

COUNSELOR'S CORNER

September 2026

Sleep Spotlight: What Happens at Night?

Sleep supports learning, mood, attention, memory, and overall well-being. Two nighttime experiences that can be confusing are **nightmares** and **night terrors**. They are different events, and knowing the difference can make nighttime feel less scary.

Feature	Nightmares	Night Terrors
What they are	Frightening dreams that can cause fear, sadness, or anxiety. The person usually wakes and remembers the dream.	Episodes of intense fear or distress during sleep. The person may scream, sit up, sweat, or look terrified but may not be fully awake.
When they happen	Most often during REM sleep , commonly later in the night.	Most often during deep non-REM sleep , commonly earlier in the night.
Awareness & memory	Usually awake and able to describe the dream afterward.	Often difficult to wake; usually little or no memory the next morning.
Common causes / triggers	Stress or anxiety, frightening media or experiences, sleep deprivation, irregular sleep, some medications, or other sleep-related factors.	Often linked to an immature or disrupted sleep-arousal system; sleep deprivation, irregular schedules, fever/illness, stress, and family tendency can contribute.
What helps	Comfort, reassurance, calming routines, talking about worries, and consistent sleep habits.	Keep the person safe, stay calm, avoid forcing them fully awake, and focus on regular, adequate sleep.

Coping Strategies: When Sleep Feels Scary

- **After a nightmare:** Take slow breaths, remind yourself that it was a dream, turn on a soft light, and talk to a trusted adult if you need reassurance.
- **For recurring worries:** Write down worries earlier in the evening and pair them with one small action you can take tomorrow.
- **Use a calming reset:** Try 4 slow breaths, gentle stretching, quiet music, or a brief mindfulness exercise.
- **For night terrors:** Prioritize safety. Keep the area clear, speak calmly, and avoid startling or forcefully waking the person.
- **Ask for support:** Frequent, severe, or disruptive episodes are worth discussing with a healthcare professional, especially if there are injuries, breathing concerns, or major daytime effects.

Sleep Hygiene: Build a Better Bedtime

- **Keep a consistent schedule:** Go to bed and wake up at about the same time each day.
- **Create a wind-down routine:** Give yourself 30–60 minutes for quiet, relaxing activities before bed.
- **Dim the lights:** Reduce bright light and stimulating screen use near bedtime when possible.
- **Make the room sleep-friendly:** Aim for a cool, comfortable, quiet, and dark environment.
- **Watch caffeine:** Avoid caffeine late in the day if it interferes with sleep.
- **Get daytime movement and light:** Regular activity and daytime exposure to natural light can support healthy sleep timing.
- **Use the bed mainly for sleep:** If you are awake for a while, try a quiet activity in dim light and return when sleepy.

■ Counselor's Corner Takeaway

Good sleep is a skill, not a test. Small, consistent routines can make bedtime calmer. If frightening sleep events happen often or interfere with daily life, reaching out for professional guidance is a positive next step.