

Enter Sandman: Study shows dreams spill over into the workplace and can be channeled for productivity

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Before heading to work each day, most people have spent the night dreaming. Studies show that on any given morning, about 40% of the

working population recalls their dreams.

New research from the University of Notre Dame shows that when dreams are first recalled, people often draw connections between their dreams and waking lives, and the connections they draw alter how they think, feel and act at work.

The research titled "A Spillover Model of Dreams and Work Behavior: How Dream Meaning Ascription Promotes Awe and Employee Resilience" is forthcoming in the *Academy of Management Journal* from lead author Casher Belinda, assistant professor of management at Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business, and Michael Christian from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"Similar to epiphany, we found that connecting the dots between dreams and reality gives rise to awe—an emotion that sparks a tendency to think about ourselves and our experiences in the grand scheme of things," said Belinda, who specializes in [organizational behavior](#), specifically emotions, interpersonal communication and [close relationships](#) in organizations. "This makes subsequent work stressors seem less daunting, bolstering resilience and productivity throughout the workday."

"People experience awe when they undergo something vast—something that challenges their understanding or way of thinking about things," Belinda explained. "These experiences can come in different forms, whether physical, such as when witnessing aurora borealis, or conceptual, such as when grasping the implications of a grand theory. Awe often borders on the extremes or upper bounds of other emotions, for example, when people experience profound gratitude or admiration. Dreams are conceptually vast experiences that have a striking capacity to elicit feelings of awe."

The team performed three studies that collectively captured approximately 5,000 morning-of reports of [dream](#) recall among full-time employees. The researchers issued a morning-of field study, a single-day morning-to-afternoon study and a two-week experience sampling study.

They found that these relationships persisted even after accounting for how much or how well people slept, suggesting that the psychological consequences of recalling and finding meaning in dream experiences may at times offset the physiological consequences of poor sleep.

At face value, dreaming appears to have little connection to work. However, most people are dreaming shortly before they start work on a given day. The study reveals that when we recall our dreams—which, to sleeping minds, are very real—they can set the stage for the rest of our day.

"We arrive at work shortly after interacting with deceased loved ones, narrowly escaping or failing to escape traumatic events and performing acts of immeasurable ability," Belinda said. "Regardless of our personal beliefs about dreams, these [experiences](#) bleed into and affect our waking lives—including how productive we are at work."

Say you recall an awe-inspiring or meaningful dream in the morning, and then later in the afternoon, your supervisor tells you to conduct 10 more interviews than you were expecting to do. You might now think that in the grand scheme of things it's not that big a deal because your awe-inspiring dream just put everything into perspective. You have a greater realization that there's a bigger world out there and you're just part of it or that you're connected to everything.

"Harnessing the benefits of awe may prove invaluable to organizations," Belinda said. "And one of our primary goals was to understand how to do so."

First, get a good night's sleep.

Belinda explains that dreams occur in all stages of sleep and are impactful regardless of sleep habits. However, the most vivid dreams—those most likely to have meaning and create waking awe—occur during REM sleep. Because REM sleep takes place late in a given sleep cycle, getting sufficient, high-quality sleep will help you get the most out of your dreams.

Sleep-tracking devices that indicate when and how much time you spend in REM sleep can help improve sleep schedules to increase the odds of having awe-inspiring dreams.

"Also, keep a dream journal to allow meaningful dreams to stick with you," Belinda said. "Recording dreams gives them repeated opportunities to elicit beneficial emotions and make connections between dreams."

For both managers and employees, Belinda suggests promoting the "awe experience" at work. In addition to dreams, other elicitors include nature, art, music and exposure to senior leaders, all of which can increase productivity at work.

More information: Casher D. Belinda et al, A Spillover Model of Dreams and Work Behavior: How Dream Meaning Ascription Promotes Awe and Employee Resilience, *Academy of Management Journal* (2023). [DOI: 10.5465/amj.2021.0377](https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2021.0377)

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