

Bereaved individuals have reported finding peace and comfort from learning certain details about near-death experiences (NDEs) and related experiences. Often those experiencing grief and loss are searching for answers to questions:

- ◆ Where is my loved one?
- ◆ Will I ever see him/her again?
- ◆ Did my loved one suffer at the time of the accident, heart attack, or illness that resulted in their death?
- ◆ How can I make meaning of this loss?

### **How can knowing about NDEs help me in my grief process?**

**Insight gained from learning about an NDE has impacted the grief process for some people who have noted that:**

- ◆ NDErs reveal that “the moment of death was not painful.” Many people who have had a close brush with physical death (clinical death—no breathing and/or heartbeat) assumed that they would suffocate or feel intense pain at the time of death. Surprisingly, they report that there was no physical distress of any kind. Instead, they had a floating, peaceful, euphoric experience.
- ◆ Beyond the moment of death, many NDErs report entering a brilliant light that is actually an all-knowing, all loving being. They describe entering that light as “coming HOME”—implying that they experienced a sense of familiarity and total comfort.
- ◆ For the above two reasons (and others), most people who have had NDEs no longer fear death or, at least, have significantly reduced anxiety about death. They say that, because of their NDEs, they now know what happens in death, and they have nothing to fear.
- ◆ NDErs often say they encountered deceased loved ones at one or more times during the experience. They report that these reunions were joyous, and that the loved one was in a state of complete health and well being.
- ◆ NDErs sometimes have reported that during their NDE, they encountered deceased relatives whom they had never met. Later, living family members may identify these relatives, and photos may confirm that identification. These kinds of experiences are suggestive of immortality.

- ◆ Some NDErs report being “sent back,” some note they “chose to come back,” still others explain they were just suddenly “back in the body.” This might imply to the bereaved that the person who “did not come back” found that it was their time to die.
- ◆ NDErs sometimes have reported that during their experience they saw children waiting to be born. In some cases, they later recognized these children when they actually were born. Such experiences can comfort the bereaved by affirming the continuity of life that includes the time before birth and the time after death.

### **What about Hell? Is the deceased being “punished” for their “sins”?**

**Although NDErs sometimes report distressing experiences involving feelings of powerlessness, isolation, torment, or worthlessness, such reports are much less frequent than reports of pleasurable NDEs. These points are probably most relevant to people experiencing grief and loss:**

- ◆ During a predominantly pleasurable NDE, usually while in the light, the NDEr may experience a “life review.” In this review, the NDEr typically re-views (sees again) and re-experiences every moment of his/her life. At the same time, the NDEr fully experiences being every other person with whom the NDEr interacted. The NDEr knows what it was to be on the receiving end of his/her own actions—including those that caused others pain. At this time, the NDEr usually reports feeling profound remorse, along with extreme regret that the harm cannot be undone. At the same time, the NDEr typically reports feeling consistent unconditional love from the light who communicates that the NDEr was “still learning” how to be a more loving person—what NDErs tend to say is the purpose of life.
- ◆ Some people report having had a mostly distressing experience involving overriding feelings of terror, isolation, and/or torment. Even though the experience itself was unpleasant at the time, most distressing NDEs, like more pleasurable NDEs, led experiencers to report that the NDE transformed their lives and values in very constructive ways. Typically, people with distressing NDEs ultimately express appreciation for having had the experience.

- ◆ It can also be helpful to note that a psychospiritual “descent into hell” has been the experience of saints and sages throughout history and across cultures. Every world religion has its mystics who seek ultimate wisdom. Current research also has explored the realms of altered states of consciousness. It can be comforting to know that the evidence from both the mystics and the researchers indicates that, whatever the experiences along the way, the ultimate condition of consciousness is one of peace.

### **What do experiences of Nearing Death Awareness and After Death Communication have to do with my grief and loss?**

**These experiences imply not only the ongoing survival of a loved one, but also their connection to, concern for, and even protection of those still in earthly existence.**

- ◆ In nearing death awareness, dying people commonly are aware of the presence of deceased loved ones who are there to reassure them. While awake and alert, they often converse with the deceased. These experiences differ from hallucinations: Whereas someone hallucinating is out of touch with the surrounding environment and people, the dying person experiencing nearing death awareness remains in touch with ordinary “reality” as well as an alternate “reality.”
- ◆ In after death communication, a living person experiences the presence of a deceased person. The experience of the deceased person’s presence can range from a vague but definite feeling, to a distinctive smell associated with the deceased, to hearing the deceased person’s voice, to seeing all or part of the deceased person, either vaguely or extremely clearly. They may also experience the presence of the deceased loved one symbolically through such common signs as butterflies, rainbows, birds and other animals, flowers, and through inanimate objects such as pictures. It is common for the bereaved to experience the presence of loved ones for the first year or so after their death—and this communication may occur throughout a lifetime, especially at times when it would be most helpful. In fact, people have reported being warned of impending danger by deceased loved ones, even after those loved ones have been dead for several years.

## What meaning can I make of my loss, based on near-death and related experiences?

**From near-death and related experiences, a bereaved person can find implications that the deceased did not suffer at the time of death, that he/she may continue to exist healthfully in some other form and dimension, that contact might occur between the deceased and the bereaved person, and that a reunion might await the deceased and the bereaved. At the same time, a very strong implication is that each person's life has a purpose, and there are probably reasons beyond our understanding as to why some people die from earthly existence while others are left to continue on in that existence. As a group, NDErs would tend to say that, by learning to endure the (apparently) temporary separation from those we love who have gone ahead into "death," we enable ourselves to fulfill the purpose of our own earthly existence: to continue our own process of psychospiritual development. Knowledge of near-death experiences cannot take away all the hurt and pain associated with a loved one's death, but it can provide some comfort and can help a grieving person endure the loss.**

### Suggested Resources

- Callanan, M., & Kelley, P. (1992). *Final gifts*. New York: Bantam.
- Guggenheim, W., & Guggenheim, J. (1995). *Hello from heaven*. New York: Bantam.
- Horacek, B.J. (1997). "Amazing grace: The healing effects of near-death experiences on those dying and grieving." *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 16(2), 149-161.
- Kircher, P. (1994). *Love is the link*. New York: Larson.
- Ring, K. (1998). *Lessons from the light*. New York: Plenum.

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Incorporated in Connecticut in 1981 as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization according to Internal Revenue Service regulations, the International Association for Near-Death Studies, Inc. (IANDS) mission is to respond to needs for information and support concerning near-death and similar experiences. IANDS' goals are:

- ❖ To encourage thoughtful exploration of all facets of near-death and similar experiences;
- ❖ To provide reliable information about such experiences to experiencers, caregivers, researchers, and the public;
- ❖ To serve as a contact point and community for people with particular interest in near-death and similar experiences.

IANDS maintains no "party line" on the interpretation of near-death or similar experiences and is open to the presentation of varying responsible points of view. The Association is committed to scholarly investigation of the NDE and to providing accurate information based on those findings.

IANDS publishes two quarterly periodicals, the scholarly *Journal of Near-Death Studies* and the newsletter *Vital Signs*, in addition to other informational materials. It sponsors a national conference in North America annually and other conferences occasionally.

# Impact of the Near-Death Experience on Grief and Loss



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