

# Focus Newsletter

FALL 2008

## Gratitude

### The Healing Power of Gratitude

How do people become genuinely happy? Psychologists now know much more about that. In the past few years, we have learned that gratitude is one skill that will increase your happiness. People who keep a **gratitude and appreciation diary** generally see a rise in their happiness within a few weeks. The idea is simple. Just write down each day 3-5 things about that day that you appreciate, and hope to see continue. This is not as hard as you might think. We all can find unique things each day to feel good about. From a change in the weather to an unusually polite driver, good does happen. As you write about those things, you will begin to see the world differently. It will seem to you that there is more good in the world than you had noticed. Some people's gratitude is always about things outside of themselves. They seem to be blind to what is good about themselves. If they do something that would generally make one feel appreciative about oneself, they will discount it. "Oh, anyone would have done it." There is a deep-seated aversion to appreciating themselves; an "unhealthy humility," you might say. If you find that you are like that, you hate to say anything good about yourself, you may find that a gratitude diary is not as helpful at raising your spirits as it should be. So

you might want to reflect on the possibility that self-criticism is an overrated habit. Certainly most people would not be so critical of others as they are of them-



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selves. Would you be as tough on your closest friend as you are on yourself? You instinctively know that this would be rude. So how about applying some consideration, even some compassion to yourself? Write about the things you did that **you** appreciate.

### Reframing From Bad to Good

Now try this. Consider something about your day that bothered you. It doesn't have to be a huge tragedy. A small irritant will do. Now **reframe** it. What is meant by that is that the event is what it is, but the meaning we attribute to it is like a frame we put around it. The picture is the same, but the impact is has on us is changed by the frame as well as by the picture itself. When we

reframe an event, we look for something positive about the negative event. So consider what about the event is also good? Bear in mind that there are few unmixed blessings or tragedies in this world. Winning the lottery doesn't solve problems, it merely changes them. So also with bad events. John Walsh suffered the worst imaginable experience—his child was kidnapped and murdered. This event was also a blessing—he started a TV series, "America's Most Wanted." His show has caused literally hundreds of vicious criminals to be apprehended. So if he can make something good come from that catastrophe, surely we can find some hidden blessing lurking in every painful event. Paradoxically, we can actually learn to be grateful for our unpleasant and painful experiences as well as the pleasant ones.

Try the diary exercise for one month. At the beginning, rate how happy you are typically on a 0-10 scale, with 1=despondent, 5=neutral, and 10=joyful. After a month, re-rate your happiness level. If you find that you have increased, that is a good sign that you can and should continue this exercise.

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# What Your Dreams Are Really Telling You

Gillian Holloway, PhD  
Maryhurst University

In our dreams, we fly without airplanes, chase cars and have romantic encounters with casual acquaintances. The images can be enthralling or disturbing—but what, if anything do they mean? In recent years, researchers have begun to take a closer look at dreams. They have discovered that many of us have similar dreams—and that these visions can offer helpful insights into our lives. Here are some of the most common dreams and what they mean....

## Unprepared

**Dream:** You are back in high school and have to take a final exam—for a class that you somehow forgot to attend all year. Or you're about to appear in a play and don't know your lines.

**Meaning:** This dream often occurs when people have been pushed out of their comfort zone, such as by an unusual or important assignment at work. Generally, the fears expressed are unfounded because those who have this dream tend to be overachievers and unlikely to ever be unprepared for anything.

**What to do:** Realize that you may be more stressed than the situation warrants. Once you start working on the task, the dreams should stop.

## Falling

**Dream:** There are two distinct types of falling dreams. In one, you step off a side-

walk or some other small drop and feel yourself fall a short distance. In the other, you feel like you're falling a great distance, such as over the edge of a cliff.

**Meaning:** The "short" fall dream is particularly common during the December holiday season. It might suggest that you're feeling overwhelmed by a suddenly hectic schedule or a long list of commitments. The "long fall" dream is common among successful people who are experiencing concerns about a temporary risk or loss of control. A businessman might have this dream after going into debt for the first time to expand his company. The dream indicates that the possibility of failure is weighing on you—even if rationally you know that the risk is worth taking.

**What to do:** Reflect on situations that you can control, such as eating or spending habits. Adjust your expectations and pace where possible so that you can avoid heading for a "fall."

## Flying

**Dream:** As with falling, there are two main types of dreams about flying without an airplane. In one type, you're having no trouble. In another, you confront problems along the way—perhaps you're being pursued...must dodge trees...or forget how to fly in mid-flight.

**Meaning:** Those who dream of flying without problems tend to be highly intelligent people who have outlets for their creativity. They see themselves as going beyond normal limits, and the dreams are an

expression of their feelings of achievement. Flying dreams that feature impediments suggest that there are people, things or parts of yourself that you believe prevent you from putting your abilities to use.

**What to do:** If there are difficulties in your flying dreams, reflect on the obstacles you may be facing, but don't dwell on them. Say to yourself that they may slow you down but won't stop you.

## Can't Get Your Locker Open

**Dream:** All your high school classmates are opening their lockers, but you can't seem to open yours no matter how hard you try.

**Alternate version:** You find a forgotten room in your house. All sorts of great things are inside, covered by cobwebs.

**Meaning:** You feel that you have put aside some important part of yourself. Perhaps you were once a skilled artist or an aspiring teacher but gave it up for a more lucrative profession. People tend to have these dreams at a point in their lives when it's feasible to revive the long dormant interest, such as shortly after retirement or when the last child has left the house.

**What to do:** Explore your interests—otherwise, you will be haunted by this dream. Take a look at what you meant to do 20 years ago, and see if there is any way that you can have fun with it today.

## Unable to Come to the Rescue

**Dream:** Your house is on fire, but you can't get in to



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rescue your family. Or you know that a plane is about to crash, but you can't do anything to help. The more you try, the more panicky you feel.

**Alternate version:** You lose your driver's license, wallet, purse or passport...or your car isn't where you parked it.

**Meaning:** These dreams indicate high levels of anxiety about things beyond your control. They are very common when the economy takes a downturn and companies downsize. The "unable to rescue" versions are more common among men...the "loss of identity" versions are more common among women.

**What to do:** Make a plan to reduce the anxiety that this dream reflects. Evaluate your options and search for opportunities. Also exercise and/or meditate to relieve stress.

#### Naked in Public

**Meaning:** You're in a store, at the office or giving a speech when suddenly you realize that you're not

wearing any clothes. You make a desperate attempt to cover yourself while trying not to attract attention.

**Meaning:** This dream usually comes to people who face unfamiliar circumstances that figuratively strip them of their normal defenses—such as a new job, a new romance or the need to give a speech.

**What to do:** Don't expect perfection. Allow yourself to make mistakes and grow into your situation. The dream should go away once you become accustomed to the new circumstances.

#### Runaway Vehicle

**Dream:** Your car—or some other vehicle—is rolling down a hill with you in it or near it, but you can't do anything to stop it.

**Meaning:** The runaway vehicle represents a part of your life that feels out of control. This dream often comes to people who haven't yet consciously become alarmed about an increasingly troubled part of their lives.

**What to do:** Reflect on what the problem might be. Once you recognize what the cause is, you will be able to address it.

#### Sex With Unexpected Partners

**Dream:** Your dream self has sex

with someone you're not attracted to in real life—perhaps even a member of a gender you're not attracted to.

**Meaning:** Despite the conventional wisdom, these dreams usually don't mean that you're secretly attracted to the person or that you're unhappy with your current relationship. More often, they show that you're attracted to a quality this person has. Perhaps your dream partner is the wittiest person you know, and you would like to get in touch with your funny side...or he's very confident, and you would like to be more confident.

**What to do:** Work on developing the qualities and then act that way, taking small, modest steps at first.

#### Desperate for Help

**Dream:** You dial 911 but get a busy signal or the phone doesn't work...or you try to tell people about an impending disaster, but no one will listen.

**Meaning:** Stress may have pushed you close to your breaking point.

**What to do:** Take immediate action to reduce stress—exercise, meditate, etc. Explain to loved ones or coworkers that you need their support. If necessary, consult with a therapist.

#### Bottom Line/Personal

interviewed Gilian Holloway, Ph.D., a psychologist who has been studying dreams for 20 years and an instructor at Maryhurst University, Maryhurst, Oregon. She is author of *The Complete*

*Dream Book: Discover What Your Dreams Tell*

*About You and Your Life*

(Sourcebooks).

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## A Sanctuary for Sleep

In order to get optimal rest, your bedroom should be a sanctuary in which you feel calm and relaxed. If you find that you have converted your bedroom into a multi-purpose room for other activities such as working, studying, eating, or entertainment, you may be disturbing your own good night's sleep. With all this activity going on, psychologically you might find it difficult to shut off the lights. It is important

that you train your body to associate your bed with sleep. Get into bed only when you are really tired and on the verge of falling asleep. If you feel like reading or watching TV, position yourself on other furniture, preferably in another room. Because your body cools down during sleep, it is important to adjust the temperature of your bedroom so that it's neither too warm nor too cool. Dress comfortably in

loose fitting clothing. Darken the room with heavy blinds or curtains or use an eye mask. To block out distracting noises, try earplugs or play low-volume relaxing music or "white noise," such as sounds of the ocean or a rain shower.



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## Symptoms of Inner Peace

Be on the lookout for symptoms of inner peace. The hearts of a great many have already been exposed to inner peace and it is possible that people everywhere could come down with it in epidemic proportions. This could pose a serious threat to what has, up to now, been a fairly stable condition of conflict in the world. Some signs and symptoms of inner peace:

- A tendency to think and act spontaneously rather than on fears based on past experiences.
- An unmistakable ability to enjoy each moment.
- A loss of interest in judging other people.
- A loss of interest in interpreting the actions of others.
- A loss of interest in conflict.
- A loss in the ability to worry. (This is a very serious symptom.)
- Frequent, overwhelming episodes of appreciation.
- Contented feelings of connectedness with others and nature.
- Frequent attacks of smiling.
- An increasing tendency to let things happen rather than make them happen.
- An increased susceptibility to the love extended by others as well as the uncontrolled urge to extend it.



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**Anonymous**