dreams mentioning the brother's death), 15 dreams out of the 1,943 dreams recorded after the death of the brother were directly related to the brother's death, resulting in 0.77% of these remembered dreams. The first dream with the brother as a dream character, including the knowledge that he was dead in real life was recorded on September 27, 2016, whereas the first dream including the death of the brother as a topic occurred on October 9, 2016 (see Table 3).

Interestingly, there was a slight increase in brother dreams in which the dreamer was communicating directly with his brother (see Table 2); unfortunately, due to the small sample size the algorithm of Klingenberg (2008) could not be applied for statistical testing. In most of the dreams, the emotions of the dreamer towards his brother were neutral (see Table 2). If emotions occurred, the emotions were more often negative than positive in both periods, before and after the death of the brother, as seen in dream example 6. Very positive dreams have been relatively rare, prior and after the death of the brother (see dream example 8).

Another interesting topic was that the brother within the dream was younger compared to his real age in waking life,

Table 1. Frequency of family members in the N = 1.731 dreams three years prior to the death of the brother vs. N = 1,916 dreams three years after the death of the brother.

Family member	Prior to death	After death	Statistical analysis
Brother	8.26%	5.17%	$t = -3.5$ $p = .0017$
Mother	9.01%	8.35%	$t = -0.5$ $p = .4786$
Sister	7.97%	8.25%	$t = 0.3$ $p = .7622$
Father	1.04%	1.67%	$t = 1.6$ $p = .1055$

supporting the idea that the dream does not reflect the relationship to the brother immediately prior to his death, but might be related to memories of the distant past. In a similar way, the 50% of dreams in which the brother is part of the family doing something together (being in the flat where all live, driving a car, etc.) are more indicative of experiences the dreamer had with the brother (and his family) a long time ago. In these dreams, there is no direct interaction between the dreamer and the brother (e.g., the brother and other family members are also in the flat where the dream is, but without and direct contact).

Dream examples

Death-related dreams

Dream 1 (September 27, 2016): "I'm in an apartment and go into my room, which is at the front. I get a fright be-

Dreams with family members

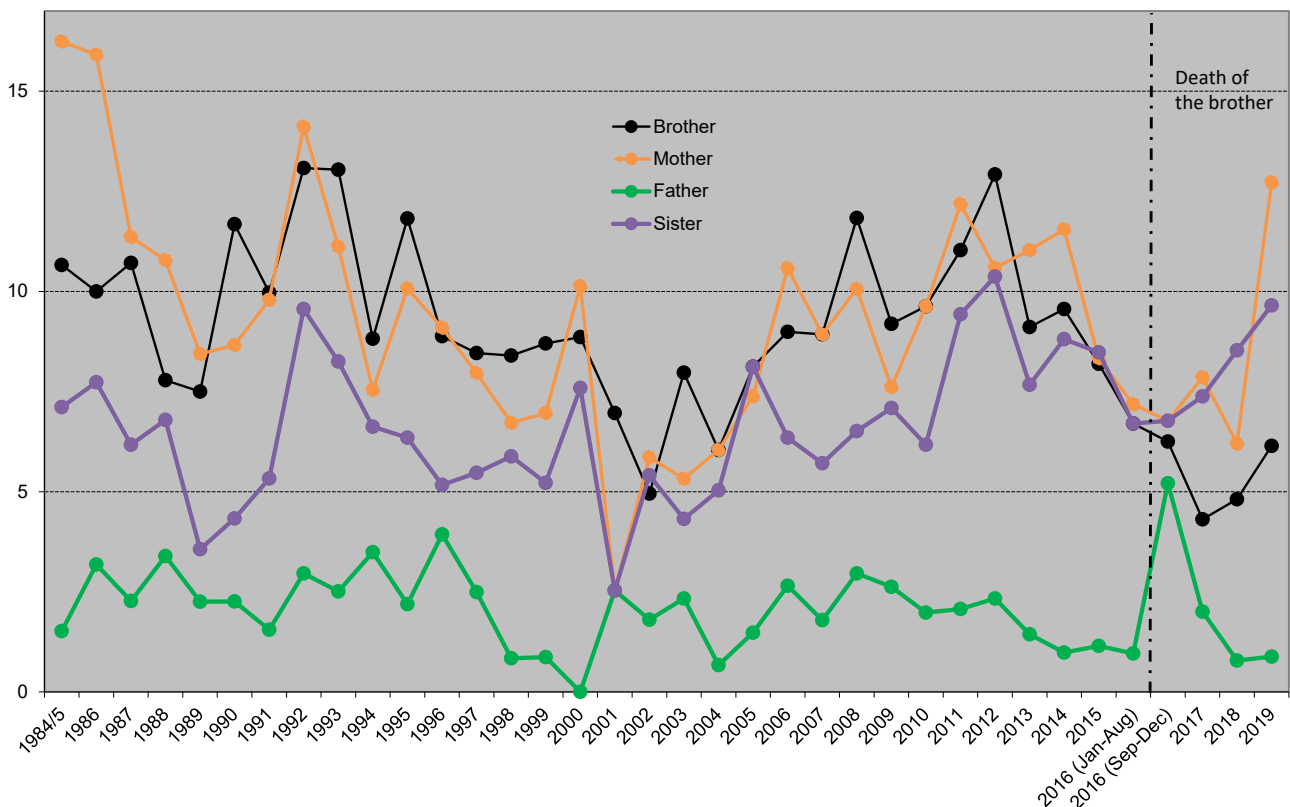


Figure 1. Dreams with family members per year.

Table 2. Dream characteristics related to the brother in dreams of the brother in three different phases

Variable	Random sample before 2016 (N = 96)		2016 prior to the death of the brother (N = 28)		Dreams after the death of the brother (N = 99)	
Death	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	2	2.02%
Verbal interaction	23	23.96%	7	25.00%	38	38.38%
Negative	16	16.67%	3	10.71%	14	14.14%
Emotions	78	81.25%	23	82.14%	82	82.83%
Neutral	78	81.25%	23	82.14%	82	82.83%
Positive	2	2.08%	2	7.14%	3	3.03%
Brother younger	---	---	0	0.00%	9	9.09%
Brother part of family	---	---	16	57.14%	46	46.46%

cause I see a foot and think that everyone has left, but it's a guest (woman, known). I go back into the hallway, where my brother (about 30 years old, slim) is standing, looking quite unconcerned. I'm surprised to see him because I know he's dead. He's not fully there, but more like a figure."

Dream 2 (April 30, 2017): "I'm in a large room (old building, first floor). The point is that it's nice to have a cozy corner in such a large room. My brother (to my left at a small table) and my sister are there, possibly one or two other people. I explain that it's not that difficult, a 2 m wide, high wooden panel and fabric would be enough. My brother sits there quietly, I know he's dead. I'm surprised that he's there, I think it's good."

Dream with the brother being younger in the dream

Dream 3 (June 17, 2017): ".... The weather is beautiful. I look down a slope and see beautiful scenery. My brother comes along and tells me that he can throw 12 tennis balls in a sequence. He explains that he does this to practice his serves. I say something appreciative and mention

that many professionals also work out on exercise machines, etc. He knows this too, as he has a professional trainer. He is younger (maybe 30) and I admire his dedication, as he plans to become a really good tennis player."

Dream with verbal interaction

Dream 4 (July 17, 2018): "I am sitting with my siblings at a round table near Shopping center (Heidelberg). I have a loaf of bread (light whole grain bread) cut into thin slices. My brother remembers the time when I wasn't allowed to eat many things. I agree that it was a difficult time, being vegetarian, gluten-free, and milk protein-free. And, neither of the two diagnoses was correct. A small foreign boy looks at the table, which makes me uncomfortable. He walks around the table, and then wants to sit on my lap. I think he is hungry and give him a slice of bread. I think it would be nicer for children if there were something sweet, jam, but I don't have any. The little boy takes a small bite, but runs around squeaking somehow. His father comes to calm him down. It's not clear what's wrong with the boy."

Table 3. Dreams with the death of the brother as topic but the brother is not present in the dream (N = 13).

Number	Date	Content (abbreviated)
T12616	Oct 9, 2016	Dreamer tells his boss that his brother had died recently.
T12619	Oct 11, 2016	Dreamer sees three beer cans that belonged to his brother who is now dead.
T12620	Oct 11, 2016	A friend is comforting the dreamer who lost his brother.
T12653	Nov 2, 2016	The dreamer is seeing his father who seems to weep likely because of the death of his son (the dreamer's brother).
T12666	Nov 8, 2016	The dreamer witnesses how his mother called his father to tell him that their son (the dreamer's brother) is dead.
T13055	Jun 19, 2017	Dreamer is with his family and sees the chair the brother was typically sitting before he died.
T13150	Aug 17, 2017	Dreamer has a broken bicycle and thinks about his brother that he would have been able to fix it if he is still alive.
T13164	Aug 25, 2017	The dream is about the death and the heritage of the dreamer's brother.
T13180	Sep 2, 2017	The father of the dreamer died in the dream. The sister says: "Then he died exactly one year after our brother."
T13310	Nov 28, 2017	The dreamer is searching a large basement room and finds several objects that belonged to his brother.
T13896	Sep 20, 2018	The dreamer is in his room, which used to belong to his brother.
T14249	May 5, 2019	Two aggressive looking men are looking for my brother, the dreamer has thoughts whether they can demand the money (a considerable sum) from his mother as she is the brother's heiress.
T14372	Jul 11, 2019	There is a plane crash in the dream that might have involved the dreamer's mother and sister. The dreamer is sad and thinks about the death of the brother and his father.

Dream with brother as part of the family

Dream 5 (June 15, 2017): "I am in a large hotel room with my family, possibly other relatives or close friends. I am gathering clothes; it is morning. The day before, we carried out a big operation, well planned, taking a lot of money from bad people, theft. There are some cats with us, possibly also a small dog. These could give away our trail, which we have very cleverly covered up. I am afraid because the bad guys wouldn't be very subtle."

Dream with different emotional qualities

Negative emotions: Dream 6 (Oct 11, 2017): "I'm sitting at a large table in a large room (castle-like). There are maybe 30 people sitting at the table, a feeling of kinship. I'm more to the left, opposite me is my brother (younger), who makes mean remarks about me. That really annoys me. We talked beforehand and I apologized for always teasing him like that as a child. I get up and walk to the right, he has also walked around the blackboard. I grab him by the shoulders, shake him and say that I'll always be older like him, bigger and stronger too. He can't do anything about that. It's not clear how he will react."

Neutral dream: Dream 7 (July 11, 2017): "I am in a large apartment. My brother is there at first, but at some point, he leaves. He is wearing a jacket or something similar. I look for him, considering whether it makes sense to arrange for him to sign out, since there are only two of us living in the apartment. I may also want to leave. Old apartment building."

Positive emotions: Dream 8 (September 3, 2017): "I am in a large room that is quite dark (apartment). My brother is lying on a large couch while I am standing. We are talking about dealing lovingly with our own weaknesses; it is very close and intimate between us because we are talking about something that is very important to us."

4. Discussion

The present findings indicate that the death of the brother had an effect on the frequency of brother dreams – an expected decrease in frequency. Interestingly, despite dreaming of the deceased being common after loss (Black et al., 2019; Black et al., 2021; Germain et al., 2013; Wright et al., 2014), "classical" grief dreams featuring the deceased (e.g., Barrett, 1991; Belicki et al., 2003; Black et al., 2016; Domhoff, 2015; Garfield, 1996; Wright et al., 2014) were rare ($N = 2$ dreams). The death of the brother can be seen to be reflected more generally in 13 dreams (e.g., talking with someone about it, without the brother being a dream character). Although the emotions of the interaction with the brother within the dreams after his death were more negative than positive (with the majority of interactions being neutral), these emotions seem to be related to the sibling rivalry present during childhood and adolescence – as the same distribution of dream emotions was found in the brother dreams before his death.

Given the fact that the present analysis is based on a single case, the generalizability is limited. On the other hand, the extensive dream series allowed a detailed analysis of the frequency of brother dreams before and after his death. Moreover, mundane dreams (e.g., family activities in

which the brother partakes without any specific interaction between the dreamer and the brother) have been recorded and indicate that – in this dreamer – they outnumber the death/grief-related dreams by far. However, as pointed out by Garfield (1996) and Black et al. (2020), the dreams might differ regarding the cause of death of the loved one (e.g., violent, severe illness like cancer, or sudden death), and the grief intensity experienced by the dreamer after the loss. In the present case, the grief intensity was on the low end after the brother died, and the death was due to illness; therefore, a broader spectrum of persons who had lost a loved one should be studied, preferably persons who kept a dream journal prior to the death of the loved one.

Overall, the percentage of brother dreams was quite high in the dream series (about 9%) compared to other studies, e.g., 3.0% (Hall & Van de Castle, 1966) and 5.9% (Nöltner & Schredl, 2023), indicating that the brother played a substantial role in the life of the dreamer – even though the contact frequency in adulthood was not high. As expected, the frequency of brother dreams dropped after his death (this decrease was not found for the other family members); this decrease in frequency is comparable to relationship break-ups (Schredl, 2024; Schredl, Cadiñanos Echevarria, et al., 2020) and retirement (Schredl, Anderson, et al., 2020). However, the frequency is well above 0%, indicating that not only current waking-life experiences are reflected in dreams but also experiences of the past (see below). It is important to keep in mind that thoughts about the deceased brother can also affect dreams, but it seems that this effect is relatively small, as reflected in the low percentage of brother dreams actually relating to the brother's death. This pattern can also be seen in a high percentage of work-related dreams after retirement (Schredl, Anderson, et al., 2020). Studying these dreams with references to the past (brother and dreamer part of the family, dreamer is younger in the dream) might help to shed light on how dreams might reflect sleep-dependent memory consolidation (Hudachek & Wamsley, 2023), for example, integrating new experiences into the network of already existing memories.

An unexpected finding was the very low number of grief-related themed dreams; in the present series, only two back-to-life dreams occurred; all other topics, for example, advice dreams, saying-goodbye dreams, etc. (Belicki et al., 2003; Black et al., 2016; Garfield, 1996) were not present. This might be explained by the minor grief reaction of the dreamer, but also partly by the fact that that previous research (e.g., Black et al., 2016) elicited only the most memorable dreams about the deceased. Including the dreams with references to the brother's death, 15 dreams were recorded over the three years after the death. Interestingly, the frequencies of dreams about the deceased are not that high in other dream series either (Black et al., 2014; Domhoff, 2015; Garfield, 1996). For example, there were 143 dreams over 22 years (Domhoff, 2015), 44 dreams in two years in a very high dream recaller (she recorded over 20,000 dreams in her lifetime) (Garfield, 1996), 9 dreams in a two and a half year period (Black et al., 2014), and 106 dreams over a 16-year period (Belicki et al., 2003). Even though many persons report having dreams about the deceased (Black et al., 2019; Germain et al., 2013; Wright et al., 2014) and the dreams related to the death of the loved one can have a profound impact on the dreamer (Wright et al., 2014), the actual frequency of those dreams in relation to all remembered dreams seems quite low.

After the death of the brother, most of the interactions with the brother within the dream were neutral; if not, the negative emotions outweighed the positive ones. However, the ratio of positive and negative dreams was similar to brother dreams within in this series recorded prior to the brother's death, indicating that these dreams might not be related to the loss itself but to the long history the dreamer shared with his brother (e.g., sibling rivalry in childhood and adolescence). The analysis provided hints that there might also be changes in the content of brother dreams (e.g., increased percentage of dreams with interactions). Interestingly, this was also found for ex-partner dreams that included more often verbal interaction with the ex-partner compared to partners, whereas mundane topics (e.g., doing something together) were more prominent (Schredl & Wood, 2021), indicating that the ex-partner dreams – even though they are rarer than partner dreams – are more salient. This could also be an explanation for the present tendency of more frequent direct contacts with the brother in the dreams after his death. Another interesting finding relates to the dreams in which the brother was younger that was only found after the death of the brother but not in the 2016 dreams recorded prior to the death of the brother. As the sample size was small, the finding should be viewed with caution; a larger number of brother dreams prior to the death should be analyzed. These dreams are very interesting as they provide a direct clue that they are connected to experiences that occurred a long time ago. Thus, studying dream series that allow detailed comparisons of dreams about the deceased after death and the dreams about this person before death might be very helpful in understanding how dreams change due to the death of a loved one and how one is processing their grief. For example, back-to-life dreams have been associated with the first phase of mourning (denial) (Garfield, 1996); however, this dream type should be differentiated from dreams featuring the deceased (alive) but without any reference to her and his death, as these might simply reflect long-term memory processes or another aspect of the grieving process.

An interesting finding was the increase of father dreams after the death of the brother. The dreamer and the father met at the funeral (a rare contact), and during the funeral reception, a friend of the brother talked with the father about his relationship with the brother, which was conflict-laden. The dreamer overhear bits and pieces of conversation. As the dreamer blamed the father for contributing to the brother's problems (e.g., unemployment, alcoholism), this may have triggered emotional salient topics in the dreamer – reflected in an increase of father dreams after the brother's death.

To summarize, the analysis of this dream series – even though it is based on only one dreamer – has broadened the view on dreams about a lost loved one that can occur after a death. The dreams that the bereaved can have may not be solely related to the death and the grieving process, but also to memories the dreamer shared with the deceased. This type of dream can also be addressed in grief counselling or therapy as they might represent the close connection the dreamer had with the deceased and could provide an opening to discuss the relationship and the experienced grief. It should not be interpreted as reflecting a specific stage in the grief process (as Back-to-life dreams might reflect the denial phase), but a series of dreams, as shown here, may represent a grief that is integrated and not the focus of dis-

tress for the person. Research is still in its infancy in understanding how dreams reflect the grieving process. It would be interesting to study more dream journalists undergoing losses to expand the present findings – as grief processes differ from person to person and effects on dreams might be different regarding the relationship between the dreamer and the lost loved one (e.g., spouse, family member, close friend, etc.).

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AI Statement

For the translation of the German dream reports into English DeepL was used. Otherwise, no AI tools or AI assistants were used for literature search, data analyses, writing, and grammar.

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