

This handout is based on information in Finlay, L. (2015). *Relational Integrative Psychotherapy: Process and Theory in Practice*, Chichester, Sussex: Wiley.

Working with dreams

The way we work with dreams varies according to our theoretical perspective. Psychoanalytic and humanistic approaches can be contrasted, for instance, though in practice integratively-orientated therapists may well merge the two. It can help, however to recognise key differences in focus and method.

Psychoanalytic approaches view dreams as the 'royal road' to the unconscious, suggesting unconscious messages which the therapist interprets. The classic Freudian (1900) view is that dreams act both as wish fulfilment and as a kind of a censor which disguises the unacceptable material of unconscious reality. Freudian analysis aims to use interpretation to uncover the symbolism and work through the defended material. Taking a different view, a Jungian approach to dream work views dreams as spanning both the personal and the collective unconscious. Dreams are understood to carry eternal archetypal energy patterns within deep recesses of the soul. Different again, in more modern relational versions, the meanings of dreams cannot be interpreted and understood outside of the intersubjective context in which they arise (Atwood & Stolorow, 2014).

With **humanistic** versions, a split between conscious and unconscious is denied and therapists' interpretations are avoided as they are seen as an arbitrary imposition of therapists' meanings. Instead, dreams are seen to reflect a figural feeling (e.g. a current anxiety) or something of the dreamer's world which may be currently in- or out-of-awareness. In existential terms, the '*dream world*' is viewed as accessible and as experientially valid as the 'waking world' (Spinelli, 2007).

With a gestalt approach, for instance, dreams are seen as representing parts of self which can be brought into awareness, experimented with and cathartically worked through in therapy. A dream character may, for instance, represent an unmet need or might point the way to a new way of being. The therapist invites the client to recount their dream from moment to moment, using the present tense as if the dream is actually happening. The dream might then be re-entered from the perspectives of the different characters or objects which figured in it. These parts (of self) can be brought into dialogue with each other and worked with creatively.