Nightmares and the Brain

In the late 1700s, the popular reference text, An Universal Etymological English Dictionary, first published by Nathan Bailey in 1731 and reprinted through 1800, defined a nightmare as a "disease when a man in his sleep supposes he has a great weight lying upon him." Although that definition doesn't surface often today, nightmares are still considered to be frightening dreams that result in feelings of terror, fear, distress, or anxiety.

Dreams are understood to be recent autobiographical episodes that become woven with past memories to create a new memory that can be referenced later, but nightmares are simply dreams that cause a strong but unpleasant emotional response. Dreams are part of the brain's default network, a system of interconnected regions, which includes the thalamus, medial prefrontal cortex, and posterior cingulate cortex, that remains active during comparatively quiet periods.

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