Using Dreamwork to Accelerate Healing and to Support Emerging Competencies in Your Counseling Practice

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This presentation is based on a book chapter that has been published in...
Three things I want to cover

1. A new approach to dreams called the co-creative paradigm
2. A five-step method based on this approach, called the FiveStar Method
3. An example that we’ll work with together
A FEW MONTHS AFTER I HAD BECOME LICENSED AS AN LPC IN 1982, I ACCEPTED A REFERRAL...

**Gwen's dream:**

I have returned home after being away, and arrive late for a family picnic beside a lake. When I go to get something to eat, I discover that all the food has been eaten. Only the bones of a large fish remain on a platter. For some reason that I cannot explain, I take the platter down to the edge of the lake and lower it into the water, perhaps to wash it off. As I do, the bones come to life again. The fish shimmers with color and swims away.
IN THE DREAM WORK WITH GWEN...

- The situation and imagery depicted her alienated and impoverished emotional state.

- But an exclusive focus on the imagery would have overlooked the most significant aspect of the dream — Gwen’s remarkable response.

- Her response facilitated the transformation of the fish!

- Her response became in our therapeutic work an “exceptional moment” (de Schazer, Dolan, Korman, Trepper, & Berg, 2007) that offset her view of herself as hopeless and broken.
THE BACKDROP TO MY APPROACH...

▸ We dream about 90 minutes each night.
▸ People love to share dreams.
▸ Dream sharing accelerates and deepens the therapeutic process.
▸ Dream sharing achieves better outcomes than insight therapy alone.
▸ Not many counselors initiate dream sharing. Why?
THE PROBLEM . . .

- Therapists don’t receive training in dream analysis.

- Therapists tend to view dream analysis as a tool of psychoanalysis, focused on interpreting the dream content for clues about one’s unresolved early life issues.

- Dream interpretation seems to take the focus off the client and here-and-now concerns, their choices, and their goals.
Freud believed that dreams are “the royal road to the unconscious,” and express unacceptable, unresolved impulses of a sexual and aggressive nature pertaining to one’s past.

- are formed outside of the ego’s awareness.
- are disguised to circumvent the ego’s resistances.
- are “strictly determined” before we experience them.
- are presumably bizarre and unlike waking life, thus DISCONTINUOUS.
Freud also gave us... The Dreamer Deficiency Hypothesis

- He believed that the dreamer...
- was incapable of perceiving the dream’s true meaning.
- was passive and unaware of what was happening during the dream.
- was thus incapable of interacting with and influencing the dream’s outcome, thus DEFICIENT in normal waking awareness and agency.
- In other words, Gwen’s competent response made no sense within Freud’s view of the dreamer.
The Discontinuity and Dreamer Deficiency Hypotheses have been challenged by . . .

- Numerous studies that have shown that the characters and scenarios in dream mirror waking life, effectively overturning the Discontinuity Hypothesis. Dreams are like our waking lives!

- Recent studies that have also shown that dreamers are more aware and responsive in ordinary dreams than previously thought, thus overturning the Dreamer Deficiency Hypothesis. Dreamers are active participants!
My discovery of the co-creative dream paradigm began in the 70s when I started having “lucid dreams,” in which the dreamer is aware that he/she is dreaming, and free to interact with the dream figures.

I did my masters thesis and doctoral dissertation on lucid dreams, and wrote the first book on lucid dreaming published in North America.

As an LPC, I foresaw how lucidity could conceivably help resolve longstanding conflict and trauma.
But... lucid dreaming is difficult to induce for the average dreamer. How many of you have had frequent lucid dreams?

I shifted my attention to my clients’ “ordinary dreams,” and discovered that dreamers exhibit significant reflectiveness and responsiveness without acknowledging it.

In the last 25 years, several researchers have confirmed that dreamers possess significant reflective awareness, or “metacognition” in dreams.
THE CO-CREATIVE DREAM PARADIGM IS BASED ON THE IDEA THAT...

- Dreamers are capable of responding freely to the dream content in ordinary dreams.
- Dream content adapts to the dreamer’s responses.
- Dreams are not fixed from the outset, but are co-created through the interaction between the dream ego and the dream content.
- The interactive process gives rise to one of many possible outcomes.
THE CO-CREATIVE DREAM PARADIGM IS BASED ON THE IDEA THAT . . .

- Dreams can be analyzed just as any relationship can be analyzed—that is, as an interactive exchange between dreamer and dream.

- The dream’s purpose is to facilitate integration of new (or unresolved) aspects of one’s life.

- Integration depends on the dreamer’s responses to the content.

- The dreamer’s responses mirror waking attitudes and actions toward similar issues.
The traditional approach to dream analysis raises interpretive questions, such as, “What does this image mean or refer to?”

The central question of the co-creative paradigm is, “How did the dreamer respond to the dream imagery?”

Other questions naturally follow, such as, “How did the dreamer’s responses impact the dream imagery?” and “How, in turn, did the changes in imagery impact the dreamer?”

Family therapists will recognize such questions as process questions, which underscore the reciprocal dynamics between parties, and the power each person has to make a difference.
CCP shifts the emphasis of dreamwork onto the relationship between dreamer and dream—just as a family therapist naturally shifts his or her focus away from an exclusively intrapsychic, or intrapersonal exploration when doing conjoint or family work.

The emphasis on relational process illuminates the dreamer’s relational style, thus making the dream imagery understandable within the relationship context, rather than as a set-apart object within the dream.
**TRADITIONAL CONTENT-FOCUSED DREAM ANALYSIS VS. CO-CREATIVE DREAM ANALYSIS**

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<tr>
<th>Content-Focused Dream Analysis</th>
<th>Co-creative Dream Analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dream work focuses primarily on visual and emotional content.</td>
<td>Dream work focuses as well on the dreamer-dreamer interactive process.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dream work may overlook changes in dreamer response or alterations in imagery.</td>
<td>Dream work examines the dreamer responses and the reciprocal alterations in the dream imagery.</td>
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<td>Dream images or “symbols” may be analyzed independent from the dreamer’s own mindset.</td>
<td>Dream imagery is regarded to be in a contingent, reciprocal relationship to the dreamer’s mindset.</td>
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<td>The dream ego is often seen as a passive recipient of the dream.</td>
<td>The dreamer is, to some extent, active and responsive in every dream, whether aware of it or not.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The dream is assumed to reflect content parallels with waking life.</td>
<td>The dream may reflect content parallels, but more importantly, it reveals relational patterns or process dynamics that are evident in the dream and waking life.</td>
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<td>The principal goal is to translate visual content into meaningful insights about one’s waking life.</td>
<td>In addition to the conventional goal, the goal is to discern both competent and dysfunctional response patterns that may be evident in dreams and waking relationships alike, and to embrace the newfound competency or to take corrective action accordingly.</td>
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A middle-aged woman, who had also been a victim of childhood sexual abuse, shared the following dream toward the end of her treatment.

I awake to find myself on a bed. I look up and see holes in the ceiling, and rats dropping down through the holes. Horrified, I jump and run out of the room. The rats seem to chase me, so I fearfully run up a stairway to get away from them. When I reach the top, I turn around to see if the rats are still following me. A huge rat is climbing the stairs and is within a few steps of where I stand. I look at it closely, and I’m surprised to see that its fur looks soft and lustrous. Intrigued by its beauty, I reach down as it comes closer and touch its fur. As soon as I do, the rat changes into a snow leopard. I am spellbound by its beauty, and awaken.
It was clear that the dreamer got in touch with the fear and aversion connected to her sexual abuse.

The rats represented to her the abhorrent, invasive experience of molestation.

But the more significant aspect of this dream is the dreamer’s willingness to turn around and touch the rat’s fur.

This act became the pivotal moment in the dream, transforming the dream.

The dreamer’s courage in the face of the disgusting threat was the most important thing to focus on from the standpoint of therapy.

The snow leopard thereafter served as a powerful metaphor of the beauty and power of her instinctual nature.
THE FIVESTAR METHOD—35 YEARS IN THE MAKING

‣ Is a structured approach to co-creative dream work designed to highlight dreamer-dream relational dynamics.
‣ Is designed to support client competencies, and highlight chronic problematic reactive patterns, as well.
‣ Is designed to foster greater awareness and resilience in future dreams and parallel waking experiences.

The FSM harnesses the dream to support a competency-based, existential-humanistic, cognitive-behavioral, solution-focused, and systemic/relational approach to counseling.
Step One: Sharing the Dream and Feelings

- Ask the dreamer to tell the dream in the first-person, present tense.
- Listen to the dream as if it were your own dream.
- Identify with the dreamer, and notice the feelings that you have.
- Ask the dreamer to share his or her emotions that are aroused by the dream, and then share your own, as well.
Step Two: Formulating the Theme

- Distill the action of the dream in the form of a succinct summary.
- Avoid mention of specific images and names by using generic nouns like “someone,” “something,” or “somewhere” to replace specific names, objects, and places. Examples are:
  - “Someone is trying to get somewhere, and encounters an array of obstacles blocking her way,” or
  - “Someone is trying to get someone’s attention, and finally gets noticed by not giving up.”
Step Three: Dreamer Response and Imagery Change Analysis

The dream worker highlights the dreamer’s responses to the dream by focusing on where the dreamer responded emotionally or behaviorally to the dream situations and characters. The dream worker uses “process descriptions” and “process questions” to highlight the circular relationship between the dreamer’s responses and the imagery changes, such as:

- “When you became afraid, the dog started growling, and then you ran from the dog rather than allowing it to inspect you.”
- “When you let your wife know that you weren’t going to argue, she became loving and tender toward you, and you welcomed her love.”
THE FIVESTAR METHOD

- The dream worker can follow up with questions such as:
  - “Is this a new stance, or is it familiar?” or
  - “What was constructive about the actions you took?” or
  - “What was unfortunate about your actions?”

- Then the dream worker might ask such questions as,
  - “What do you wish you had done differently?” and
  - “How do you think the dream character/situation would have responded to that?”
THE FIVESTAR METHOD

Step Four: Imagery Analysis

This step involves using non-invasive methods of imagery analysis:

**Amplification:** The dreamer shares his or her associations with the images. The dream worker/dream group can also provide associations and ideas as well, but the dreamer is the final authority.

**Parts of Self Analysis:** Ask the dreamer what part of himself/herself the dream character or image represents, and ask him/her to describe himself as the image, e.g. “I am a broken-down truck in need of repair…” Dialoguing between the image and dreamer can be useful.
Step Five: Homework

- The dream worker asks the dreamer, “Where is this relational pattern occurring in your life?” and “What would you like to do differently in the waking state context, or in the dream, if this type of encounter should arise again?”
- The dreamer may brainstorm ways of enacting new responses to a problematic situation, either in the waking state or the dream state, or both.
- Then, in collaboration with the client, the dream worker will review, in subsequent sessions, the various efforts made and results achieved.
LET'S DO IT!

- Dreamer — A 33-year-old male, struggling to resolve some family conflicts.
- Step One: Dreamer tells dream in first person, present tense

I am visiting my childhood home, I am greeted by a man whose face I cannot see. I feel a sense of nostalgia as I am in my childhood home. The man invites me to see the house which I immediately notice has been remodeled. The idea that the house is remodeled pleases me. The first thing I see is that the garage has been enclosed and is now a room in the house. I like that. After I notice the enclosed garage the man takes me to the back of the house where there is an entrance to the foundation underneath the house. I feel somewhat confused but intrigued when I see this. The entrance leads to a lower level of the home, like a basement.
As I walk around this lower level I can see that the foundation room’s walls are made of concrete and the concrete is still wet as if it had just been poured. I approach a closet with much interest and I open the closet door and see two antique sets of golf clubs. I notice that the golf clubs are, indeed, vintage and in my dream I perceive that they have value/worth. All of a sudden, I hear my father’s voice say something to the effect of, “Wow, son, those are some nice clubs!” When I hear my father’s voice say this I feel a sense of happiness. I examine the golf clubs a little more and my dream ends in that moment.
Step 2 – Summarize the basic theme or action of the dream.

The dreamer is visiting a familiar place from the past, meets someone who is responsible for its restoration, is happy to see changes, and then discovers something that impresses someone else.
Step 3 - Analyze the Dreamer’s Reactions to the Dream.

• I first reacted to the realization that I was at my childhood home.
• I followed the man around the home to see the renovations. I explored the foundation room below the house and opened up a closet which revealed the vintage golf clubs. This response was the only real proactive action I took.
• I would have preferred to have explored the inside of the home too, not only the foundation. I would have preferred to have explored more regarding the identity of the renovator.
• If a similar dream occurs again, I would want to ask the man why he was renovating my childhood home.

A COMPLETE APPLICATION OF THE FSM
Step 4 – Analyze the imagery.

Amplification – My association to my childhood home is wonderful memories of time spent with family. The unknown man reminds me of God, or someone who creates positive change. I associate the new foundation of the home to a new start in my life, maybe my family and career. I think of the golf clubs as something representing time spent with my father and oldest brother and of happy memories on the golf course. My dad voicing his opinion of the value of the golf clubs helps me see their value, since I respect my dad’s opinion.
Step 4 - Analyze the imagery (continued)

"Parts of Self Analysis" – The man whose face I cannot see is a desired "me" who is capable of restoring my broken family. The renovator's enthusiasm represents the emotions I have of wishing to have a united family once again and to be the person responsible for making the reconciliation possible. The sound of my dad's voice in my dream expressing his opinion of the value of the golf clubs represents my own conviction of the value of time spent with family.

"Metaphorical Analysis" – The image of the new foundation suggests that the family's unity and togetherness is restored once again. The image of the new foundation suggests a stronger sense of family unity that was lost after my brother and sister's fallout.
Step 5 – Applying the Dream Work

This dream relates to the conflict within my family between my oldest brother and oldest sister. This dreamer seems to support spending more time with my family when possible, as the vintage golf clubs in the dream represent time spent with my father and brother, and a sense of family togetherness. A new response from the dream might be attempting to make time for my family. I think it would be a good idea to share the dream with all of my family members and allow them to gain insight from it and, hopefully, be inspired to see the value of our family being reunited once again.
THE FIVESTAR METHOD, IN SUMMARY...

- Is designed to highlight dreamer-dream relational dynamics
- Is designed to support client competencies, and highlight chronic problematic reactive patterns, as well.
- Is designed to foster greater awareness and resilience in future dreams and parallel waking experiences.
- When these new responses to previous dreams are rehearsed, they tend to carry over into future dreams.
- The impact is immediate, and the healing can be profound. E.G. woman trying to get away from a rats/.
THE FIVESTAR METHOD

• Supports a competency-based approach to counseling.
• Fosters new responses to challenging relationships in dreams and waking life, and thus accelerates integration and healing.

It's a powerful methodology!
You can learn to use it!
Using Dreamwork to Accelerate Healing and to Support Emerging Competencies in Your Counseling Practice

The audio of this presentation, the powerpoint, the paper upon which it was based, and a summary of the FiveStar Method are available for download on the Recent Events tab at www.dreamanalysistraining.com