

Suzanne Had Cancer. It Was Her Precognitive Dreams That Saved Her Life.

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She's not the only one — studies show many cases where insistent dreams clued people into their hidden diagnoses.



By Amy Paturel, M.S., M.P.H.

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During the summer of 2013, when Suzanne Degregorio was 43, she began waking from a deep sleep with memories of a recurrent dream: "It's your time to get cancer," she heard, over and over again, almost like she had an appointment to meet the disease.

"I ignored the dreams because they pissed me off," she says. Degregorio had a clean mammogram and no family history of cancer. Her radiologist casually mentioned she had dense breasts but didn't otherwise sound any alarm bells. Nevertheless, when Degregorio's

annual breast screening was due in December, she pushed for magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) in conjunction with a mammogram, since MRIs are more likely to spot abnormalities through dense breast tissue.

"In between getting the MRI and getting the results, I had another dream, but this time a woman in a white lab coat with short curly hair said, 'You have stage 3 breast cancer,'" says Degregorio. "I woke up knowing she was right."

Within two weeks, the MRI results uncovered a suspicious region and a biopsy confirmed Degregorio had cancer, but instead of stage 3 breast cancer, she tested positive for stage 1, grade 3 (not stage 3) HER-2 positive cancer. "Grade 3 indicates that cancerous cells are highly aggressive; stage 1 means the tumor had not spread," says Degregorio. "I suspect my subconscious grabbed the word stage, a term I was familiar with, to indicate the gravity of my disease."

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Degregorio met with a cancer counselor before beginning treatment to discuss next steps. "When the counselor walked into the room, I homed in on her curly hair, then her facial features — it was the lady who diagnosed me with cancer in my dream," she says.

It turns out Degregorio's foreboding dream isn't all that unique among those diagnosed with cancer. In a 2015 study of 18 women with breast cancer published in the scientific journal *Explore*, more than half reported they had warning dreams. "Many of these women had no family or personal history of the disease," says study author Larry Burk, M.D., Radiologist at Duke Center for Integrative Medicine. "Instead, in 94% of cases, the dreams were the first clue that the women had cancer."

While a follow-up study in 2020 found that only nine of the 163 women (or 5.5%) referred for a breast biopsy had a dream mentioning the word "cancer," other data suggests that about one-third of people report having precognitive dreams about all sorts of things — and they happen regardless of gender. Whether frequent or rare, these warning dreams have one thing in common: They're highly specific. One woman in the 2020 study dreamed about getting a call from her doctor, saying "it's just as you suspected; it's cancer." And that's exactly what her doctor said when he called with her results.

What are "warning dreams"?

Dating back to ancient times, healers relied on dreams to make medical diagnoses and devise treatment strategies. In fact, the concept of warning dreams appears in the earliest writings of humankind. But the phenomenon didn't gain traction in scientific circles until the late 1960s, when Russian researchers noted a correlation between dreams and physical illness.

According to Helen Marlo, Ph.D., chair of the Department of Clinical Psychology at Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont, California, precognitive dreams happen with surprising frequency. But they're not ordinary dreams. They're *big* dreams laden with detailed information about the location and severity of disease. Patients described these foreboding dreams as remarkably vivid, realer than real. They contain a sense of dread — and most important, they're hard to ignore.

Kat O'Keefe developed the SO DREAM approach to help people remember their dreams.

"Precognitive dreams are designed to get your attention, and if left unaddressed, they often recur until you take notice," Dr. Burk says. Many of the dreamers in Dr. Burk's study sought medical attention, despite exhibiting no clinical evidence of breast cancer. In some cases, the dreamers were so convinced of the information contained in their dreams, they persisted in getting a diagnosis, even in the face of negative imaging studies.

Kathleen (Kat) O'Keefe, of Treasure Island in St. Petersburg, Florida, for example, convinced her doctor to do exploratory surgery even after a mammogram, an ultrasound *and* an MRI came back clear. Since she had large, dense breasts, she started getting annual mammograms at age 29. They were always negative. But the night of her mammogram in 1999, she had a bizarre dream where a monk wearing a brown robe with a rope belt and leather sandals stepped through a window that materialized out of thin air.

"He said, 'Come with me,'" she says. "So I followed him into a room of sorts where he placed his hand on my right breast and said, 'You have cancer right here. Go back to your doctor tomorrow. Don't wait for an appointment.'"

O'Keefe followed the monk's instructions and demanded more tests. But with every scan, blood test and biopsy, doctors said, "You're too young for cancer; your tests are clear; go home." And each time, she'd have another dream where the monk reappeared and showed her, once again, the exact location of her cancer.

"I felt like I was crazy," says O'Keefe, but she pressed the doctor to probe further. When her post-surgery pathology report came back, her doctor was shocked: O'Keefe had stage 2 breast cancer, an aggressive form of the disease. Moreover, O'Keefe's cancer returned, not once, but twice. Fortunately, the monk from her dreams did, too.

After O'Keefe's story went public, she appeared on several radio and TV shows. At the end of these interviews, she frequently heard members of the audience ask, "But what if I can't remember my dreams?" So she came up with the acronym, SO DREAM, as a mnemonic device to help them set the stage for memorable dreaming.

TRY IT!

Want to be more intentional about recalling your dreams?

Try Kathleen O'Keefe's approach using the acronym, **SO DREAM.**

SET YOUR INTENTION.

Write in a journal, ask questions, invite your dreams to speak.

ORGANIZE.

Get your red light, make sure you have a notepad by your bed and keep a pen on your nightstand.

DECLARE

That you're going to dream.

REMAIN IN PLACE.

Instead of rushing to get out of bed, remain in the position you're in when you wake.

EMOTIONS.

What are you feeling when you wake from the dream?

ADD.

What colors did you see? Which animals showed up? What symbols did you recognize?

MEANING.

What do these things mean to you?

A journey into the unconscious

Nearly everyone has experienced déjà vu, where an experience feels familiar, like it happened before. Maybe you received news that a loved one passed the morning after you dreamed about their death. Or perhaps you dreamed that you were pregnant before you missed a period.

Logically minded folks are likely to dismiss such synchronicities, and for good reason. With billions of dreams happening every night, mathematical law suggests that any prescient dreams happen by chance; they're just random coincidences. In fact, according to the Law of Truly Large Numbers, even the rarest event will eventually occur if given billions of opportunities.

Some researchers say that selective recall (remembering dreams that come true, but not those that don't) and a tendency to search for signs and coincidences may lead to an inflated number of "warning dreams." But inflated or not, cancer patients' ability to identify the exact location of their tumors based on "data" from their dreams raises questions for researchers about the source of the information — and how it transferred to their consciousness.



After doing TV appearances about her experiences, Kat O'Keefe developed her "SO DREAM" mnemonic for remembering dreams.

Courtesy of Kat O'Keefe

"The most conservative interpretation would be that the women had already detected physical symptoms that were translated into dream form and brought to conscious awareness," Dr. Burk says. "A sort of middle ground view is that there may be unknown psychophysical mechanisms for transferring information from the body to the brain. But the most mind-expanding theory is that there's some intuitive psychic process happening; that we are somehow in touch with our bodies on a non-material level."

No matter which viewpoint you adopt, neuroimaging studies show that brain activity during REM (rapid eye movement sleep) mimics a waking state. Feel-good chemicals like dopamine and acetylcholine climb during REM, which activates the regions of the brain associated with visual stimulation, movement, emotions and autobiographical memory. In that state, the brain prefers abstraction, novelty and diversity.

"The mind is capable of deep revelations during REM, in part because dreams have their own language, and they're insulated from the external influences of the waking world," Dr. Marlo says. "Unlike spoken language, which is housed in the thinking center of the brain, dreams communicate through intuition, divergent thinking, imagery and loose associations." This may be why some strokes of genius have been attributed to dreams — like Einstein's theory of relativity and Paul McCartney's timeless melody for "Yesterday."

The benefits of intentional dreaming

Scientists are still trying to unravel exactly why we dream. The prevailing theory is that dreams help us process our feelings, particularly those related to trauma. So is it such a stretch to think that your dreams are a sort of natural defense mechanism? A way to prepare you for difficult or troubling experiences before they happen?

Suzanne Degregorio still looks to her dreams for answers (and often finds them).

Courtesy of Suzanne Degregorio

"Dreams help us process emotions and memories," Dr. Marlo says. "Precognitive dreams could function similarly, but in a prospective way." So precognitive dreams may be nature's way of helping people face the future. After all, being able to predict the future, at least to some degree, is essential to sidestepping catastrophe.



Say you've been worried about an upcoming visit with your in-laws. Maybe you're thinking about the insults they'll lob your way or how they'll judge your parenting. Since those thoughts take up a huge chunk of mental real estate, dreams that "come true" after your in-laws arrive may just reflect what's happening in your waking life.

Once you begin paying attention to your dreams, the information contained within them begins to make more sense. Try asking questions before you go to bed and write down what comes to you in your dreams. "When you begin recording your dreams, you'll start to notice patterns," says Carlyle Smith, Ph.D., author of *Heads Up Dreaming* and professor emeritus of psychology at Trent University in Ontario, Canada. "You can even begin to incubate questions a bit, particularly as they relate to your health."

Eight years after her breast cancer diagnosis, Degregorio still mines her dreams for solutions. "I ask questions before I go to bed or say out loud that I need more information about a particular issue in my life," she says. "The answers may not come through that night, or even that week, but when I set an intention and request more information, almost inevitably, a dream follows."

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