

What Happens in a Near-Death Experience?

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Summary

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are a common and universal experience for the human race. Defined as “reported memories of profound psychological events with certain common paranormal, transcendental, and mystical features that occurred during a special state of consciousness associated with an episode of actual or threatened physical, psychological, emotional, or spiritual death and that were followed by certain common aftereffects,” NDEs have existed throughout history and across cultures. Because of life saving medical techniques and technology, the numbers and frequency of persons having had an NDE increased, enabling researchers to study them during the latter half of the 20th century.

Valid scientific studies have been done using qualitative, retrospective and prospective approaches. These studies showed that NDEs are a robust phenomenon that shows very consistent characteristics and individualized particulars. NDEs unfold in discrete stages containing distinctive elements. The first stage might begin with hearing one’s self pronounced dead, followed by a distinctive noise and then a sense of peace, quiet and well being that is often ineffable. Next NDErs experience a separation from the physical body where they discover that their non-physical body has capabilities different than the physical. Third, they enter the darkness, where they might encounter a tunnel through which they travel to the Light. Upon leaving the tunnel, they enter into the Light and discover a place not of this world. They might meet deceased relatives and a Being of Light that assists them in reviewing their life. The NDE concludes with the NDEr encountering a border where a decision is made to return to the physical.

NDEs have a different qualitative nature than dreams or other altered states of consciousness in that they are “very vivid.”

In general, neither demographic nor psychographic factors predispose a person to have an NDE. The same is true of medical circumstances surrounding their physical crisis. NDEs seem to occur randomly across the population.

NDE are confirmed by veridical perceptions where experiencers gain knowledge unavailable to them except by abilities gained during an NDE. Prospective studies also have shown that NDEs occur after the brain has ceased functioning, suggesting that the brain may not be the repository of consciousness and memory.

Pleasurable Western Adult NDEs: Circumstances and Contents

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Building Global Understanding of Near-Death Experiences

The University of Texas
MD Anderson Cancer Center:
Making Cancer History

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Resources Used

- 41 studies
- Peer-reviewed and refereed journals between 1975 and 2005
- US (33 studies) & six Western countries
- Small number of books & 1 dissertation
- 3356 NDErs

Types of studies

- 32 Retrospective
 - “Convenience samples”
 - Self-identified & volunteered to be in study
 - Shortcomings: sampling, supporting data & overlooking important groups
- 9 Prospective
 - Chosen location (cardiac care unit)
 - Gather everyone’s information before NDE
 - All interviewed immediately after event

Definition of Near-Death Experiences

- “reported memories of profound psychological events with certain common
 - paranormal,
 - transcendental,
 - and mystical featuresthat occurred during a special state of consciousness associated with an episode of actual or threatened
 - physical,
 - psychological,
 - emotional,
 - or spiritual deathand that were followed by certain common aftereffects.”
(Holden, et al.)

Lots of Ways to Slice an NDE

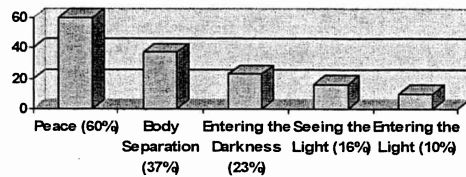
- Raymond Moody, 1975 11 elements
- Kenneth Ring, 1980 5 stages
- Michael Sabom, 1982 3 types
- Bruce Greyson, 1983 4 components
- plus others...

Caution

- From Raymond Moody:
 - No one experiences all the elements of an NDE
 - No two NDEs are identical
 - The sequence is not universal
 - Each case is unique

5 Stages of an NDE

(Ring)



Stage I: Peace

- 60% of Ring's sample reported a sense of
 - absolute peace,
 - calm
 - contentment
- Most participants found it difficult to describe "ineffable"
- Pain from physical body drops away
 - no fear
 - relaxed
 - pleasant, happy, joy, quiet and warm
- This stage was considered extremely positive,
 - 95% using positive terms.
 - Of the remaining 5%, most negative feelings were transient.

Stage I: quotes

- "I was in a foam rubber canoe or raft, sitting in a river of milk or cream. Lying there, everything was white. It was very peaceful. To get to the other side, I just had to shove off the shore just by a little bit. It would easily float right over there."
- "I know that my description lacks, but it held incredible peace. Incredible. I've experienced nothing like it before or since." --*Zachary*

State II: Body Separation

- 37% reached this stage.
- Involved a sense of detachment from one's physical body.
 - floating above their physical body
 - seemed very normal at the time
- Aware of acute hearing and remembered conversations clearly.
- Visual perception was clear and very brightly illuminated.
 - spanned both inside the room and outside the initial space
 - most reported no sense of a physical bodily connection
 - no awareness of that body
 - Most described a mind state of observer-like detachment
 - feeling that "all this is perfectly natural"
- Most were unaware or dimly aware of a non-physical body.
 - Can exist in a range of states from exact duplicate, to an amorphous blob, to mind only
 - Non-physical body has different capabilities than physical—"natural"

Stage II: quotes

"[Being a leaf felt] lacey. It felt energetic. You could feel energy moving through. I could see it from the bottom and I could see it from the top. It was really weird. I could see it and be it and feel it. I mean there were so many different things going on. I could see my teacher touching my body, I could feel her touching my body and yet I was up above the trees and yet I felt like I *was* the trees. It was all happening all at the same time and yet separate. It's so confusing to me as I voice it, but it was an excellent experience." --*Julia*

Stage III: Entering Darkness

- 23% of core experiencers entered this stage
- Transition between the physical and what lies beyond in the non-physical
- Reported as:
 - completely black or dark
 - soft, velvety texture
 - very peaceful
 - without dimension.

Stage III: quote

- "I found myself in a world of black and it was wonderful. I felt held, cared for, loved and appreciated for who I was and what I'd gone through in my life. I felt like I was in the womb of God."

-Joan

Stage III: Entering Darkness

- NDErs may "hang out" in the deep void, not moving anywhere, or
- A dark tunnel may exist in this space.
 - Drawn to move through this tunnel to the light at the end
 - Travel is often fast
 - Except for return NDErs

Stage III: Entering a different dimension

- During Out of Body Experiences (OBEs), consciousness was still experienced in the physical realm.
 - transition out of the physical universe
 - non-physical dimension is outside of time and space
 - unity universe

Stage III: quotes

- Dolley: "all wrapped up in one"
- Abigail: "connected, whole, oneness"
- Abigail: "everywhere, all places, all times"
- Julia: "pervasive"
- Julia: "completeness, wholeness, oneness"
- William: "limitless"
- Quincy: "we are little parts of the whole"
- George: "interconnected"
- Martha: "everything and everyone is part of everything else"
- Martha: "What we do affects not only ourselves, but also everything in the universe."

Stage IV: Seeing the Light

- 16% of experiencers had an experience with a brilliant golden Light.
- This Light was
 - bright, but never hurt the eyes.
 - very restful
 - comforting
 - ineffable beauty
- Some felt lovingly enveloped by the Light
- Virtually all felt drawn to it.
- For the religious, this effulgent Light was interpreted as the visual manifestation of God.

Stage IV: quotes

"When you get in the Light, that's heaven. That's the most love and peace and joy and hope and tenderness and power and freedom and happiness. Every word that we have for something good--times billions. We don't have words for it. It's safe, it's perfect, it's heaven."

—Thomas

"I asked if God was the Light, was told that the Light is what happens when God breathes. I found myself standing the breath of God."

—Pam Reynolds

Stage V: Entering the Light

- 10% of Ring's participants reached this stage
- Each sensed being in another world
 - beauty that transcended the normal confines of nature
 - Colors were more vivid and real
 - Some colors didn't even exist in the physical world
- NDErs found themselves in
 - a beautiful meadow or park
 - unusual structures not found in the physical world
 - landscape of beautiful flowers and lovely music.
- Greeted by deceased
 - friends
 - relatives
 - persons unknown (at the time)
 - sometimes pets.

Stage V: Entering the Light

- Meeting with a Being of Light
 - Exudes love and warmth, has divine qualities
 - Communication is direct, unimpeded thought-transfer
 - Past life review (and preview)
 - Re-experience life in the physical from multiple perspectives
 - Helped them to understand their experiences (not judged)
 - Loved them through the experience
- Coming upon a border
 - Decision to return to the physical
 - If crossed, there was no return
- The return
 - Most did not stay in this world for long—having been given "just a peek."
 - express resentment at having been brought back.
 - Most seemed reluctant, even unwilling, to return to the world of the physical.

Stage V: quote

- "I felt more alive than I ever felt in my whole life. I didn't feel dead at all. The sensation, the insight (that's the thing that really blew me away), all of a sudden I had a sense of understanding about everything. Everything was clear. There were really no more questions. I could have described to you the interaction of every kind of chemical, as an example. It's kind of hard to give you the concept of this sort of thing. Now when I get into it, the questions start coming in. The rational mind starts to interfere. It's more profound than the collective unconscious. What you read about, the experiences and all that good stuff, much more profound. There was a point where I was the most brilliant person that ever existed. I could have told you how anything worked. It was just like the whole world, everything, every mystery of life was exposed." --*Abigail*

How common are NDEs in surveys, in retrospective studies and in prospective studies ? (1)

Surveys:

1. USA 1982 (Gallup): 5% of general population
2. Germany 1999: 4.2% of general population

More than 10 million persons in the USA could have had an NDE!

How common are NDEs in surveys, in retrospective studies and in prospective studies ? (2)

Retrospective studies 1982- 1996

(Ring, Sabom, Thomas, Picciolla): 27% - 40%.

3 Prospective studies in 523 survivors cardiac arrest

Dutch study (2001) : 344 patients

18% NDE : 12% NDE score 6 or higher, 6% score 1-5

American study (2003): 116 patients

15.5 % NDE: 9.5% NDE score 6 or higher, 6% score 1-5

English study (2001) : 63 patients

11% NDE : 6.3% NDE score 6 or higher, 4.8% score 1-5

Influence of Age

Significant more frequent NDE in younger patients:

1. Retrospective studies:

- Morse (children) 85 %
- Ring (mean age 37 years) 48 %
- Sabom (mean age 49 years) 43 %

Mean age during NDE in other retrospective studies:

32 yrs (Greyson), 29 yrs (Owen), 22 yrs (Schmied)

2. Prospective studies (mean age survivors 63 years!)

Frequency NDE: 11% - 18 %

N.B. Deeper NDE reported at younger age and by women!

NDEs not remembered?

Good short-term memory seems to be essential to remember an NDE.

But the (scientific) question is: "Is the NDE not **remembered** or not **experienced**?"

Especially NDEs at **very young age** are not always remembered at adult age.

Does it matter who you are?

No influence on reporting NDE by:
(demographic factors)

Gender, social class, area of residence, size of home community, marital status, race, religious affiliation, education, occupation, site of accident, foreknowledge of NDE, fear of death before cardiac arrest, or other psychological or psychiatric factors.

Under what circumstances do NDEs occur?

No influence of *physiological* factors: Duration of cardiac arrest, duration of comatose state, need for intubation in complicated CPR, induced cardiac arrest, method of CPR, administered drugs, or **severity of underlying disease**.

With our current medical and scientific concepts it seems impossible to explain all aspects of NDE

Circumstances during which NDEs are reported

Cardiac arrest (clinical death), shock after loss of blood or sepsis, coma following 1. accidents 2. infection 3. diabetes or 4. intracerebral haemorrhage, near-drowning (children!), asphyxia, electrocution, auto-intoxication (suicide attempt), but also in diseases not immediately life-threatening, in depression, in existential crises, without any cause during relaxation, isolation or meditation, or in "fear-death" situations

Out of Body Experience (OBE) (veridical perceptions!)

Scientifically important, because the reported perceptions and the precise moment the OBE occurred can be verified by doctors, nurses and relatives.

an OBE is

1. no hallucination (= a perception that has no basis in "reality")
2. no delusion (= an incorrect assessment of a correct perception)
3. no illusion (= a misapprehensive or misleading image)

Summary: in survivors of cardiac arrest (during loss of brain function)

- The feeling of being out-of-the body
- Clear (enhanced) consciousness
- Self-identity, with emotions
- Cognition, with associative thoughts
- Perception (non-sensory): "seeing", "hearing"
- Memories (also preservation of all thoughts!)
- Consciousness is in a dimension without time and space (all past and future available)
- Conscious return in the body

Conclusions

1. Near-death Experiences are a common and universal experience for the human race.
2. The content of an NDE and the effects on patients seem similar worldwide, across all cultures and all times.
3. Except age, neither demographic, psychographic or medical circumstances predispose a person to report an NDE.

(1) Some questions for future research in cardiac arrest patients:

- 1 Reality OBE perceptions during NDE (veridical perception):
Crucial issue with respect to the *relationship* between consciousness and the brain, and the *moment* OBE occurs.
- 2 Is there a **correlation** to be found between quantitative EEG changes and NDE and/or OBE during cardiac arrest?
(Measurement and registration of **brain function** during NDE).
- 3 Is there a kind of **preposition** to report an NDE? (Careful registration of objective medical, pharmacological, psychological and demographic factors, **before** the cardiac arrest).

(2) Some questions for future research in cardiac arrest patients:

- 4 Is there a kind of preposition to report an NDE, and have (some of) these factors **changed** as a result of an NDE? (Comparison of **pre- and post NDE changes** in *psychological, physiological* (changes in the endocrine and immune system, functional changes of DNA), and *neurophysiologic* factors (fMRI, PET, and quant. EEG).
- 5 What **physiological** changes might explain the **long-lasting psychological** and other effects like enhanced intuition? (Comparison physiologic, neurophysiologic (fMRI, PET, and quant. EEG) and functional DNA changes, with psychological (consciousness) and **transformative changes** like enhanced intuition in a longitudinal study.

Ethical and practical relevance to different health care settings

1. Coronary Care Unit :
NDE during cardiac arrest, shock, dying
2. Intensive Care Unit :
Consciousness experienced during coma
3. Terminal and Palliative Care:
Reducing patient's fear of death
4. Psychiatry: Reducing likelihood of suicide