

# DREAM INTERVIEWING

A contemporary method of dream interpretation

## THE FIVE INTERVIEW STEPS OF DREAM INTERVIEWING

*The interviewer's role is in italics.*

1. DESCRIPTION: This is the dreamer's concrete and subjective description of the major dream images, *facilitated by the interviewer.*
2. RECAPITULATION/ RESTATEMENT: *This is the interviewer's reflection to the dreamer of an edited, concise version of the dreamer's description.*
3. BRIDGE: This is the dreamer's interpretive step of recognizing the dream metaphor in waking life, *facilitated by the interviewer.*
4. TESTING THE BRIDGE: This is the dreamer's verification of the parallels between the dream image and its match in waking life, *facilitated by the interviewer.*
5. SUMMARY: This is a review of the dreamer's understanding of the meanings of part or all of a dream by means of the dreamer summarizing the major descriptions and bridges, and *with the interviewer's careful attention to consistency.*

**AXIOM: Dream interviewing is simple, but not easy.**

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### STEP 1. **DESCRIPTION** - Definitive Description Formulation

#### **A. INTERVIEWER'S STEPS FOR FACILITATING THE FORMULATION OF EACH DEFINITIVE DESCRIPTION:**

1. Invite the client to recount **one** dream, with feelings.
2. Select **one** major dream image to be described.
3. Elicit the definitive description of that image:
  - A. Physical appearance **in brief**
  - B. Function/purpose (of a place or thing.)  
Personality profile (of people or animals)
  - C. Unique features
  - D. The most striking/noteworthy characteristic
  - E. The essence or essential nature of the image
  - F. *Relevant* associations **only** i.e. habitual or emotionally powerful
  - G. Strongest waking feelings/judgments about the image

*Note 1:* There may be some cross over in step B between people, animal and things, depending upon the dreamer's attitude and feelings towards the image. For example, some people treat their cars as pets or their animals as things.

*Note 2:* For visual learners, there is a schema of this in my chapter, "The Dream Interview Method in a Private Psychotherapy Practice," in Delaney, Gayle, Ed., New Directions in Dream Interpretation, 1993, SUNY Press.

## DREAM INTERVIEWING

a contemporary method of dream interpretation

### A SAMPLE WORKSHEET FOR DEFINITIVE DESCRIPTIONS

Use one worksheet for each major image in your dream.

**IMAGE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Physical appearance** of this person(s)/thing/place in the dream: (include clothes, size, decor, ethnicity, style etc.) List adjectives.

**Personality** of a person/ animal: (If unknown, guess/extrapolate from the clothing, behavior, type, etc. Include at least 5 adjectives.)

**Function:** (If this is a place or a thing, i.e. what is it used for?)

**Uniqueness** of this person: (state generic if not unique in *any* way.)

**Essence** of this person or thing: (essential nature, without which he/she/it would be someone different.)

The **most striking feature** of this person/thing is:

Any powerful or habitual **associations** to this person/thing?

Any **feelings** or **judgments** about this person? (positive and negative)

Brief as possible recapitulation of description **in the dreamer's own words.**

# DREAM INTERVIEWING

## A contemporary method of dream interpretation

### STEP 2. INTERVIEWER'S STEPS FOR RECAPITULATION

1. Edit and summarize the information obtained about the dream image, *using the dreamer's own words*.
2. Encourage the dreamer to correct you: "Did I get that right?"  
"Is that complete?" *Watch the non-verbal cues*.
3. Now, polish the summary into a complete, succinct and accurate description, still *using the dreamer's own words*.

# DREAM INTERVIEWING

## A contemporary method of dream interpretation

### STEP 3. INTERVIEWER'S STEPS FOR BRIDGING

1. Mentally divide the plot of the dream into short sequences, each containing more than 1-3 major images.
  2. Ask the dreamer to repeat the first sequence of the dream with the feelings, and include the first setting: "So tell me, again, where were you at the beginning of the dream and what was happening?" "So tell me, again, where were you at the beginning of the dream and what was happening?"
  3. Start with the definition of this setting, and the associated action in this sequence.
  4. Bridge questions for the setting are phrased something like, "Is there anywhere in your life now (or when you had this dream, if it's old) that you are in a place which is like....(here repeat the definitive description of the image) and where (whatever is happening in the dream) is metaphorically happening in your life?"
  5. Allow time for the dreamer to think; encourage thinking aloud. Don't pressure.
  6. If necessary, use these strategies to help the dreamer search for a parallel life situation:
    - Repeat or rephrase the question 3-4 times.
    - Remind the dreamer this is a *metaphor* for something in waking life.
    - Ask what *possibly* fits this description and the feelings.
    - Ask, "Does this fit anything at home or work? Your family? School?"
    - Encourage speculation if the dreamer is reticent.
    - Check *you* are using the *dreamer's own words*.
    - Ask if the dreamer recognizes just the emotions & start there.
    - Note: **Personalities** often bridge to parts of the dreamer or someone else; sometimes to the same personality as pictured in the dream.
    - Objects** rarely bridge to people.
  7. Move to the next sequence before you fatigue, whether or not the first sequence is bridged to some aspect(s) of waking life,
  8. Keep all possible bridges in mind at this point; subsequent bridges will eliminate or suggest alternatives.
  9. Continue the process sequence by sequence, to the end of the dream.
- AXIOM:** Think of the interviewer as the footman with the glass slipper, looking for "Cinderella," i.e. the best fitting interpretation: Don't force the fit; she may not be found today, but she's out there somewhere!

## DREAM INTERVIEWING

A contemporary method of dream interpretation

### STEP 4. INTERVIEWER'S STEPS FOR TESTING THE BRIDGE:

1. Clarify exactly how the dreamer sees a parallel between the dream sequence and a waking life situation, by asking, "How does that fit?"
2. Check that the major details of **action** in the dream also fit the situation.
3. Check that the major **feelings** match precisely in quality if not intensity (quantity) - the dream feeling is often the more powerful.
4. In bridging the second and subsequent sequences, the recurring images, if well bridged, will interpret consistently. This gradually eliminates inaccurate, alternate or divergent bridges
5. There is usually only one interpretation that fits *all* parts of the dream: images, feelings and plot. However, various levels of this interpretation are often valid and useful.
6. When a bridge totally fails a test, ask the dreamer to look for an alternative.
7. When a bridge partially fails a test, encourage the dreamer to consider what would be more precise e.g. it might be an adjustment in the level of focus on the same issue.

## DREAM INTERVIEWING

### A contemporary method of dream interpretation

#### **STEP 5. INTERVIEWER'S STEPS TO FACILITATE THE SUMMARY**

1. When you have reached the end of the first scene of a dream, with as many bridges made as possible (without belaboring the process), **congratulate** the dreamer on her/his hard work.
2. Then, have the dreamer read/recount the dream scene itself again.
3. Next, ask the dreamer to summarize his/her understanding of the scene at this point, reiterating major descriptions with their bridges, and including mention of points that remain unclear.
4. Allow time for him/her to deal with any powerful emotions before you move onto the next scene.
5. Repeat steps 1-3 above with each subsequent scene.
6. Help the dreamer, through questions, to reconcile obvious or apparent contradictions as you link scenes together.
7. At the end of the whole dream, have the dreamer recount the entire dream one last time prior to telling you his/her final interpretive summary.
8. Ask the dreamer what he/she has learned, if anything, from the dream interview method of interpretation applied to this particular dream.
9. Ask the dreamer how he/she might use any new information or perspective he/she has gained.

# DREAM INTERVIEWING

A contemporary method of dream interpretation

## CHARACTERISTICS of the DREAM INTERVIEW PROCESS

1. It requires **focused thinking**, not just loose associations by both the interviewer and the dreamer.
2. The **descriptions are totally subjective** on the dreamers' part. The interviewer accepts their "facts", beliefs, attitudes and opinions without revision.
3. **Any dreamer** (not cognitively impaired) can provide the necessary information, but it may require mental dredging to articulate it.
4. **Information** necessary for the interpretation must be provided **by the dreamer**, not anyone else.
5. It sometimes requires **a new way of thinking** about objects and people that is totally unfamiliar to either the dreamer or the interviewer.



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A contemporary method of dream interpretation

## CHARACTERISTICS of the DREAM INTERVIEWER'S ROLE

1. Dream Interviewing requires the interviewer to **have confidence in the dreamer's** ability to understand his/her own dynamics.
2. The interview process requires the interviewer to **decline the role of expert** about the *meaning of any dream* that is not his/her own.
3. The interviewer becomes a **collaborator**, expert only in facilitating the process of interpretation.
4. The interview process requires **significant self-discipline** on the part of the interviewer.
5. The interviewer's **creativity is focused** on attentive question formation, timing, and juxtapositions to open the door to the *dreamer's* articulation of his/her metaphoric systems.
6. Spoken **speculations** by the interviewer about possible interpretations and meaning **are usually unnecessary**.
7. An **open mind is essential** - too many silent speculations tend to contaminate the neutrality of the questioning.
8. Dream interviewing can be **very exciting**, however, remember the axiom: dream interviewing is simple, but not easy.
9. The insight from Dream Interviewing can be extremely powerful, making the dreamer particularly vulnerable to unexpected self-awareness. This requires the interviewer to **monitor the dreamer's tolerance for insight**, and prepare them or protect them in a professional manner when necessary.

## DREAM INTERVIEWING

A contemporary method of dream interpretation

### TOP TEN COMMON PITFALLS OF THIS TECHNIQUE:

#### DURING STEPS 1 & 2, DESCRIPTION & RECAPITULATION

1. **Being the Expert:** Interpreting before descriptions, e.g.  
 Projecting meaning onto the dream, theoretical or personal,  
 Assuming puns are interpretations,  
 Accepting common analytical interpretations without testing.
2. **Upstaging:** Expressing your *own* opinion or feelings about a dream image or action rather than asking questions.
3. **Pride & Prejudice:** Assuming *your* opinion of an image or action is 'universally acknowledged' or right for another's dream.
4. **Translating:** Not using the *dreamer's words* but substituting your own or other people's words.
5. **Losing the Scent:** Not following the dreamer's emotional emphasis or tone or non-verbal signals.
6. **Jumping to Conclusions:** Not following the interview format &  
 Assuming associations are interpretations or  
 Accepting bridges from day residue without interviewing.
7. **Failure to Prioritize:** Selecting images for description that are trivial in light of the dramatic structure of the dream.
8. **Chasing tangents:** Asking description questions that are not *central* to the role of the image in the dream.
9. **Lagging:** Losing control of the interview mid-description and following a dreamer around from one image to another, or from image to waking life to plot, or from one dream to another, rather than directing the flow of the interview.
10. **Drowning in Detail:** Losing sight of the *specific* information you need for a definitive description, and not focusing on the basic questions or dramatic thrust of the dream.

## DREAM INTERVIEWING

A contemporary method of dream interpretation

### TEN MORE COMMON PITFALLS OF THIS TECHNIQUE:

#### DURING STEPS 3 & 4, BRIDGING & SUMMARY

11. **Isolating an Image:** Bridging an image out of the context of the dream's dynamic structure
12. **Poorly Timed Interruptions:** which inhibit the dreamer's emotional flow or productive train of thought
13. **Losing Momentum:** Allowing the interview process to get tedious or boring by e.g.
  - extended gaps between questions,
  - too many repetitions
  - not moving on soon enough when no bridge appears
14. **Feeling Overly Responsible:** for obtaining a meaningful interpretation of the dream, rather than limiting your responsibility to just asking good questions
15. **Overworking the Dream or Dreamer:** Not accepting the level of interpretation of which the dreamer is capable at the time of the interview, and continuing to persist with questions
16. **Leading the Witness:** asking questions which suggest the "correct" answer
17. **Being Seduced:** by passionate "ah-ha's" independent of bridges
18. **Failure to Test:** a bridge to be sure it fits both the dream and waking life "facts"
19. **Takeover:** Inappropriately summarizing the meaning for the dreamer
20. **The Winner's Complex:** Feeling you've failed if the whole dream isn't completely understood