

Trauma-Related Nightmares & Sleep Disruption

Understanding why sleep can become difficult after trauma and what can support recovery.

Why trauma affects sleep

Sleep requires reduced vigilance. After trauma, the nervous system may resist that vulnerability, leading to difficulty falling asleep, frequent waking, nightmares, or waking in a panic.

After a nightmare

- Orient to the current room, date, and safety.
- Use light briefly if darkness increases disorientation.
- Ground through touch, feet on the floor, or a familiar object.
- Avoid immediately replaying the entire dream if that escalates arousal.
- Use a brief reset routine before trying to sleep again.

Treatment options

Persistent trauma nightmares and insomnia are treatable. Trauma-focused therapy, CBT for insomnia, imagery-based interventions, and medication options may be considered depending on the person and should be discussed with qualified professionals.

Try this reflection

What would a 5-minute post-nightmare reset routine include for you?

Using this resource: For education and skill-building only; not diagnosis, medical advice, or crisis care. If you feel overwhelmed, pause and seek appropriate professional support. In the U.S., call or text 988 for crisis support; call 911 for an immediate emergency.