

# The Biology of Dreams

## Jacob Berkowitz, Dream Guide

*Most of the Self is an Unseen Universe—One that can be Explored.*

Most ways of understanding dreams see them as arising from something transpersonal, or beyond biology. In contrast, I have a body-based perspective on dreams.

When we reflect on our biology, dreams are seen as a natural process, as essential as breathing and loving. Homeostasis is a term that describes how a body's system works to maintain a constant, healthy physical state. You are doing homeostasis right now. Dreams are a form of psychological homeostasis; they are part of our way of maintaining an overall healthy state.

There are three concepts that underpin the biology of dreams:

### **Most of our Psychological Experience is Unconscious**

Neuroscientists see that about ninety percent of brain activity is unconscious, or outside conscious awareness.

Many people initially find this difficult to believe. Yet consider for a moment your current experience reading this text. As you read, you are breathing, your muscles are adjusting slightly to keep you comfortable, you are listening to your surroundings, you might have slight hunger pangs, maybe thoughts are arising about tasks later in the day. All of this is occurring without conscious intent. The same applies to most of our vast experience of memory, emotion, even thought—it is usually unconscious, only rarely emerging into consciousness.

This back-and-forth between unconscious and conscious is a core part of our psychology. Dreaming is a specific type of this process via images and feelings that occurs during sleep. Yet conceptually it is representative of the general functioning of our psyches—unconscious material emerging into consciousness and vice versa.

### **We are Psychodynamic**

Psychodynamic means that our psyches, or minds, are composed of interacting parts.

Different schools of psychology describe these parts in various ways.

For example, Freudians refer to the id, ego and superego. Jungians refer to the persona or ego and the various parts of the unconscious—shadow elements, complexes, anima and animus figures. Internal Family Systems Therapy describes psychodynamics as the interaction of managers, firefighters and exiles. Trauma-based therapists use the imagery of the inner child in relationship to the wise adult self.

In all these cases, there's a recognition that we contain multitudes. We experience this daily when we tune-into the chatter of voices in our minds. A psychodynamic perspective sees that psyche is the result of interacting parts that together form a whole self.

These parts are the players interacting in our dream dramas.

### **Biological Systems are Self-regulating and Integrative**

Each of us is a biological system. We don't really "have a body". We *are* a body. And the core characteristic of all living systems is that we are self-regulating and integrative. These two concepts, self-regulating and integrative go together because in order for a system to regulate itself, it must integrate all its parts simultaneously.

An example of this is the way we maintain body temperature. Keeping our selves at a constant 98.7 degrees Fahrenheit (37 degrees Celsius) is a remarkable and largely unconscious feat of integrative self-regulation. If you had to think about it would consume all your attention 24-7. Imagine having to take into account the changing environmental temperature, the heat generated from digesting food, moving heat from the body core to the peripheries through expanding and constricting blood vessels, opening and closing skin pores to allow sweating or prevent heat loss. When we consciously feel too hot or too cold, it is the end result of this complex self-regulating process that can no longer operate unconsciously but rather needs us to consciously take-off a sweater.

Our psyches do the psychological equivalent of temperature homeostasis. Our minds are self-integrating and seek mental homeostasis or a healthy state. We are continually putting together external input—sights, sounds, touch—with our emotional responses, thoughts, and memories in order to decide how to react, or simply reacting. Indeed, this *psychosynthesis*, putting all the pieces together, is the main role of all mental activity.

Dreaming is a core part of this self-integration. Dreams are complex, merging time and space and different parts, exactly because they are integrative. The images and feelings of dreams bring together different parts of ourselves in a movement towards psychic self-regulation. An additional integrative step with dreams is bringing deliberate conscious focus to the memories, feelings, and thoughts associated with the dream.

This is similar to what we do during the day when we bring conscious awareness to a feeling or thought.

Dreamwork results in a feeling of greater wholeness and integrity, because this is exactly what is happening.



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