



The Skeptics SA guide to Alien Encounters

Imagine awakening in the dead of night to hear padding footsteps in your bedroom. You have a sense of a malevolent presence in the room, and you may hear breathing. Even more frightening, you find yourself paralyzed, unable to move a muscle. The footsteps seem to approach you, then you feel someone or something touching your body. Light fingertip pressure moves over your chest, abdomen, genitals. You are still motionless, except for your breathing. Try as you might you cannot open your eyes or move your limbs. You may experience a strange sensation of levitation. Then all goes blank. You awaken a little later, able to move normally. The room is silent and dark.

This strange phenomenon is due to a neurological condition called sleep paralysis. Russell Brain (1947) describes it as the outcome of a failure of the uniform spread of sleep over the nervous system levels concerned with consciousness remain awake when the motor and postural levels have fallen asleep, or conversely are awakening before them.

In an article on sleep Russell Brain (1939) describes the condition as a splitting of function of the sleep center in the brain, with the body asleep and the mind awake. This unequal distribution of sleep was described by physicist Paul Davies as 'lucid dreaming'. The condition is not usually due to organic disease of the

brain, although it may occur in lesions of the posterior part of the hypothalamus (Mayer, Gross, Slater, and Roth, 1955).

The neurosurgeon Cairns (1942) includes the condition in the disturbances of consciousness with lesions of the brain stem and diencephalon. Hallucinations (false sensations without an external stimulus) occur in this condition, and they are often elaborate and terrifying. The night terrors of childhood appear to be of a similar nature. The sensation of one's body being palpated and examined, and the sounds of footsteps and breathing are hallucinations. This hallucinatory state is the result of a dissociation of consciousness, akin to dreaming when the subject is partially awake, known as hypnagogic hallucinations. It may be noted that the condition is the converse of somnambulism (sleep walking). In this latter condition the conscious mind is asleep, while motor control in the brain is awake.

In sleep paralysis the subject is awake but there is some clouding of consciousness. This may result in irrational thinking. In the light of day the majority of subjects will dismiss these ideas. But a few more imaginative persons may elaborate and rationalise their night experience. Thus the concept of alien encounters arises, particularly in view of the media hype on this subject. The terrifying paralysis may be

rationalised as the alien's ability to immobilise the human subject to allow him to be examined. In the dream-like state the subject may include alien abduction, particularly in view of the sensation of levitation. Some subjects report that aliens create a mental block causing amnesia.

According to South Australian UFO enthusiast Colin Norris 'Aliens can cloud the minds of humans.' In this clouded or amnesic state some subjects may believe that they were abducted, examined and experimented upon. Aliens, it seems have a penchant for experimentation on humans, especially in the sexual sphere (pun intended).

Thus disorders of the mechanism of sleep may account for some of the myths of alien adventures.

References

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