

Transcript

In this home video a Japanese man makes the ritual moves of a Samurai warrior, stabbing his imaginary opponent then finishing him off with a flourish. All this time the man is sound asleep. He suffers from a parasomnia: unpleasant and unwanted behaviour during deep sleep. So do millions of Americans including Mike Doyle, by day he is a mild-mannered bank executive who lives with his wife in a suburb of Minneapolis. By night, he wanders the house in a deep slumber, acting out his strangest and wildest dreams.

- I ran down the hallway and jumped from the top step and landed somewhere near the bottom, I got up and went back to bed and the following morning I didn't realize what I had done, until I sat down on the wooden chair in the kitchen. And I thought I was gonna die because of how bad it hurt to sit.
- What happens with parasomnias is that the brain tells the body to move: to walk, to have sex, to eat, to become aggressive, to become violent. It's the brain that directs the muscles and the rest of the body to engage in these activities

Dr. Carlos Schenck a sleep disorder specialist has conducted pioneering research into how the brain triggers such behaviour. In the documentary Sleep Runners he's catalogued a range of parasomnias, including those who eat in their sleep.

- A woman with sleep eating, every time she eats a bit of her brownie, she extends the pinky of her hand and nibbles on it and that's no way that she would ever eat during the day time ...

This 28-year-old woman eats and drinks continuously over two hours while asleep in the dead of night. She starts munching at bread, a few minutes later she washes it down, then it's the bread again, then potato chips, the drink and once more the chips.

- The sleep eaters generally have partial awareness of what they are doing, but they don't know the full extent until the next morning, when with horror they would see all that they ate. Here is a bite out of a frozen pizza.
- And also they are really very disgusted with how they ate, such as spaghetti and meatballs with their bare hands or they make a tuna fish sandwich loaded with salt and pepper or they'll even make a cat food sandwich.
- A cat food sandwich?
- They make a cat food sandwich, they butter cigarettes. They put coffee grounds, Coca-Cola, egg shells in a blender and they blend it all together and drink it, it's bizarre.

Sometimes the bizarre behavior can be quite violent. This is a 21-year-old man suffering a night terror.

- He responds by throwing a back handed punch at his pillow then he growls.
- Why are people responding to this sort of primal fears in their sleep?
- Well, I think it is the fight or flight response. Suddenly out of deepest sleep you encounter a major threat and you have to respond either running away or fighting against the threat.

The parasomnias are considered a brain dysfunction, not a mental illness.

- Most parasomnias can be diagnosed and effectively treated, and most parasomnias are not a function of a daytime psychiatric disorder.

But Mike Doyle feared the stigma, one reason he only reluctantly signed up for a sleep study at the Minnesota Regional Sleep Disorders Center. He's wired with hundreds of leads so the researchers can monitor his brain and body. Such testing is critical because some parasomnias during the dream stage of sleep known as Rapid Eye Movement or REM, can be a precursor to brain diseases including Parkinson's.

- We identified a disorder, what is the rapid eye movement sleep behavior disorder, or RBD, mainly affecting men in their 50s or older who were acting out violent dreams involving unfamiliar people or animals. After we followed these men along for a decade or longer, we realized that at least two thirds of these men developed Parkinson's disease, which is a traditional neurologic disorder involving tremor and rigidity.
- Mike's wife Cheryl is concerned, her husband has been walking, talking and occasionally raging at her in his sleep throughout their eight-year marriage.
- He'd bolt right out of bed and would scream, yell sometimes it was just nonsense. There were dogs in the house and we needed to get the dogs out. The only time that I would probably run after is if I heard the front door open or the garage door open ...
- Did he actually leave the house?
- Yes
- What kind of things would you notice, Mike, about these episodes?
- Well, certainly the frequency: three, four, sometimes five, six times a night

One of his recent night episodes involved the movie "Cape Fear." Robert De Niro stars as an ex-con who stalks the family of a lawyer played by Nick Nolte.

- There's a scene where the family is on the boat in the river and the family is trying to escape Robert De Niro and they all jumped into the river, and I dreamt that I was on that boat and I got up out of bed, I got a running start and dove into our living room.
- He actually pushed me in a closet
- Basically just got up and went back to bed and it wasn't until a couple hours later that I woke up and wondered why the bed was wet and I realized that I turned on the light that my knees were bleeding from having scraped my knees.
- Have you noticed distinct personalities a night personality and a day personality?
- Oh, absolutely. He's not himself at night when he has these episodes. He's a totally different person.
- Jekyll and Hyde?

- Yes

Sleep disorders have increasingly served as legal defenses in violent crimes with mixed results: Two years ago, this Canadian man was acquitted of rape after claiming he was asleep when he forced himself on a woman after a party, the two had been napping on a sofa, the defense called him: sexsomniac. In 1997 Scott Falater, a devout and devoted family man with no criminal past but a history of sleep walking stabbed his wife 44 times and held her under their pool.

- It's something that is going to hunt me forever.

The Arizona jury rejected his sleepwalking defense.

- Do you think that someone can be innocent of murder because they have a sleep disorder?

- Yes, someone with a parasomnia can commit an act of murder and have no idea what he or she is doing in the process. So on that basis yes, they should be considered innocent.

- I need you to relax with your eyes closed, please.

During his sleep study Mike Doyle was monitored overnight and through a series of naps nearly 24 hours. In the morning, Dr. Schenk and Dr. Mark Mahowald - a neurologist - go over the results. So Mike and Cheryl get some good news: The sleepwalking did not appear to be the more serious REM behavioral disorder, (RBD) the red flag for Parkinson's disease.

- The bottom line is that you have sleep apnea that is superimposed on your sleep walking, You did have one episode of confusional arousal with mumbling out of slow wave sleep which is very consistent with the sleep walking history. But you had mild to moderate obstructive sleep apnea, 25 episodes an hour. The prescribed treatment includes a breathing device to prevent sleep apnea and perhaps a common sedative.

By now the DoYLES share a simple wish:

- I think just having what I would consider a normal night's sleep

- Getting a good night sleep myself, uninterrupted sleep would be nice

For this couple that is the ultimate dream: a sound sleep unburdened by the terror of the night.