Sweet Dreams

For most, sleep is a time of relaxation and dreams. But for many suffering with post-traumatic stress disorder, sleep can be a terrifying and vivid reminder of a painful experience.

“Nightmares following a trauma appear to be worse in many ways than the nightmares most of us experience on occasion,” says Dr. Joanne Davis, director of undergraduate studies at the University of Tulsa.

“Approximately 70 percent of individuals reporting trauma nightmares say they are similar to or exact replays of the traumatic event experienced. So, for many, it’s like being re-traumatized on a nightly basis.”

According to Davis, who has been studying the impact nightmares have on adults with PTSD since 1999, trauma nightmares tend to be more frequent and repetitive and occur earlier in the sleep cycle. Often these nightmares impact the ability to fall back asleep.

During her time at TU, Davis has conducted two research studies. Patients who have experienced trauma from events such as combat, rape, domestic violence and natural disasters provide details of their nightmares that are turned into brief scripts that are read either by the patient or to them. As the scripts are being read, patients are asked to imagine themselves in that experience and to engage in the emotional experiences and visual imagery.

Dr. Jamie Rhudy, assistant professor of clinical psychology who works alongside Davis, studies the physiological and psychological responses to pain, such as increased heart rate, sweat production, increased respiration and facial movements.

“I look at how an emotional state influences pain response. With nightmares, we’ve found there is a tremendous amount of negative emotion reminiscent of the initial traumatic experience,” says Rhudy.

The treatment of the nightmares consists of three therapy sessions, which utilize techniques such as exposure, relaxation and rescripting. The results have proved encouraging to Davis and Rhudy.

“The people we’ve treated reported – before beginning the study – an average of four nightmares per week for up to 25 years,” Davis notes. “Six months after treatment, approximately 84 percent of participants in the first study had not experienced nightmares in the past week, and 79 percent had not had nightmares in the past month. Patients also reported significant decreases in post-traumatic stress symptoms, depression and improved sleep quality and quantity,” she concludes.

“We’re finding that not only are the nightmares going away, but how the patient physiologically reacts to pain and fear changes,” Rhudy adds. “When we read the scripts, the way the brain processes the nightmare imagery is altered and they’re not as affected as they once were.”

– Katie Carmichael