Continuity and Creative Problem-Solving in Guided Dreaming (GD)–Induced Waking Dreams: A Mixed-Methods Pilot Study of the Novel Protocol

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Abstract

This mixed-methods pilot study investigated Guided Dreaming (GD), a novel waking dream protocol, to test the applicability of the continuity hypothesis and problem-solving theory to GD-induced waking dreams. The study featured a demographically diverse sample of eleven adult volunteers (e.g., varying ethnicity, religion, and educational background) presenting a wide spectrum of self-determined waking-life concerns, including career conflict, trauma, relationship issues, and health challenges.

Following a single GD workshop that used a standardized underwater dreamscape featuring an octopus guide, phenomenological data revealed that all eleven participants experienced highly distinct and individualized waking dreams, demonstrating the protocol's capacity to elicit personalized symbolic material from a common structured setup. Quantitative analysis revealed significant average improvements in self-assessed mental outlook (mean increase 36%, $p = .00067$, Cohen's d = 1.03), with 91% reporting feeling safe, stress reduction and gaining personalized problem-solving insights.

Reflexive thematic analysis provided strong support for continuity, demonstrating that participants' specific waking-life concerns were directly translated into unique dream symbols. The data further evidenced a functional problem-solving capacity, identifying three core mechanisms: symbolic confrontation, embodied cognition, and archetypal transformation. The single outlier, who interpreted her dream literally, underscores the role of symbolic literacy.

This study provides preliminary evidence that the novel GD protocol serves as an effective empirical bridge, demonstrating that waking dreams can actively harness neurocognitive continuity to facilitate directed problem-solving across a diverse population. The protocol effectively leverages the hyper-associative potential typical of sleeping dreams while uniquely maintaining the metacognitive oversight necessary for immediate insight and implementation.

Keywords: waking dreams, guided dreaming, continuity hypothesis, problem-solving theory, mixed-methods, active imagination

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Introduction

The cognitive functions of dreaming in sleep---particularly the consolidation of waking experience (continuity hypothesis) and creative problem-solving---have been extensively theorized. While empirical and anecdotal evidence support the role of dreams in facilitating insight (Barrett, 2017), a significant scholarly debate persists. Critics like Domhoff (2004) argue against a primary problem-solving function for sleeping dreams, contending that their bizarre, hyper-associative nature often lacks the directed focus necessary for logical solution-generation, and that most famous "eureka" dream examples rely on post-hoc interpretation. This pilot study investigates whether this very limitation can be overcome by accessing dream-like cognition in a state of waking awareness. Guided Dreaming (GD) is a novel protocol designed to provide a safe and effective method for inducing transformative waking dreams, which presents an accessible and reliable way to investigate whether the neurocognitive mechanisms of dreaming can be consciously harnessed and directed for therapeutic problem-solving.

Waking dreams—dreamlike mental episodes experienced when one is not asleep (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.)—are a cross-culturally documented phenomenon, cultivated through practices like hypnosis, vision quests, and Jungian active imagination (Lanfranco et al., 2021; Martínez, 2004; Watkins, 1976). Jung’s method, in particular, involves a conscious engagement with the unconscious through imagery and fantasy, serving as a primary theoretical foundation for GD. Developed by the author through an iterative process, the standardized GD protocol immerses participants in a guided underwater dreamscape featuring an archetypal octopus guide—a symbol of cognitive flexibility and adaptability. Crucially, while the induction

is structured, the protocol is designed to generate highly personalized waking dream experiences, allowing for a direct test of the continuity hypothesis, as participants' unique waking concerns and diverse personal backgrounds are expected to shape the content and symbolism of their individual waking dreams.

This study presents a mixed-methods pilot investigation of the novel GD protocol. Its primary aim is to determine if a GD-induced waking dream can demonstrate the core principles of continuity and problem-solving across a demographically and clinically diverse sample. The author systematically analyzed the waking dream narratives and subjective measures of eleven adult volunteer participants with varied ethnicities, religious affiliations, and presenting problems—including career conflict, trauma, relationship issues, and health concerns—to investigate two key questions: First, do waking dreams produced under a standardized induction show clear continuity with participants' waking lives? Second, does engagement with this embodied, metaphorical content facilitate actionable problem-resolution and improve mental outlook? By addressing these questions, this research seeks to establish GD not only as a promising therapeutic protocol but also as a rigorous empirical method for studying the continuity and functional potential of conscious dream states.

Literature Review

This review synthesizes the neurocognitive and psychological foundations of dreaming to establish the theoretical basis for the GD. It focuses on two core, interrelated functions of dreaming that GD seeks to harness in a waking state: the reflection of waking life (continuity) and the facilitation of adaptive solutions (problem-solving).

Neurocognitive Foundations: Continuity and Problem-Solving in the Sleeping Brain

The continuity hypothesis posits that dreaming is not a random neurological event but a cognitive process deeply continuous with waking life, incorporating daily experiences, ongoing concerns, and emotional themes (Roesler, 2018). Neuroimaging studies provide a basis for this continuity, revealing that key brain networks active during waking rest—particularly the default mode network (DMN) involved in self-referential thought and autobiographical memory—remain highly active during REM sleep (Nir & Tononi, 2010; Horton, 2017). This shared neural substrate allows for the integration and processing of waking experiences during sleep.

One of the primary adaptive functions of this process is problem-solving. The dream state is characterized by a shift towards hyperassociative cognition, where the brain makes novel connections between distantly related concepts, bypassing the linear constraints of waking logic (Walker et al., 2002). This facilitates creative insight and emotional regulation, often through metaphorical representations of waking-life challenges (Barrett, 2017). For instance, threatening situations in waking life are frequently rehearsed in dreams, aiding in threat simulation and emotional adaptation (Barrett, 2001). However, a significant limitation of sleeping dreams is that the implementation of these insights is often dependent upon recall and subsequent conscious reflection (Domhoff, 2004). The potential is generated in sleep, but its application typically requires a separate, waking effort.

Lucid dreaming—the phenomenon in which a dreamer becomes aware that they are dreaming while the dream continues—provides a compelling neuroscientific model for a conscious state that blends waking awareness with dream immersion. Neuroimaging studies have demonstrated that lucid dreaming is not merely a subjective claim but is marked by a distinct and measurable neurophysiological signature. During lucid episodes, a hybrid state emerges: there is

a reactivation of key regions associated with metacognitive oversight, such as the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) and the frontoparietal control network (FPCN), which are typically deactivated during standard REM sleep (Voss et al., 2009; Baird et al., 2019). Simultaneously, the limbic and parallimbic areas, along with the default mode network (DMN), remain highly active, sustaining the vivid emotional and sensory fabric of the dreamscape. This unique co-activation of metacognitive and oneiric networks validates lucid dreaming as a third state of consciousness, effectively bridging the gap between the logical oversight of waking thought and the hyper-associative generation of the dreaming mind. This model provides a crucial conceptual precedent for the GD protocol, which seeks to induce a subjectively similar hybrid state of metacognitive engagement within a directed, waking-dream experience.

Lucid dreaming enables metacognitive awareness within a dream state. However, a significant practical limitation exists: achieving lucidity reliably typically requires sustained, disciplined training over weeks or months, often utilizing techniques like reality checks or mnemonic induction, which can present a formidable barrier for widespread clinical or other application (Stumbrys et al., 2012). The GD protocol addresses this accessibility gap. By externalizing the induction process through a structured, guided narrative and sensory engagement in a waking state, GD effectively bypasses the need for extensive individual training. This makes the core therapeutic benefit—the integration of metacognitive oversight with the hyper-associative, symbolic processing of the dream mode—immediately accessible. Consequently, GD can be understood as a pragmatic tool that operationalizes a key mechanism of lucid dreaming for contemporary populations, offering a pathway to insightful, directed problem-solving without the protracted training curve, thus bridging a critical gap between theoretical potential and practical implementation.

Psychological Frameworks: From Interpretation to Active Engagement

Psychological theories have long sought to access and utilize the problem-solving potential of the dream state. Freud (1900) established dreams as the "royal road" to the unconscious, though his focus on deciphering latent content kept the dreamer in a passive, interpretive role. Adler contributed a pragmatic perspective, viewing dreams as rehearsals for solving problems and advancing life goals, thereby emphasizing their prospective and functional nature (Bird, 2005). Contemporary approaches have integrated these views, with Bulkeley (2023) highlighting the communal and sacred dimensions of dreamwork, and Thompson (2014) bridging neuroscience and philosophy through the lens of embodied cognition. Thompson's work is particularly salient, arguing that consciousness fluidly transitions across waking, dreaming, and other states, with each state offering distinct cognitive advantages.

Jung expanded the potential of dream states significantly by introducing active imagination, a method that moves beyond passive interpretation into a conscious, dynamic engagement with the images, figures, and emotions that emerge from the unconscious (Chodorow & Jung, 2015). This practice is a direct precursor to contemporary waking dream protocols, fundamentally shifting the paradigm from post-dream analysis to a real-time, active dialogue with the psyche. The theory behind this process is what Jung termed the transcendent function—the psyche's innate capacity to generate a third, reconciling perspective from the tension between conscious and unconscious opposites, such as a waking problem and a dream symbol like Philemon from Jung's personal waking dream experience - a recurring wise old male guide with kingfisher wings (Jung, 1963). Active imagination provides the vessel for this function to operate, creating a liminal space where symbols can be engaged directly, allowing for a transformative synthesis that alters one's conscious attitude. The GD protocol is a direct

operationalization of this framework. The structured underwater dreamscape serves as the modern container for active imagination, while the encounter with the shapeshifting octopus guide embodies the transcendent function in action. The octopus, with its fluid intelligence and ability to bridge elements (represented by its tentacles), acts as a living archetype of mediation, facilitating the integration of disparate psychic contents—the participant's conscious problem and the unconscious solution—into a new, transformative insight, thereby fulfilling the core objective of Jungian psychological transformation.

Synthesis and Rationale for Guided Dreaming

A critical gap remains between the theoretical understanding of dreaming's functions and the practical application of its problem-solving power. While sleeping dreams excel at generating novel associations through hyperassociative cognition, they lack metacognitive oversight for immediate implementation. Conversely, conventional waking problem-solving possesses oversight but is often constrained by logical, linear thinking.

Although Jung's active imagination remains a foundational method for eliciting waking dreams, its traditional application faces practical limitations in the twenty-first century. It is typically conducted as a solitary practice or in a one-on-one therapeutic setting, which can be time-intensive, costly, and may create a power dynamic that some individuals find intimidating. In contrast, the GD protocol innovates by adapting this process for a group setting. This collective format can enhance the sense of safety and support, as participants undergo the experience alongside others, normalizing the journey and reducing feelings of isolation. By providing a structured, time-bound, and group-based container, GD makes the profound benefits of engaging with the unconscious more accessible, scalable, and psychologically safe for a contemporary audience.

GD synthesizes the neurocognitive principle of continuity with the psychological method of active imagination. By inducing a structured waking dream state, GD aims to create a neurocognitive environment where the hyperassociative, metaphorical problem-solving of dreaming can occur while maintaining the metacognitive direction of the waking mind. The protocol leverages an embodied, archetypal dreamscape (the underwater world and octopus guide) to provide a container for the continuity of waking concerns to manifest, thereby enabling directed problem-solving through the very mechanisms identified in sleep, but with conscious awareness and intent.

Methods

This pilot study employed a convergent mixed-methods design to investigate the initial efficacy and therapeutic mechanisms of the novel GD protocol. The design was selected to triangulate quantitative outcomes with rich qualitative phenomenology, providing a comprehensive evaluation that honors the subjective nature of dream and emotional experience.

This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Adler University (24-206). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to them taking the survey.

Participants and Recruitment

A diverse sample of eleven adults self-selected from a pool of approximately 60 individuals who participated in a single-session GD group workshop offered between June and October 2024. The resulting sample of 11 survey respondents represented a range of ethnic backgrounds (7 White, 2 Black, 1 Asian, 1 mixed ethnicity), religious affiliations, educational attainment, and relationship statuses. All participants presented with self-identified, subjectively significant stress related to specific problems, including trauma, chronic illness, career conflicts,

and relationship challenges. This heterogeneity enabled an initial exploration of GD's applicability across diverse demographics and life circumstances.

The GD Protocol

The GD protocol was developed iteratively from a stress-reduction model (Phase 1: 2021-2023) to its current problem-solving form (Phase 2: 2024), which is the focus of this study. Participant agency was paramount, with the ability to self-terminate the experience at any time. The standardized session consists of a single 90-minute group workshop, which includes:

- Problem Determination: The participants were prompted to identify an ongoing personal problem to focus on.
- Imagined Helper: For psychological safety, the participants were invited to invoke an imagined helper, which can be a person, an animal or an object.
- Induction and Guided Interaction: Breathwork and visualization guiding participants into a relaxing underwater environment. Visualization and engagement with the imagined helper and an archetypal octopus guide.
- Dream Sharing: The participants were given the opportunity to share their GD experience with the facilitator and the other participants in a supportive environment, to help them derive meaning from the dream symbols.

Facilitator Observations of the Waking Dream State: Throughout the facilitation of the GD protocol, consistent behavioral markers were observed that further characterize the waking dream state. Participants, while deeply immersed in the experience, remained responsive to vocal guidance, indicating a preserved thread of metacognitive awareness. Notably, observable rapid eye movements (REMs) beneath closed eyelids were a frequent occurrence among participants, mirroring the oculomotor activity characteristic of REM sleep and suggesting a

similar engagement with vivid internal imagery. Crucially, unlike in sleep, participants retained full volitional control over their physical bodies, with some observed making small, deliberate adjustments in posture. This triad of observations—auditory responsiveness, REM-like activity, and voluntary movement—visibly demonstrates the unique hybrid nature of the GD state: a conscious, embodied wakefulness coupled with the immersive, internally-generated sensory experience of a dream.

Data Collection and Rationale for Subjective Measures

Following the workshop, participants completed a 15-item anonymous survey on the Qualtrics platform. The survey focused on self-assessed, subjective measures—including pre-post mental outlook (on a 0-100 scale), stress reduction, and safety—alongside open-ended questions about dream narratives and problem resolution, as well as demographic information. This methodological choice was a deliberate application of the core ethical dreamwork principle upheld by the International Association for the Study of Dreams (IASD, 2025), which positions the dreamer as the ultimate authority on the meaning of their dreams. Extending this principle to the dreamer's assessment of their own psychological state, participants are treated as the foremost experts on their internal landscape; no standardized instrument can capture the nuanced reality of their stress or mental outlook with the same accuracy as their own subjective report. This approach is grounded in phenomenological philosophy (Thompson, 2014), which prioritizes lived experience as primary data. The case of Participant #5, whose negative outcome was a truthful report of her experience, later validated the necessity of this method for capturing the full spectrum of response without imposing external interpretation.

The de-identified, raw survey data supporting the findings of this pilot study are available in the appendix of the author's master's thesis (Tang, 2024) published on ProQuest.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a convergent mixed-methods approach:

- Quantitative Analysis: A paired-samples t-test compared pre-post mental outlook scores, with Cohen's d for effect size.
- Qualitative Analysis: Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) identified recurring symbols and problem-solving pathways from the participants' own narratives and interpretations.
- Triangulation: Quantitative and qualitative datasets were integrated to provide a coherent understanding. Demographic and contextual variables were used to interpret individual outcomes, ensuring that the participants' subjective reports remained centrally grounded in their lived contexts.

Findings

Analysis of data from eleven participants revealed two foundational outcomes: first, the GD protocol successfully induced vivid waking dreams in all participants (100%), despite substantial diversity in demographics, religious backgrounds, and prior experience with mindfulness practices (which ranged from daily practice to infrequent engagement). Second, this single-session intervention was associated with significant positive outcomes for the majority. The mixed-methods results are presented below, beginning with quantitative changes, followed by the key therapeutic mechanisms identified through thematic analysis, and case-by-case triangulations.

Quantitative Outcomes: Significant Improvement in Mental Outlook and Stress

Statistical analysis of self-assessed mental outlook scores revealed a significant positive shift following the GD session. The pre-intervention average was 57.8 (SD = 17.7), which

increased to a post-intervention average of 78.9 (SD = 23.0). This represents a 36% mean improvement, which was statistically significant (p = .00067) with a large effect size (Cohen's d = 1.03).

This quantitative improvement was supported by other self-report metrics. Ten of the eleven participants (91%) reported a reduction in stress, with eight describing it as "definite" and two as "somewhat" reduced. Furthermore, the vast majority (91%) felt "definitely safe" during the experience, and all eleven reported that the protocol provided either "definite" (6 participants) or "somewhat" (5 participants) problem-solving insights.

A notable exception was Participant #5, whose mental outlook score decreased from 30 to 15. This outlier, who had the lowest baseline score, interpreted her dream of “running joyfully without pain” literally as a "harsh reminder" of her chronic pain, rather than symbolically. This contrasts sharply with Participant #11, who started with a similarly low baseline (31) but achieved a major improvement (76), underscoring that individual differences in symbolic processing significantly mediate outcomes.

Thematic Analysis: Core Therapeutic Mechanisms of Guided Dreaming

Reflexive thematic analysis of the participants' detailed narratives identified three primary, overlapping mechanisms through which the GD protocol facilitated problem-solving and psychological shift.

1. Symbolic Confrontation

This mechanism involved participants confronting their chosen problems through potent, self-generated metaphors, which created a psychologically safe space for engagement. Ten participants successfully reinterpreted challenges this way.

Participant #1 transformed her overwhelming job conflict into a manageable "underwater cliff," realizing, "It depends on how I view it."

Participant #8 processed trauma and grief through a vision of "rainbow-colored oil" that dissipated from her body, symbolizing emotional release.

Participant #10 confronted feelings of powerlessness by seeing a "world tree" in an octopus's eyes, which helped her discard limiting beliefs and affirm, "My beliefs are valid."

2. Embodied Cognition

GD facilitated insights through kinesthetic and somatic metaphors, providing an actionable, bodily-felt template for change.

Participant #11 transformed a feeling of being "stuck" into a kinesthetic insight of "feeling the water flowing through me rather than against me," which led to concrete plans to "recreate the feeling of ease."

Participant #6 healed childhood abandonment wounds through the tactile sensation of a "giant mauve octopus" giving her an "enormous hug," which translated to increased self-assurance at work.

Participant #3 managed diverticulitis by interpreting "defibrillator-like tentacles" from a jellyfish as a somatic signal to initiate emotion journaling.

3. Archetypal Transformation

The octopus guide emerged as a potent, cross-cultural archetype of adaptability and polymorphous intelligence. Eight dreams featured this imagery, with 73% of participants attributing their solutions to it.

Participant #7 dissolved business rigidity after a "purple, yellow, and orange octopus with black cartoon eyes" danced with her, teaching her "not to be afraid to play."

Participant #9 repaired marital distance by merging with his wife and a "light blue octopus," becoming "one body," which reinforced their spiritual bond.

Participant #4 experienced an intuitive rebirth, feeling "like a baby in utero" and interpreting the octopus's colors as a signal to "open intuition."

Please see Table 1 for a thematic analysis of all the cases with changes in subjective mental outlook.

Table 1

Thematic Analysis of Guided Dreaming Cases: Problems, Dream Content, and Outcomes

Case #	**Presenting Problem**	**Waking Dream Symbols & Narrative**	**Participant's Interpretation & Insight**	**Solution, Integration, Transformation**	**Δ Mental Outlook**
#1:	Job avoidance due to manager conflict	Cliff, late father smiling, red octopus, healing bubble	"I am supported no matter what"	Will confront manager	44 → 82 (+38)
#2:	Career direction uncertainty	Warm black space, weightlessness, endless void	"Endless possibilities"	Change job goal to "warmth and happiness"	70 → 96 (+26)
#3:	Illness (diverticulitis)	Opalized jellyfish with "defibrillator" tentacles, ocean	"Emotional release needed"	Will start emotion journaling	43 → 66 (+23)
#4:	Spiritual blockage in meditation	Bright colors (blue, green, red), baby in utero, ocean	"New intuitive beginning"	Switch meditation time to mornings	80 → 90 (+10)
#5:	Chronic pain and negative affect	Running joyfully without pain	"A harsh reminder that my life is painful"	No changes planned	30 → 15 (-15)
#6:	Workplace isolation, abandonment wounds	Giant mauve octopus, childhood community pool, hug	"Never abandoned"	Increased inner strength and assertiveness	75 → 85 (+10)

Case #	Presenting Problem	Waking Dream Symbols & Narrative	Participant's Interpretation & Insight	Solution, Integration, Transformation	Δ Mental Outlook
#7:	Business rigidity and obstacles	Friendly turtle, playful multi-colored cartoon octopus, dance, cocoon	"Playful foundation-building"	"Say yes more often and try new things"	65 → 85 (+20)
#8:	Trauma and grief processing	Waterfall cave, deceased cat, rainbow-colored oil, rose octopus	"Divine love healing me"	Continue to "purge" and release through GD	70 → 90 (+20)
#9:	Marital disconnection	Abu Dhabi beach, merged with light-blue octopus with wife	My wife and I "are one"	Will prioritize "shared relaxing experiences"	60 → 85 (+25)
#10:	Feelings of powerlessness, limiting beliefs	Dolphin, moonstone, supernova-colored octopus, world tree	"Release old beliefs"	"My beliefs are valid"	68 → 98 (+30)
#11:	Existential stagnation, powerlessness	Directing water flow, floating with current	"Stop fighting currents"	Plans to "recreate ease" in daily life	31 → 76 (+45)

Case-by-Case Triangulation

Participant #1: Confronting Workplace Conflict

A middle-aged, non-religious White woman with a college education rarely practiced mindfulness. Facing job avoidance due to manager conflicts, her waking dream featured an overwhelming underwater cliff: "When I looked to my right, I saw my late father smiling." A red octopus embraced her within a healing bubble, creating safety "like a baby in the womb." She interpreted this as unconditional support despite challenges, deciding to confront her manager rather than seek new employment. Her mental outlook surged from 44 to 82, demonstrating how symbolic reassurance enables assertive action.

Participant #2: Career Direction Clarity

A young spiritual White woman with a master's degree frequently practiced mindfulness. Uncertain about career paths, she experienced "a warm, cozy black space" inducing weightlessness and calm. She interpreted this endless void as representing creative freedom, reshaping her job search to prioritize opportunities evoking "warmth and happiness." Her outlook improved from 70 to 96, illustrating GD's efficacy for existential uncertainty through spatial metaphors.

Participant #3: Emotional Release for Physical Healing

A middle-aged, spiritual White woman with diverticulitis dreamed of "opalized jellyfish with defibrillator-like tentacles" delivering acupuncture-like sensations. She recognized this as emotional release therapy, initiating journaling to process "uncomfortable or shocking" feelings underlying physical symptoms. Despite a recent divorce, her outlook increased from 43 to 66, showing GD's mind-body integration potential.

Participant #4: Overcoming Meditation Challenges

A Christian White woman with a professional degree frequently meditated but struggled with sleepiness. She visualized "bright blues, greens, and reds" while feeling "like a baby in utero in the ocean." Interpreting colors as her octopus guide, she connected this to "opening intuition" and switched meditation to mornings. Her outlook rose from 80 to 90, confirming GD's utility for spiritual practices.

Participant #5: Literal Interpretation Blockade

An Asian spiritual woman with a college education sometimes meditated. Her chronic pain manifested as "running joyfully without pain"—a positive waking dream image she interpreted literally as "a harsh reminder that my life is painful" despite active movement being

an effective pain management strategy. With the cohort's lowest baseline outlook (30), her score decreased to 15. She reported: "Absolutely not" to making life changes, exemplifying how negative affect inhibits symbolic processing.

Participant #6: Healing Abandonment Wounds

A spiritual White female professional with a divorce history faced unsupportive coworkers. She returned to childhood's community pool where "a giant mauve octopus larger than the pool hugged me lovingly." This tactile reassurance helped reframe abandonment, increasing assertiveness. Her outlook improved from 75 to 85, demonstrating somatic healing of relational trauma.

Participant #7: Playful Business Innovation

A Black spiritual entrepreneur encountered business obstacles. After initial fear of diving deep, "a friendly turtle appeared," followed by a playful "purple, yellow, and orange octopus with cartoon eyes" that danced and morphed into a cocoon. She translated this to business openness: "Say yes more often and try new things," improving outlook from 65 to 85.

Participant #8: Processing Grief and Trauma

A spiritually-identified divorced woman processed trauma through an elaborate dream: Swimming through a waterfall cave with her deceased cat, encountering dolphins and whales, then cuddling "a large rose-colored octopus." Emotions released "like rainbow-colored oil dissipating into air," interpreted as divine guidance. Her outlook increased from 70 to 90, and she planned continued GD for emotional "purging."

Participant #9: Marital Reconnection

A Muslim Black man with a master's degree felt emotionally distant from his wife. On a UAE beach, they swam deep, merged with a light-blue octopus, becoming "one body,"

symbolizing their "unbreakable bond." He committed to prioritizing "shared relaxing experiences," improving outlook from 60 to 85 across cultural contexts.

Participant #10: Reclaiming Personal Power

A single spiritual mixed-ethnicity woman felt powerless. Guided by a dolphin to underwater ruins, she stood on a moonstone revealing "old belittling mindsets." A supernova-colored octopus absorbed her, showing a "world tree with busy realms" in its eyes. She discarded limiting beliefs, declaring: "My beliefs are valid," achieving a near-maximal outlook increase (68 to 98).

Participant #11: Breaking Free from Stagnation

A non-binary Humanist rarely practiced mindfulness. Feeling "stuck and powerless," they directed water flow: "Floating through rather than against currents." This kinesthetic metaphor inspired recreating "ease" in daily life, with outlook surging from 31 to 76 despite a low baseline—contrasting sharply with Participant #5's similar starting point.

Discussion

This mixed-methods pilot study provides preliminary evidence that the novel GD protocol effectively bridges a critical gap in dream theory and practice. The findings suggest that GD-induced waking dreams can harness the neurocognitive mechanisms of dreaming within a consciously accessible, waking state. However, these promising results must be interpreted in light of several limitations, including a small, self-selected sample, the single-session design, and the reliance on self-report measures. Despite these constraints, which are common in pioneering phenomenological research, the strategic use of methodological triangulation and the demographic heterogeneity of the sample provide a robust foundation for identifying core therapeutic mechanisms and generating testable hypotheses for future research.

Synthesizing Continuity and Problem-Solving in a Waking State

The study offers robust support for the extension of the continuity hypothesis (Roesler, 2018) to waking dreams. The GD protocol successfully acted as a catalyst, transforming the specific waking-life concerns of a demographically diverse cohort into a rich mosaic of personalized symbolic content. This finding validates the protocol's design and aligns with the neurocognitive premise of shared neural substrates between waking thought and dreaming (Nir & Tononi, 2010). The phenomenological reports of dream-like experiences are corroborated by behavioral observations during the sessions, including REM-like eye movements and metacognitive responsiveness to guidance, suggesting a potentially unique integration of dreaming and waking neurophysiology.

Crucially, this study demonstrates that such continuity can be therapeutically directed. While sleeping dreams generate potential solutions through hyper-associative cognition (Walker et al., 2002), their utility is often limited by poor recall and the need for post-dream interpretation (Domhoff, 2004). GD overcomes this limitation by maintaining a thread of metacognitive awareness, allowing participants to engage with symbolic material in real-time. The significant quantitative improvements in mental outlook and stress, directly supported by the qualitative narratives of insight and planned changes, provide compelling evidence for a functional problem-solving capacity within this waking-dream state. Participant #11’s kinesthetic insight to "flow with the current," which led to actionable plans, exemplifies this synthesis: a dream-like, hyper-associative metaphor generated a solution that was immediately understood and adopted by the waking mind.

Therapeutic Mechanisms and the Transcendent Function

The three core mechanisms identified—Symbolic Confrontation, Embodied Cognition, and Archetypal Transformation—operate synergistically within the GD framework, which is fundamentally an operationalization of Jung's active imagination. The protocol creates the liminal space necessary for the transcendent function to operate, mediating between the conscious problem and the unconscious mind.

The octopus archetype emerged as a potent embodiment of this function. Its polymorphous nature and intelligent adaptability served as a modern cross-cultural symbol for cognitive flexibility and the integration of disparate psychic elements. For instance, Participant #7's rigid business mindset was dissolved not through analysis, but through a playful dance with a cartoonish octopus—a clear instance of the transcendent function bypassing ego defenses through symbolic engagement. Similarly, the mechanism of Embodied Cognition, as seen in Participant #6's healing "hug," provided a somatic blueprint for change, enabling insights to be felt and integrated physically, not just understood intellectually.

The case of Participant #5 is instructive, serving as a boundary condition for the protocol's efficacy. Her literal interpretation of a positive dream image and subsequent decline in outlook highlights that the therapeutic effect is not inherent in the imagery itself, but in the individual's capacity for symbolic engagement. This underscores the importance of assessing symbolic literacy in future applications.

The contrasting cases of Participants #2 and #5 provide a powerful illustration of how the therapeutic efficacy of Guided Dreaming is determined not by the objective content of the dream, but by the subjective process of meaning-making. One might superficially judge Participant #2's "warm, cozy black space" as abstract or meaningless, while viewing Participant #5's "running

joyfully without pain" as highly continuous and positive. Yet, their outcomes were diametrically opposed. Participant #2 engaged in active symbolic interpretation, transforming an amorphous void into a metaphor for "endless possibilities" and deriving a concrete new strategy for her job search. In stark contrast, Participant #5, despite a dream image that directly embodied her deepest wish, interpreted it literally as a "harsh reminder" of her inadequacy. This comparison underscores a core principle: the continuity hypothesis describes the incorporation of waking material, but the transformation of that material into a solution is an act of symbolic literacy and conscious reframing. The dream does not solve the problem; it provides the symbolic raw material. The dreamer, through their interpretive framework, determines whether that material becomes a cornerstone for building a solution or a weapon for self-critique. This finding strongly supports the Adlerian and phenomenological view that the dreamer's lifestyle and attitude are paramount in determining a dream's functional outcome (Bird, 2005).

Broader Societal Implications: Beyond Clinical Applications

The Guided Dreaming protocol, with its structured progression of intention-setting (separation), symbolic immersion (liminality), and communal reflection (re-aggregation), functions as a potent modern ritual, creating a contained liminal space for transformation as described in anthropological models of ritual (Turner, 1969). This accessible format provides a vital pathway for developing symbolic literacy—the capacity to understand, generate, and derive meaning from metaphor. In an era often characterized by literal-mindedness and digital overload, this ritualistic container addresses a profound need for experiential meaning-making and connection to the inner life. Its implications extend far beyond the clinic:

- In Educational Settings: GD can be systematically integrated to cultivate the core cognitive skills demanded by the twenty-first century. By guiding students to engage with their internal

metaphorical world, the protocol directly trains creative problem-solving and divergent thinking. A student struggling with a physics concept might, through a waking dream, discover a new understanding of gravity by embodying a planet orbiting a sun. This moves learning beyond rote memorization to embodied, personal insight, fostering a more flexible and innovative mindset.

- Within Organizations: The protocol offers a powerful antidote to collective cognitive fixedness and groupthink. In a corporate retreat setting, a team facing a strategic stalemate could use GD to bypass defensive, linear debate. By individually exploring the problem as a shared metaphor (e.g., a "stuck ship" or a "barren landscape") and then sharing these narratives, the team accesses a deeper, more intuitive layer of intelligence. This shared, non-linear exploration can unearth novel solutions, rebuild trust, and foster a culture of psychological safety and innovation.
- For Community Building: Perhaps most profoundly, the group-based nature of GD transforms personal insight into a process of collective visioning. As individuals share their unique symbolic journeys within a safe, ethical container, they bear witness to the universal human themes within personal struggles. This practice of deep, empathetic listening fosters a powerful sense of shared understanding and belonging. In a world grappling with social isolation and fragmented discourse, GD offers a structured process for building relational resilience and weaving a fabric of communal meaning, one shared story at a time.

By formalizing access to the transformative potential of the inner world, GD provides a scalable template for cultivating the very psychological skills—symbolic literacy, emotional-regulation, and empathetic connection—that are essential for human flourishing in an increasingly complex world.

Future Directions

The limitations of this pilot study provide a clear roadmap for future research. Subsequent studies should employ randomized controlled trials (RCTs) with active control conditions and larger samples. Longitudinal designs are essential to assess the persistence of outcomes, and multimethod assessment integrating psychometric scales, behavioral measures, and the neurophysiological investigations previously hypothesized is a critical next step. Research should also explore the specific efficacy of GD in the societal domains of education, organizational innovation, and community cohesion.

The GD protocol establishes a reliable and safe pathway to access and study the waking dream state. Unlike lucid dreaming, which requires extensive personal training or psychotropic approaches, GD utilizes a structured, guided induction that is immediately effective without any prior practice or pharmacological intervention. Suitable for groups and conducted within a clear ethical framework that prioritizes participant agency and psychological safety, the protocol provides a consistent and controllable container for inducing vivid, dream-like experiences, making it an exceptionally viable tool for both therapeutic application and rigorous consciousness research.

Conclusion

This investigation establishes Guided Dreaming as a promising, evidence-informed protocol that leverages the natural, problem-solving functions of the dreaming mind within a safe, structured waking experience. Despite the acknowledged limitations of this pilot study, the significant improvements in mental outlook and the rich phenomenological data provide compelling proof of concept. By creating a neurocognitively plausible bridge between waking and dreaming states, GD enables individuals to confront life challenges through symbolic

engagement, embodied cognition, and archetypal transformation. Its potential impact, however, reaches far beyond the clinician's office. As a tool that cultivates the very cognitive capacities—creativity, adaptability, and empathetic understanding—most needed in our complex world, Guided Dreaming offers a valuable pathway not only for fostering individual psychological resilience but also for inspiring innovation, empathy, and collaboration in our classrooms, workplaces, and communities.

Data Availability Statement

The de-identified quantitative and qualitative data (participant survey responses) generated and analyzed during this pilot study are available in the appendix of the author's master's thesis, hosted on the ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global database:

Tang, B. L. (2024). Efficacy of Guided Dreaming in stress reduction and problem solving: Eleven mixed-method case studies [Master's thesis, Adler University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. https://www.proquest.com/docview/3223107700

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