

Dreams in bereavement: Case study

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Summary. This article presents a case study of a Polish middle-aged woman whose mother died after a long and serious illness. This woman started collecting her dreams over the period of one year. She wrote down 29 dreams in which her deceased mother appeared. The dreams changed along with time – in terms of their content and structure – reflecting consecutive phases of the dreamer’s adjustment to life after her loss. In the article, the dream content changes are characterised with the help of Hall/ Van de Castle scale. Continuity between the dream content and the dreamer’s waking process of coping with grief is explained in the light of the informant’s comments. Moreover, some healing effects of those dreams are suggested and observable in three main dimensions: diagnostic, distracting, and compensatory.

Keywords: Dreams in bereavement, grief, trauma, continuity hypothesis of dreaming, therapeutic effect of dreams

1. Introduction

Dreams in bereavement are often believed to have consoling or therapeutic effects. In Western civilization, some people believe that in dreams they were visited by their deceased loved ones (see Klugman, 2006). Many theorists, researchers and psychotherapists admit that dreams of specific kind can help the dreamers to overcome their grief and adjust to life after the loss. In the context of such convictions, I would like to present a case of Eve (the name has been changed), a 45-year-old Polish woman whose mother died in January 2019, after a long and serious illness.

After Eve’s deceased mother appeared in her dream for the first time (in February 2019), she decided to write down her dreams – but only those in which the mother was present. (Garfield [1996, p.208] reminds us that people in bereavement have also “symbolic dreams” which “do not contain the image of the deceased”). Over the period of one year – till February 2020 – Eve reported 29 dreams in her dream diary. Usually she wrote them down in the morning, after getting up. Then she stopped collecting the dreams as she felt that she no longer needed to do it.

For many years, Eve has been a very good friend of mine. Since the death of her mother we have had several talks about Eve’s feelings and psychological condition. She was sharing her dreams and thoughts about them. In March 2020, she sent me her dream reports and allowed me to use them in this article. All my observations are based not only on Eve’s dream descriptions, but also on her comments, explanations and answers to my questions, provided both in the period of collecting the dreams and after sending them to me.

The literature on dreams in bereavement is not overwhelmingly rich, however a substantial number of studies in this field exists (Adams & Hyde, 2008; Barrett, 1991-1992; Belicki et al., 2003; Black et al., 2014; Black et al., 2016; Black et al., 2020; Cartwright & Lamberg, 2000; Domhoff, 2015; Garfield, 1996, 1997; Hinton et al., 2013; Linn, 1991; Ryan, 2006; Von Franz, 1986; Wright et al., 2013). The researchers are mainly interested in whether dreams in bereavement can be helpful for the dreamers, what the most common categories of those dreams are, and how the dreams change along with time.

Many of the authors admit that dreams of the deceased can facilitate adjustment to mourning (Black et al., 2020), although they can also be a source of discomfort. Cartwright and Lamberg (2000, p.86) write:

Our dreams may highlight for us aspects of our relationship with the person who has died that we overlooked while he or she was alive. They may help us to reconcile feelings that troubled us then and remain troubling now. They can help us accept the finality of the event and prepare us for life without that person.

Garfield (1996, p.187) demonstrates that dreams in bereavement can facilitate the achievement of what Worden (1991) called the “tasks of grief”:

- to accept the reality of the loss,
- to work through the pain of grief,
- to adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing,
- to emotionally “relocate” the deceased and move on with life.

Following the grief researchers (James & Cherry, 1988; Kast, 1982; Kubler-Ross, 1975, Staudacher, 1987), Garfield (1996, p.187) enumerates three general phases of mourning: Numbness (the survivor feels shocked and dazed), Disorganization (the survivor experiences emotional chaos: anxiety, fear, grief, anger, fury, guilt, relief, and/or anguish), and Reorganization (the survivor readjusts and is able to emotionally reinvest in life), and finds specific dream categories which appear in each of these phases:

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Numbness:

- alive-again dreams,
- dying-again dreams.

Disorganization:

- saying-goodbye dreams,
- taking-a-journey dreams,
- telephone-call dreams.

Reorganization:

- young-well-again dreams,
- approval-disapproval dreams,
- advice-comfort-gift dreams,
- passionate-encounter dreams,
- deadly-invitation dreams,
- daily-activity dreams.

Black et al. (2016) demonstrate that these 11 categories cannot be reliably coded, so they propose the “Garfield’s Revised Dream Themes” consisted of 8 bereavement dream categories: Rationalization; Dead, dying, or ill; Discomfort; Comfort; Healthy and happy; Separation; Help-crossing-over; and Other. Barrett (1991-1992) distinguishes only four categories of dreams about the dead: Back-to-life; Advice; Leave-taking; and State-of-death. Regardless of the number and capacity of the dream categories found by different authors, the researchers seem to agree on the conclusion that dreams in bereavement change along with time and that those changes are connected with the process of recovery from trauma. According to Barrett (1991-1992), such series of dreams begin with disturbing ones, continue with dreams offering an advice, and conclude with leave-taking dreams. Black et al. (2014) state that time-dependent changes in dream series reflect the healing processes in bereavement.

There is no agreement between the researchers on whether the changes in dream content influence the healing process or just illustrate it. Domhoff (2015), for instance, demonstrates that dreams in his bereaved informant’s series embodied the conflicted thoughts and feelings of the dreamer. It does not mean, however, that those dreams had any therapeutic impact on the dreamer’s coping processes.

2. Methods

2.1. The dreaming person

Eve was 45 when her mother died. Well educated, working as an engineer in a private company, living in one of the biggest cities in Poland, Eve is a successful woman from the upper middle class. She has a husband and a 14-year-old daughter. She has never been in any kind of psychotherapeutic treatment. Her mourning after the mother’s death was not extraordinarily severe (as it did not cause a major depression that would hold Eve back from getting through her daily life), but was difficult enough to make her suffer. Now (June 2020) she is much better although, in her opinion, not completely recovered.

Eve’s mother had been seriously ill for several years before her death and required constant help from Eve. Nearly every day Eve had to visit her mother and take care of her. They contacted by phone many times during the day, so Eve was very much engaged in the mother’s life issues and she was really tired with her duties. Eve’s brother was not of any help in this matter. Neither was the father. Eve’s parents had been divorced for three years. The father has always been a tyrant and he terrorized the whole family. The mother

was weak and Eve, even in her early childhood, had to support her. Today Eve and her father are still in conflict, they quarrel about the inheritance.

3. Results

3.1. Eve’s dreams

As the material discussed in this study is relatively small (29 dreams coming from one person), I do not intend to formulate any general theories about dreaming in bereavement. Nor do I want to verify the usefulness of the dream category systems mentioned above. My goal is to present the specificity of Eve’s case in the context of the existing findings. Many of Eve’s dreams fit in some of Garfield’s categories, especially in Alive-again dreams, Telephone-call dreams, Approval-disapproval dreams, Advice-comfort-gift dreams, and Daily-activity dreams. However, let us follow the individual features of her dream pattern.

Eve’s initial dream (from February 14, 2019, a month after the mother’s death) was the following:

My mother and I were in an oar boat. I knew I had to take her to a doctor. I was rowing, but my mother was fussy. I was angry. We had to reach the opposite shore of the lake, but it was a very difficult task, I couldn’t manage to do it. I woke up.

In this dream Eve had to take care of her mother again. She was angry with the mother. She could not help her. She was exhausted. In this sense the dream was continuous with Eve’s real life experiences, but at the same time it was metaphorical: crossing water (river, lake) is a common dream theme in the context of death. In the terms of archetypal criticism, one can say that Eve played the role of Charon, but she failed to take her mother to the underworld/to a doctor (which can be sometimes considered synonymous images). This dream represented Eve’s ambiguous feelings and attitudes towards her mother. It made her aware that in fact, despite her grief, she could experience her mother’s death as a release after so many years of assisting the mother in her everyday life. Eve proposed such an interpretation of her dream during one of our conversations.

Let us also note that this dream remained unfinished. It lacked what Jung (2010, pp.80-81) called “lysis”, an ending of a story, “the solution or result”.

On April 20 Eve had a similar dream:

I had to take my mother to a psychologist. We were climbing stairs, I carried some heavy bags, I was tired, while my mother was not. We came to the psychologist and I asked her if I could leave my bags there. Just after that I felt overwhelmingly sad. The dream intermitted without any conclusion.

This dream also reminded Eve how hard it was to take care of her mother. She thought of leaving the bags, as if she wanted to free herself from her duties. Importantly, in real life the mother had never visited any psychologist or psychiatrist, although Eve sometimes persuaded her to do so. The psychologist in the dream was an unknown character. She could be perceived as a figure of a rescuer, somebody who could replace Eve in her role of a caregiver and consoler. However, the very thought of such a replacement immediately made Eve sad. In our talks she associated her

sadness in this dream with guilt caused by the will to get rid of her mother.

Between the two dreams, on March 14, Eve dreamt that the mother phoned her and said something. Eve was scared of hearing her voice, did not answer and woke up. Let us remember that dreams about phone calls from the dead loved ones are quite common (Rogo & Bayless, 1979).

Since May, in Eve's dreams there appeared more and more characters: Eve's husband, daughter, father, brother, father-in-law, friends and colleagues. Although the mother was present, Eve became preoccupied with other issues and she initiated relations with other people:

I was in our apartment where I used to live in my childhood. I was talking with my ex-boyfriend, a lawyer, about the inheritance issues. My mom was dying in the opposite room, but I didn't care about it at all (May 31, 2019).

Eve was no longer sad. In the 13 dreams that appeared from May to October she experienced either neutral, or hostile feelings towards her mother. In waking, she was at that time more aware of her anger and she managed to accept it, at least in part.

The inheritance issues came back in some other dreams. In one of them (from July 3) it turned out that the mother changed her last will and did not sign anything over to her daughter. Eve was furious, she shouted at her mother, father and brother. The family conflicts, still present in Eve's real life, in dreams took over her attention and distracted her in a sense from her grief.

At the same time (since July), Eve had dreams in which her parents reconciled and lived together: "My parents and I were in New York and they were exploring the city together in a calm and peaceful atmosphere" (September 23). This was an undisguised wish fulfilment. In real life Eve made many efforts to reunite her parents. In her dreams she saw them reconciled and gradually got rid of their problems.

In November, a new kind of dreams emerged – Eve experienced dreams in which the mother gave her tasty food and Eve felt happy:

I came to my mother's apartment and she said that she would make dumplings for me. I was happy but also extremely astonished because my mom had never made dumplings before (November 14).

Eve admitted that this dream had for her a metaphorical meaning. The mother was always very good for Eve and took care of her lovingly, but Eve from her early childhood had to console and comfort her mother because of the father's attacks and unpredictable actions. Eve always had to support her mother both psychologically and physically (when she had health problems and the father did not pay any attention to his wife). She felt responsible for her mother and often guilty for not fulfilling her needs. In this relationship, in fact, it was Eve who was an adult. Moreover, during the last years of the mother's illness her attitude towards Eve changed a bit and Eve sometimes sensed her hostility. The mother's offer of making dumplings in the dream allowed Eve to realise that she really deserved much more attention and dedication from her mother than she had received. The dream appeared to be a wish fulfilment again: the relationship between Eve and her mother became, at last, normalized. Eve considered this dream the turning point in the process of her bereavement and the beginning of her recovery from grief. In a similar dream (from January

4, 2020) the mother offered her tasty soup. It turned out that the soup was destined for the mother, so Eve felt guilty about eating it, but the mother reassured her that nothing was wrong.

Also since November, the mother in Eve's dreams had revealed some interest in her daughter's everyday life. They were talking about Eve's friends and colleagues. They were gossiping, as they used to in their good times. The mother was no longer concerned with her own problems, on the contrary – she tried to take care of Eve. The last dream in Eve's series (from February 18) illustrates it clearly: "My mother asked me questions about my health. I was happy with this". Eventually, in her dreams, Eve stayed in contact with her mother, their relationship was very good and friendly, without any tensions. In June 2020, she told me that at the current stage of her struggles with mourning dreams of this kind were the best consolation for her.

3.2. The dynamic of Eve's dream series

Eve's dream series can be divided into three phases: phase one – February–April (contains 4 dreams); phase two – May–October (contains 13 dreams); and phase three – November–February (contains 12 dreams). This division is based on two factors: on some features of the dream content and on the changes in Eve's psychological well-being.

In the dreams of phase one Eve was frightened, sad, misguided, tired, helpless and passive. She remained devoted to her mother's needs, but she most often failed in her attempts to do anything. The dreams ended rapidly, without any conclusion. Similarly, during the first months of mourning Eve felt depressed, abandoned, dispirited and helpless, which is certainly understandable in her situation and which resembles the phase of numbness in Garfield's terms.

In the dreams of phase two Eve engaged in social interactions, much less cared for her mother, became active and sometimes successful. She struggled with the mother and with other characters and often revealed aggressive attitudes towards them. In waking, since May Eve had become better adjusted to everyday life. She also started to consciously confront with her anger addressed to the mother. The dreams themselves, as well as our discussions about them, inspired Eve to think about the possible reasons of her anger. She realised that she had the right to feel angry. As a result, she noticed first successes in overcoming her guilt.

In phase three Eve's dreams were generally calm. She was no longer aggressive and more often friendly with her mother. Importantly, the mother began to initiate friendly interactions with Eve. The number of dream characters decreased. Since November Eve had felt much better in her waking life.

In order to illustrate the dynamic of Eve's dream series, I analysed it quantitatively using the Hall/ Van de Castle (1966; Domhoff, 1996) coding system. The results of all three phases have been compared with one another, with Hall and Van de Castle's norms for women, and with Polish female norms that I obtained from a 300 person representative sample of adult Poles (Owczarski, 2020). The most significant findings are presented in Table 1.

As can be seen, the number of characters (the mother excluded) increased from 0,5 to 1,7 per dream in phase two (when engagement in social interactions distracted Eve from her grief), and then decreased to 0.3 per dream in phase three (when she no longer needed such distract-

Table 1. Significant quantitative findings on Eve’s dreams.

Dream content category		Eve’s dreams				
		Phase one	Phase two	Phase three	Polish female norms	H/VdC female norms
Characters (mother excluded)	Characters per dream	0.5	1.7	0.3	2.5	2.8
	Known characters	50%	73%	75%	57%	58%
Dreamer’s emotions	Happiness	0	0	33%	26%	18%
	Apprehension	25%	50%	33%	43%	40%
	Anger	25%	25%	17%	13%	9%
	Confusion	25%	25%	17%	11%	20%
	Sadness	25%	0	0	7%	13%
Dreamer involved aggressive interactions	Dreams in which aggression occurs	0	15%	8%	38%	44%
	Aggressive interactions with the mother	0	43%	0	-	-
	Dreamer as an aggressor	0	71%	0	22%	28%
	Dreamer as an aggressor with the mother	0	66%	0	-	-
Dreamer involved friendly interactions	Dreams in which friendliness occurs	50%	15%	58%	38%	42%
	Friendly interactions with the mother	100%	50%	83%	-	-
	Dreamer as a befriender	100%	100%	60%	22%	41%
	Dreamer as a befriender with the mother	100%	100%	50%	-	-
Aggression with the mother/ Friendliness with the mother percent (aggression divided by aggression plus friendliness)		0	60%	0	-	-

tion). This observation contradicts what Black et al. (2014) – who also used the Hall/ Van de Castle scale – found on the dream content changes in a woman who lost her father. In her dreams the number of family members and relatives “increased with temporal distance from the death” (Black et al., 2014, p.15). The decrease of characters in Eve’s phase three could be caused by the fact that at that time she was much better adjusted to life after the loss and she became able to concentrate, in her waking thoughts, on establishing a new relationship with or attitude towards her deceased mother. No other people were desired in this intimate process, so they rarely appeared in Eve’s dreams. It is worth mentioning, however, that the percentage of known characters in Eve’s dreams (in comparison with unknown ones) increased with time and in phases two and three it was much higher than in both Polish and Hall/ Van de Castle’s (American) norms, which seems to confirm Eve’s declarations that at this stage of the grieving process she, being generally an introvert, willingly immersed herself in her inner life and preferred the society of her family members and friends rather than that of strangers.

The percentages of emotions in Eve’s dreams seem to reflect her waking process of coming to terms with her loss. Happiness (the only positive emotion in Hall/Van de Castle’s system) did not appear in phases one and two. In phase three happiness constituted 33% of all emotions – significantly more than in Polish (26%) and American (18%)

norms. (Black et al. [2014] also observed a gradual increase of positive emotions in their bereaved informant’s dreams. Domhoff [2015] noticed an increase of negative emotions in the second half of a widower’s dream series, however this series consisted of dream reports written down over the period of 22 years, so it can be hardly compared to the case of Eve). Sadness appeared only in phase one (25% of all emotions compared to 7% and 13% in Polish and American norms respectively) and was absent in phases two and three. An important role in Eve’s dreams played anger. Its percentages in phases one and two were 25%, definitely higher than in Polish (13%) and American (9%) norms, and in phase three it decreased to 17%.

Social interactions in Eve’s dreams were connected with her waking attitudes towards the deceased mother. In phase one, there were no aggressive interactions at all. Eve initiated friendliness (was the befriender in Hall and Van de Castle’s terms), but only towards her mother. The mother did not initiate any interactions. In phase two, the relationship between Eve and her mother was slightly more often aggressive than friendly (the aggression/ friendliness percentage is 60%). The percentage of dreams with at least one aggression (15%) was much lower than in Polish (38%) and American (44%) norms, but as much as 43% of all aggressive interactions concerned the Eve–mother relationship, and Eve was the aggressor in 71% of all aggressive interactions and in 66% of aggressive interactions with her

mother, while the norms are 22% for Polish women and 28% for American women. The percentage of dreams with friendliness in phase two (15%) was also lower than normally (38% in Polish and 42% in American norms). Half of all friendly interactions occurred between Eve and the mother, and it was Eve who initiated all of them. These numbers seem to illustrate Eve's ambivalent feelings towards the mother, with prevalence of aggression and with Eve being most often the initiator of social interactions – probably as a result of actively undertaken efforts to struggle with trauma in her waking life.

In phase three, the number of dreams with aggression decreased from 15% to 8%, and – more importantly – there were no aggressive interactions in the Eve–mother relationship. Dreams with acts of friendliness, on the contrary, were significantly more frequent than in phase two (85% compared to 50%), and as much as 83% of friendly interactions occurred between Eve and her mother. While in phases one and two Eve was the only initiator of friendliness, in phase three the mother initiated 50% of such interactions in their relationship.

4. Conclusions

All the findings reported above can be easily understood in the light of the continuity hypothesis of dreaming (Hall & Nordby, 1972; Schredl, 2019). There is no doubt that Eve's dreams were affected by her waking thoughts and emotions, and that the changes in the dream content corresponded to Eve's processual adjustment to life after the loss. Also, the change in the structure of the dream scenarios – with the initial ones being interrupted and unfinished and the late ones being much more coherent – can be interpreted as a sign of calmness achieved by Eve after several months since her mother's death.

More challenging is the question whether Eve's dreams had an impact on her psychological wellbeing, whether they were helpful in coping with grief. Although it is difficult to prove such a case, there are many arguments that may provoke a positive answer to this question. The healing properties of Eve's dreams seem to be based on three general mechanisms. Firstly, they revealed the true nature of Eve's relationship with her mother. As I have mentioned, due to her dreams Eve realized how tired she was with assisting her mother, not only in the last period of her illness, but since the earliest moments Eve could remember. This awareness enabled Eve to accept her anger and thus overcome her guilt. Secondly, dreams allowed Eve to look at her loss from a distance. Dreams of phase two, in which she did not care so much about her mother and engaged in social interactions with other characters, helped her feel that life was still going on. After waking from those dreams she was more eager to take up the issues of everyday life. Thirdly, dreams compensated for what Eve lacked the most: friendly contact with the mother and being taken care of by her. (For the compensatory theory of dreaming see Jung, 2010, pp.36-46). Dreams of phase three, in which Eve received food from her mother and was talking with her about current life events, were especially healing. Eve admitted that after such dreams she felt calm and consoled.

When in June 2020 I asked Eve if she found her dreams generally helpful, she answered "yes". She was convinced that all the dreams, even those full of bad emotions, had a kind of therapeutic effect as they simply allowed her to meet her mother again. (Domhoff [2015, p.236] reports

that his bereaved informant had similar impressions). But the dreams in which she talked with her mother calmly and cheerfully were, in Eve's opinion, particularly consoling.

Eve's case suggests that dreams in bereavement can have a healing potential that manifests itself in three dimensions: diagnostic (i.e. providing an insight for the dreamer and/or his or her therapist), distracting, and compensatory. More research is needed in order to confirm whether such dream effects can be found also in other bereaved subjects.

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