

# Learning a New Way To Think

Dreams are a thought-style we have yet to recognize. They're a part of our thinking process we have not yet learned to play a conscious role.

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*“Logic: The art of thinking and reasoning in strict accordance with the limitations and incapacities of the human misunderstanding.” — Ambrose Bierce*

## The Dream Fragments Book

The flu has pulled the plug on my output this week, but I have been able to publish all versions of *Dream Fragments*, which is a shorter book of essays on dreams. You can now order the [paperback](#), [hardcover](#), and [digital](#) editions on Amazon. The audiobook version is in review and I hope it will appear on [Audible.com](http://Audible.com) by the end of next week (Feb. 21, 2026).

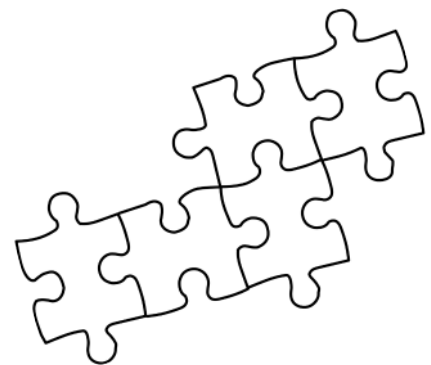
While narrating the book, I invented a graphic to explain how dreaming is its own form of thinking, which I call associative thinking. I present that explanation here, but the idea was too late to include in the *Dream Fragments* book.

As I moved on to narrate the *Dream Yourself Into Being* book, I found a chapter that repeated what I discussed in *Dream Fragments*. Removing it left a hole which I've now filled with the new explanation given here. I can now start narrating this second book.

## Rational Thinking

To understand what dreams do that's unique to dreaming, consider the kinds of thinking that we employ in our normal, waking state. Our primary, intentional forms of waking thought are rational and emotional. Rational is reason based, which means it proceeds by connecting reasons. It is reasonable only in its structure, as it's rarely reasonable in any formal sense. We use logic, but we're not particularly logical. Just because we make deductions doesn't make our deduction right or even plausible.

I picture rational thought as connecting reasons, and I picture reasons as jigsaw puzzle pieces. Each of these is an idea, and we assemble ideas that fit together into trains of thought. Reasonable thinking, pictured roughly in this way, is a chain of jigsaw puzzle pieces that move in some direction. These trains of thought, or lines of reasoning, don't proceed in straight lines, but they do take us from one set of ideas to another. And while they are not linear, they do avoid looping on themselves. At least we hope so.



Each of our rational thoughts is one of these jigsaw pieces, and we connect one with another. We believe our ideas objectively connect. Where “connect” means we think the two are connected in some logically, reasonably, functionally, or natural way.

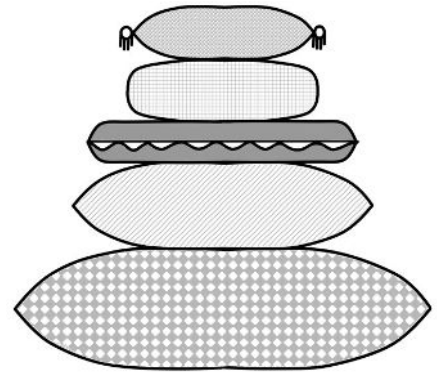
What's important is that we think the thoughts are objectively connected. In truth, they rarely are, and even when they are, we don't have any deep understanding of the connection. As far as our thoughts go, all of our chains of reasoning are subjective and imaginary.

# Emotional Thinking

Emotional thinking is like a stack of pillows. Each pillow is an emotional attitude or conclusion providing a kind of comfort. None designed for the same purpose or to the same specifications. We create a foundation with the big emotions, and we stack our smaller feelings on top. We can even use the balance of the stack as a metaphor for the overall balance of our feelings. Pillows don't make stable stacks, but we can feel that some feelings justify others.

We often enlist reasons to justify our emotions, or to justify the way we stack our feeling. Our explanations can be detailed and historical, or cursory and incidental, but we usually have some story that we tell ourselves. Much of our social discourse centers around our various explanations about how we feel.

It is an ironic truth that our feelings precede our reasons. We do not feel one way or another "because" of any reasons that we know, but we come up with reasons once we know how we feel. This is true of almost all our thoughts, and certainly our judgements and self-criticisms.



Feelings are not things you argue your way to having. They arise from perceptions not deductions. If we didn't have preexisting feelings, then we would not have the arguments that justify them.

Some physical actions might be an exception. If we've gotten lost because we didn't follow the right path, then we might feel ourselves to be stupid, so that our mental actions precede our emotional feelings. But even this is not so clear since feeling stupid is not a logical consequence of getting lost, it's something you have to create in addition to it.

Feelings are always subjective, and subjective things don't have objective origins. Even the feeling of pain that comes from hurting yourself emerges from consciousness, not inexorably from physics. There are plenty of ambiguous cases, but most of the time our reasons for our feelings are based on other feelings, all of which we've put together in our own personal ways.

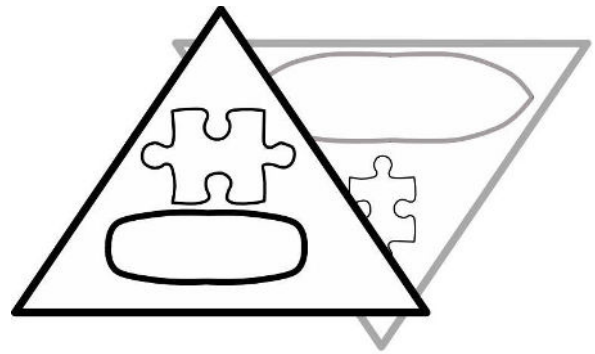
Of course, this is how we want it to be. We want our feelings to be our choice, just as we want freedom in all our feelings. This is very much the choice between free will and determinism. You may argue that

all things are determined, based on physics or chemistry, but short of broken bones and broken hearts you'll feel that it's you who decides how you feel.

## Associative Thinking

Associative thinking is where we relate different structures that we've created from our ideas and emotions. You might say it's a two-stage process of first creating ideational and emotional structures, and then comparing them. But to be honest, we create idea and emotion structures whenever we have ideas or emotions. The two always arise together and they're always embedded in some structure.

No one has ideas without emotions, or emotions without ideas, and they always appear in some context. Let's call these contexts "situations," so that we can go right to the next step: the associations we draw between these situations.



In this picture, I've put a pillow and a jigsaw piece inside the foreground triangle. This situation represents some conclusion, projection, or perception we've created. It contains ideas and emotions. Behind it is a similar triangular situation; similar in general but different in detail.

Dreams do this exclusively. We find ourselves in these situations built of ideas, feelings, and perceptions all of which we've had before, but never in exactly the combinations that appear in our dreams.

These situations are usually static. We feel time passing in the dream, and we move through the scene, but the scene has no organic evolution. At some point, it simply fades into another situation, which is the result of a different situation we have created. All of these dream situations strongly resonate with situations in waking life. We resonate so strongly with them, that we're emotionally shaken when we remember them, and often wish we hadn't remembered them at all.

# The Associative Thinking Process

Creating associated situations is not recognized as a distinct thinking processes, but based on how it proceeds in our dreams, I think it is. While it's neither intellectual nor emotional, it results in more impactful imaginary structures than what our other thought processes produce.

As disturbing as dreams can be, and as powerless as we feel in and because of them, I feel we must have them if we're to exercise responsible free will. Someone has got to fully experience how things could go otherwise if we're to be anything but uninvolved "Yes People" in the lives we lead.

We're also building these patterns while we're awake, we just can't allow ourselves to be so completely immersed in them or upset by them. It is our creation of associative thoughts that creates familiar ties in the forecasting of potential situations.

In our waking-life situations, we think we have free will, but we certainly don't have anything like the free will we have in dreams. We are severely limited by our skills, aptitudes, identities, obligations, beliefs, and desires. In contrast, in a dream it's "open season" on all of these!

In most dreams we feel a complete lack of agency. For the most part, we don't even remember what we've produced. This need not be the case.

There are cases where we imagine how things will proceed. We are careful when we do this because the moods that result deeply affect us. When we obsess or catastrophize, we're creating negative situations that can take over our waking mood. These run-a-way thoughts are often difficult to overcome. Similarly, manic constructions can lead to delusional situations.

There is clearly a skill at work, and one in which we are generally unpracticed. We adopt an attitude of disengagement, letting "reality" create situations that combine our ideas and emotions. This leads to compliance but not control. If you want control, then you will have to become consciously involved in the dream-making process.

## **Building Situations In Reality**

Consciously building situations is the writing of stories for yourself. It's not hard if you know where to start, how far to take it, and what to do with what you create. At the simplest level, just explore the schedule for the day and imagine events that have not happened.

You will want to go beyond this, but this is a start. You'll encounter blocks in imagining things different from what you assume them to be. You can always fall back on what's predictable and plain.

Just as extending your reasonable understanding requires new ideas, and new attitudes requires new feelings, new situations will require going beyond old limits. The best way I find is to meditate on thoughts and feelings without practical constraint. Clear your mind.

You'll need to be in a creative mode, and you may have a preferred creative mode: visual, kinesthetic, verbal, or musical. Don't get hung up on creating situations that read like dreams or screen-plays. Let creativity be your primary objective. It's the inspiration that takes you forward, not the mechanics of thought or feeling. From that will hang the fruits of more pertinent, personal situations.

## **Building Situations In Dreams**

As you begin to remember your dreams, they're a another place you can start. They almost demand you rewrite the situation, and they're easy to improve. Just add comfort. Doing this while you're still dreaming is difficult, but if you keep the idea in mind, then it's likely that some situations will arise, not often or continuously, but maybe once a week.

You can learn to exert your free will in a dream to any degree, but if you are careless you'll destroy the dream. Dream re-fabrication is a subtle skill. To become suddenly lucid is to be a bull in a china shop, and you'll likely shatter the whole thing.

In waking life you know how to hold it together and no one needs to tell you not to jump off a cliff, but when you're lucid in a dream it's up to you to know what you can and cannot do without destroying the situation. It is yet another irony of dream lucidity that once you become aware that you have complete free-will, you have to know that you cannot use it. Just as you would not murder anyone who offends you in waking life and expect things to improve, you cannot do this in a dream.

The effective limits to your free will in a dream are not in the reality structures you create, but in your associative thoughts. The key here is the word “effective.” You certainly can murder every annoying person in your dream, but this will create ineffective associations.

It is ultimately yourself for whom your effective free will applies. You don’t want to create dream situations in which your adversaries, unwilling partners, and unwitting allies behave differently because you will not be able to realize these in waking life.

You want to create dream situations in which you behave differently and the consequences of this lead to different situations. You can do in waking life. You’ll find it much easier to change your behavior in a dream than in reality, and once you’ve done it—and felt the change in your bones—it will be easier to perform in waking life.

Associative thinking will be the focus of my course on dream therapy. **[Learn more here.](#)**