

Mental imagery in parasomnias: a study before, during and after treatment

Results:

We studied adult patients who were suffering from rare sleep disorders such as sleepwalking, night terrors and REM behaviour disorder, which interfered with their lives and caused them sufficient distress to prompt them to seek medical help. We recorded their sleep with brainwave measurement and video recording in their own homes, to decide which specific disorder they were suffering from, and we interviewed them in depth to try and establish what they experienced during the attacks and what effect it had on them emotionally.

The interviews revealed that although many patients had no recall of the actual episodes, they did have additional dreams and night-time anxieties which they associated with their sleep disorder, and which might have increased their fear of their episodes. These often included images of insects, or of horrific situations about to happen, and nearly always were accompanied by feelings of helplessness and loss of control. In-depth analysis of the interviews has provided a valuable body of information about these rare disorders and a basis for planning appropriate psychological treatments to complement the pharmacological approach currently employed. This additional treatment would focus on the patients' fear of the coming night and the episodes themselves, which may be aggravating or perpetuating the disorder.

Published work:

Mazarakis T, Wilson SJ, Nutt DJ (2003) A qualitative study of night-time imagery in parasomnias. (abstract) British Sleep Society Annual Meeting , Cambridge, 2003

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