

Creating a Successful Dream Group

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*"Our lives extend beyond our skins,
in radical interdependence with the rest of the world."*

Joanna Macy

If you've had a fair degree of luck remembering and interpreting dreams on your own, you might be ready to amplify your dream work by joining an existing dream group or forming one of your own. There is a decided advantage to sharing your dreams with a small, trusted group of people – they unfailingly will come up with intuitions and insights about your dreams that simply never occurred to you as you tried to unravel the meaning alone. As you become comfortable with allowing yourself to take in and consider other possible angles on what your dreams might mean, you may learn to take a broader approach yourself in your solo attempts at dream interpretation. In addition, there is an interesting phenomenon that occurs when many points of view are allowed to be potentially relevant, to float in the space simultaneously and overlap, meld into one another, and build off each other. That dream synergy can feed into your awareness, stretching you, even transforming the way you perceive other areas of your life.

So, you want to start a dream group. . . What should you keep in mind? How does a dream group function? What's it capable of doing? How long should it last? What should your role be?

Is a Dream Group Right for You?

Before you join or start a dream group, it's important to have a clear sense of what suits your needs, and what kind of people you'd like to interact with in the pursuit of higher dreaming. Part of this assessment revolves around your capacity for intimacy. Sharing dreams in a group is a highly personal experience. You may think you're just going to talk about what flying or falling might mean, but dreams have a way of dredging up your deepest secrets, and everyone else's as well. Having someone suddenly "see through you" and blurt out something like, "Are you afraid of sex?" or "Were you abused as a child?" might be disorienting and upsetting if you're not prepared to see certain things about yourself. On the other hand, if the environment is set up to be safe, you can make short work of many of your subconscious blocks.

You might ask yourself: Am I comfortable with intense one-on-one situations? Am I willing to participate fully, even if it means I might show some vulnerability in front of others on occasion? Can I be honest? Am I willing to listen patiently to what others say with my full attention? Do I trust lay people, rather than a trained therapist, to give me insights about my inner self? Am I strong enough to make my own decisions about what my own dreams mean, and can I receive the ideas of others as helpful suggestions, rather than judgmental pronouncements?

You might also determine whether a general dream discussion and interpretation group is what you want, or whether you'd like a group that focuses mainly on the creative process, composed solely of artists. Perhaps you'd like to form a group for divorced, widowed, and single women, or get your men's group together. Would you be comfortable if the group had both men and women members? Would you be more comfortable if the group met in the evening or on Saturday morning?

What Format Works Best for a Dream Group?

As you consider starting a group of your own, think about the atmosphere you want to establish. It should be one of trust and openness. That means when you look for group members, you'll want to interview people a little about their motivations for exploring their dreams, their own comfort levels with group work, and their willingness to be vulnerable. Group members should share basic

agreements about cooperation and how to derive value from their dreams.

In my experience, ongoing groups with no end date in sight often become psychologically draining. Setting the group up to meet once a month for six months, or once a week for eight weeks tends to focus the energy and the work within the context of the allotted time and keeps the group members more enthusiastic. Groups that meet weekly or bi-weekly will tend to intensify your focus on your dreams and may give you faster, deeper results because you've chosen to place so much attention on them. A group that meets monthly, often mandated by today's frighteningly busy work schedules, will keep dream work an important part of all your lives, but give you time to focus on other interests as well. Group members need to decide what kind of focus they want — intense or more casual?

Since each person in the group will be sharing a dream, and you'll want to devote enough time to have each member give feedback on each dream, you'll want to make sure the meeting is the right length and that you don't strain the limits with too many group members. An evening meeting from about 7pm to 9:30pm is doable for most people who work, and gets them home at a decent hour. If you limit the group to four to six members, you should have plenty of time for each person's needs to be met.

What Works Best Attitudinally?

I encourage you to be clear about your dedication to the dream work process, the process you're undertaking by joining a group, and your dedication to the other group members. You might ask yourself a few questions about logistics: Do I want to devote the time to this sort of endeavor — if I commit to it, will I go to every meeting? Do I have any "yes, buts" that might interfere with my involvement in the process? Will I maintain confidentiality about what happens within the group and not reveal material about group members' inner lives to others, no matter how innocuous the material seems?

It works best to make it a top priority to attend all the meetings and be on time. A process of trust and respect is going to be established among the group members and if people don't think it's important enough to attend each time, after they've given their word, a subtle sort of internal sabotage begins to occur. Look honestly at the "good reasons" that cause you to abandon ship at any point. Missing and rescheduling appointments has become so routine in today's overbooked world, that it's easy for things to become shallow and drained of meaning. Don't let this happen in the important work of feeding your inner self. If you must miss a meeting, notice how the themes of your dreams that week might be a key to your growth that you might not be allowing yourself to face fully. Make a point to discuss this later with the group.

A Few Words about Group Leadership and Facilitation

Dream groups are most effective when a leader, practicing "beginner's mind," both facilitates and participates in the process. I find that groups without a leader tend to waste time and lack focus. The facilitator should be able to perform these basic tasks: 1) keep the group on purpose and on time; 2) know how much material can be covered in each gathering and control group sharing to encourage conciseness, equal participation by all members, and content that enriches everyone; 3) be able to deal with emotion compassionately but neutrally when and if it comes up in the sharing process; and 4) help group members remember to share their dreams and give feedback in the preferred formats.

Group facilitators function best when they trust the process of the "group mind" and "group heart" to guide them. They should not function as therapists or high priests. No one in the group needs "fixing" or healing. Occasionally they may share the facilitating tasks with other group members. If you're the one to start a dream group, the facilitation role will probably fall to you. If you're uncomfortable in the role, you might discuss sharing responsibility for this function with the other group members, rotating it from meeting to meeting.

Some Groundrules and Basic Principles for Dream Groups

1. Group members agree to maintain confidentiality about what transpires inside the group and to actively work on developing respect and support for each other.
2. Group members agree to be honest about sharing themselves. If they feel uncomfortable revealing something, it's OK to say so and be quiet instead.
3. All dreams have multiple meanings, and group members agree to be open to hearing a melange of interpretations as suggestions to trigger their own deeper understanding.
4. There are no right or wrong dreams, no good or bad ones. Group members agree not to compare their dreams to other people's. Each dream comes in service to increasing the authentic self-expression of the dreamer, and group members commit to find the compassionate, positive interpretation that will add to the dreamer's feeling of aliveness and wholeness. Some innocent-looking dreams may contain the deepest, most heart-wrenching issues, while a highly emotional dream may be nearly worked out and fairly matter-of-fact.
5. The only meaning that works is the one the dreamer decides is real. The dreamer is in charge of his or her own inner reality.
6. Group members agree to empower the facilitator to help keep the flow of the meeting on track — even if it means you may be asked to rephrase an insight, or wind up a lengthy narrative.

A Possible Agenda for the Meetings

At the first meeting, discuss the ground rules, your attitudes, commitment, goals, and past experience with dreams. Why does each person want to participate in the group experience? Similarly, the start of each meeting might contain a brief period of sharing — a "touch-in" — where group members say what they've been aware of in the time between meetings, how the process of their dreaming has been going, what they've noticed in their waking life that connects to their dream themes, and any successes they've had with dream incubation experiments.

Next, take a few minutes to do a centering meditation that helps everyone gather in all their energy and raise the level of their consciousness up to a lighter level. It could simply be five minutes of silence, or group members could focus on opening their heart and activating the clear light inside each cell of their body. After coming together in this attunement, go around the circle and have each member share a dream, without any commentary. This allows the group to connect in with each person's inner life and helps establish the mood of safety. If there have been dreams that follow up on dreams that were shared the previous week, this would be a good time to mention those.

After the dreams have been related, go back and have each person repeat their dream while everyone else pays close attention. Allow some time to ask clarifying questions, if necessary, like "What breed of dog was it?" or "Was the airplane full of people or was it just you and your wife?" Finally, let each person have a turn to share their own insights about what they think the dream might mean. If time is limited, try allotting ten or fifteen minutes apiece to each person's dream interpretation process.

At the end of the current dream group session, review your progress and share about the experience each group member had. Could the group functioning be improved somehow? Would you all like to continue for another eight weeks/six months? Or do you need a short break? Do some people need to skip the next session but would like to rejoin in the fall? Make plans for the next time.

How to Share About Dreams

How you share and receive from each other contributes immensely to the effectiveness of the process. Look at each group member as a vital component of yourself, one that you may not see or want to see. Empower the others to be messengers to you from your soul, then be surprised at what insights they trigger in you. When participants share, don't try to help or change them; let them be an influence in your own process. No one should be forced to share involuntarily. Remember: There's no right way to dream! If you judge yourself or others, simply use it as a lesson in what doesn't work. Stay out of long "stories" that wander from the point and don't comment unnecessarily on other people's insights.

When you share a dream, try to keep it in the present tense. This makes the dream come alive again and allows other people to "enter it" as if it were happening to them. By engaging directly and intimately with another person's dream this way, you may have insights that are more potent than you would if you viewed the dream as already over and in the past. Listen for the times when the dreamer reverts to past tense in the telling of a dream, or goes off on a tangential commentary — it may indicate a part of the dream she wishes to distance from, perhaps because there is a live issue just below the surface. Also, listen for any slips of the tongue — the dreamer may mean to say "chiropractor" but says "chirocracker" instead. There's almost always an important insight lurking around the corner when double meanings surface. If you already have some thoughts about what your dream means to you, hold those back for later. You don't want to plant ideas in anyone's mind prematurely; wait and see what insights about your dream come to the other group members spontaneously.

How to Respond to Sharing About Dreams

When responding to another person's dream, it's important to remember that you are always talking about yourself. Every idea you share comes from your own associations and inner dynamics. Your interpretation of a dream tells the group about your perceptual process, not necessarily about the other person's. So to keep yourself aware of this, and minimize projecting your ideas onto the dreamer, which could have a tendency to feel dominating, many dream groups have evolved an etiquette for sharing insights. Try beginning your sentence with, "If this were my dream, I'd think it was about. . ." or "If I'd been dreaming this, I'd be aware of the fact that. . ." If the word "you" creeps into the sharing, stop and begin again with, "If this were my dream. . ."

When the other group members share their impressions of your dream, you don't need to comment right then. Let all the ideas come in and meld around. The most accurate insights will trigger your "truth signal," and you'll immediately feel that sensation of "aha!" or tingling, chills up your arms, warmth spreading across your chest, something clicking into place, or two halves of yourself coming together. When someone's interpretation doesn't fit your dream, or when it touches on an interpretation that you don't want to hear, you may experience your "anxiety signal," which can seem like a contraction in the stomach, chest, or throat, or can make you feel cold or clammy and tight. After everyone has shared, you can give some feedback about how it all relates to your perceptions, inner process, and daily life.

Other Techniques and Dream Group Activities

If you want a little variety, your dream group could try the following processes to liven things up:

1. After everyone shares their dream, each person can spend twenty minutes drawing a picture of the dream. Then spend another fifteen minutes writing a poem from the picture, and share one by one with the others.
2. Have several group members volunteer to play roles in one person's dream. Act out the scenes as

the dreamer originally dreamed them, then ad lib and let the little drama play out spontaneously and see where it goes.

3. After everyone shares a dream, do a group meditation and each person goes back into the dream and extends it. Then come back and share what happened.

4. After sharing a dream, each person picks one of the dream symbols. The group meditates and each person pretends to be the symbol and does a direct writing process for ten minutes, speaking as the object, describing what its purpose is, what it needs from the dreamer, why it showed up in the dream, etc.

5. Have one person share a dream. The others make lists of 6 word pairs from the dream and write a poem. Continue on to the next person, and the next. At the end, give each person the poems relating to her dream.

Watch for the Emergence of Group Mind & Group Dreaming

After your group has been meeting for a while, you may find it synchronizes itself uncannily and starts a special process in which participants activate and empower each other, both while attending the group and when apart. Common themes may begin to run through the group members' lives, and some people may dream parallel dreams, or even show up in each other's dreams. Watch for group dreams – members may dream about the dream group itself, or another small group that feels similar to the dream group. The likelihood is that the work begun during waking reality is continuing at night, as well as in between meetings. Let the group mind help direct the flow of the group and show participants the specific lessons to be learned.

You might try an experiment where the group intentionally sets out to incubate a common dream they will have together, or have individual responses to a common dream goal. For instance, the group might set a goal of dreaming about an ancient Greek dream temple. In your dream, you might see yourself dressed as a priest, while someone else might have a dream about how a healing ritual was performed, and another might dream about the temple snakes. In another variation, the group could set an intention to all meet at a common location, like in front of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. See if you can dream about each other in that location. When the dream group session has completed, you might find your own way to personally acknowledge the other participants for their contributions to your life.

"Myths are public dreams, dreams are private myths."

Joseph Campbell

