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Dream expert helps you figure out why you're naked in public

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Karen Slotnick dreamed it was snowing kittens.

The Hilton Head Island resident used to live in Syracuse, N.Y. "and hated the snow" but in her dream, she was happy to see the fluffy felines floating down from the sky. Curious about what the dream might mean, Slotnick went to a dream group meeting for some insight.

Since 2010, a group has been meeting weekly on Hilton Head to share and interpret their dreams.

"We all feel that dreams are very important," said Sharon Haas, a member of the group. At each meeting, members discuss their dreams, work on various dream exercises and bounce possible dream meanings off each other.

"I consider my dreams a gift," said Slotnick, who keeps a binder full of notes about the dreams she remembers.

Another group member, Karen Struve, has dreams so detailed, it is like sitting down to read a book while she sleeps, she said. "And I wanted to understand why."

Sometimes we remember dreams vividly, other times just in fragments or not at all. Why we dream is still a mystery, but experts

generally agree that dreams serve a biological as well as an emotional purpose.

Dream expert and Hilton Head's dream group founder Justina Lasley believes that nothing about our unconsciousness is insignificant. "A dream does not come to us in order to waste our time with information we already have. It calls on us to listen and watch more intently, gathering information we missed in the waking life," she said.

Lasley has spent years studying dreams, and she takes them very seriously.

Her bookcases are filled with dream journals where she keeps meticulous entries. Each has a date, title and list of important emotions she felt during her dreams. She doodles images she can remember: carrots, stick figures, a house. Even if she doesn't know what it means right away, it helps her decipher the dreams later.

Lasley is the founder and director of the Institute for Dream Studies, which trains people to analyze dreams and lead dream groups like the one on Hilton Head. She's also the author of "Honoring the Dream: A Handbook for Dream Group Leaders," "In My Dream" and the soon-to-be-released "Wake Up! Use your Nighttime Dreams to Make your Daytime Dreams Come True."

She began studying dreams in 1990, when she joined a dream group at her church. It interested her so much that she took over as the group leader, then decided to get a master's in transpersonal psychology, or "spiritual psychology," at University of West Georgia.

The study of dreams has gained momentum in recent decades, with groups like the International Association for the Study of Dreams and the International Institute for Dream Research studying how dreams relate to brain processes. For example, researchers have determined each person dreams approximately five times a night during rapid eye movement stages of sleep.

While Lasley's work builds upon scientific studies, her dreamwork is

more emotional and qualitative. Lasley focuses on how dreams relate to a person's mind, body and spirit.

She won't interpret your dreams, though. She can't tell you what being naked in public, losing all your teeth or flying means to you because each dream is personal, a reflection of the dreamer.

"Instead of you looking to me as an authority, I'm helping you help yourself," she said.

At the dream group, participants start their sentences with the phrase "If it were my dream ..." to ensure that no one imposes their thoughts on someone else's dream.

"It's the dreamer who gets the final say on what the interpretation of the dream is," Haas said.

"But having another perspective is very helpful," Struve added.

For those she works with, Lasley always has two recommendations. The first step to understanding your dreams, she said, is to start a dream journal like the ones she keeps herself.

She also advises joining a dream group, which provides a sense of community, a safe place to be vulnerable and insight you might not see in your dream on your own.

As for Slotnick's kitten dream, the group determined that cute animals often symbolize happy surprises. The group then asked Slotnick what emotions she was feeling in the dream. Slotnick said she was surprised that the kittens, which she loves, made up the snow, something she dislikes. The overall emotion of the dream was joy and contentment. She decided she needed to be more aware of the happy surprises in her life and to look for them in the future.

Hearing others share their dreams allows people to "see the essence of that human being," Lasley said. "It shows our unity. It gives us the closest look at the human soul."

Paying attention to dreams can improve personal health and well-being, Lasley said, because dreams come to us to help process the challenges and concerns in our waking lives.

"You often are not aware of what you feel or why you feel the way you do," she said. "Dreams know and can lead us to that understanding."

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