Near-Death Experience Research

History and perspectives

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What is a near-death experience (NDE)?

**Typical elements of an NDE**

- Coming close to death
- Sense of peace
- Feeling separated from the body
- Hovering nearby and seeing your body

William Blake, *The soul hovering over the body.*

- Traveling through a tunnel toward a light
- Meeting deceased relatives or friends
- Encountering a Being of Light or religious figure
- Having a “life review”, sometimes a “preview”
- Being told or choosing to return

Hieronymus Bosch, *Ascent of the blessed (detail).*
Historical overview of NDE accounts

- Plato’s legend of Er (The Republic, book X)
  - “Died” in battle, revived on funeral pyre 10 days later
  - In Hades, souls were judged and sent up to a heavenly realm or down into the earth for punishment
  - After some time, souls returned and drew lots to choose their next life
  - Before returning to earth the soul had to drink from the River of Forgetfulness
  - Er was sent back to serve as a messenger to humanity

- Ancient Roman accounts
  - Similar phenomenal content, different terms
  - “Mistake” cases

- Medieval accounts
  - Carol Zaleski, Otherworld Journeys (1987)

- Numerous accounts in medical and parapsychological literature (19th and early 20th centuries)
An ancient Roman account

Cleodemus had a fever:

“I woke up to find a handsome young man standing at my side, in a white cloak. He raised me up from the bed, and conducted me through a sort of chasm into Hades… I came to the Judgment-hall, and there were Aeacus and Charon and the Fates and the Furies. One person of a majestic appearance – Pluto, I suppose it was – sat reading out the names of those who were due to die, their term of life having lapsed. [I was set before Pluto, but he] flew into a rage: ‘Away with him…his thread is not yet out; go and fetch Demylus the smith; he has had his spindleful and more.’ I ran off home … My fever had now disappeared, and I told everybody that Demylus was as good as dead.”

Demylus had some illness and was soon dead.

--Lucian (c. 170 CE).

Aeacus – one of the three judges in Hades
Charon – ferryman of Hades
Pluto – ruler of Hades

Research “pre-Moody”

- Albert von St. Gallen Heim
  - Remarks on fatal falls, *Jahrbuch des Schweitzer Alpenclub* (1892)

- Accounts by parapsychology researchers
  - F.W. H. Myers “Now and then we find a case where vivid consciousness has existed during a state of apparent coma” (1891)
  - Studies of deathbed visions, apparitions at the time of death, out-of-body experiences

- Russell Noyes (early 1970s)
  - Depersonalization in the face of life-threatening danger, including hyperalertness and mystical consciousness
Raymond Moody

- Ph.D. in Philosophy, M.D. in psychiatry
- Father of Near-Death Experience
  - Influenced by initial stories (especially George Ritchie’s), started gathering additional stories
  - *Life After Life* (1975) based on 150 cases
  - Book was widely accepted, flood of additional cases, followed by *Reflections on Life After Life* (1977)
- Method of study: phenomenology
  - Sensitive to the phenomenological elements
  - 14 main elements for the NDE, later added: vision of knowledge, Cities of Light, realm of bewildered spirits, supernatural rescues (from the jaws of death)
Raymond Moody…

Subsequent books

- *The Light Beyond* (1988) – further explorations, an excellent resource of additional phenomenological details

- *Coming Back* (1990) – past life hypnotic regression


- *Glimpses of Eternity* (2010) – shared death experiences, the empathic experience with someone who is dying
Kenneth Ring

- Psychology professor
- Initial broad analysis of NDE – five stages
- Weighted core experience index (WCEI)
  - Objective measure of NDE, but implicit stages
  - Concept of “depth” of NDE
- *Life at Death* (1980) – Connecticut study
  - First systematic study: found no correlation of NDE with a number of factors
- “Near-death hotel”
  - Extensive informal discussions with NDErs
  - NDEs are indicative of humanity’s evolutionary change to higher levels of consciousness
  - Later *The Omega Project: NDEs, UFO encounters and mind at large*
Kenneth Ring... 

  - What can we learn from NDEs without having one?
  - Living in the Light
  - Lessons from the life review
  - It’s all about Love
- Mindsight, with Sharon Cooper (1999)
  - Significant research in cases of blind NDErs who can see during the NDE
  - Veridical perceptions even in people blind from birth (Vicki Noratuk)
  - Unusual quality of vision in NDE: 360 degree, wrap-around, perspective changes where you choose – “mindsight”
Bruce Greyson

- Professor of psychiatry, Director of the Division of Perceptual Studies at U.Va.

- “Father of NDE research”
  - Meticulous research in nearly every facet of the field
  - “Greyson NDE scale” for evaluating NDEs – systematically developed and validated; preferred
  - Long-time editor of *Journal of Near-Death Studies*
  - Largest contributor to near-death studies research

- Significant overall summaries of NDE research
  - Co-author of *Handbook of Near-Death Experiences* (2009)
Michael Sabom

- Cardiologist, initially very skeptical

  - Excellent study, 116 patients
  - Veridical perceptions of their resuscitation
  - Compared to controls – much more accurate descriptions of what actually occurred

- *Light and Death* (1998)
  - Reported Pam Reynolds’ NDE – key aspects misinterpreted/misreported but later corrected
  - Religious issues: faith, healing, intercessory prayer, reincarnation, suicide attempts and hellish NDEs
  - Biblically-backed interpretation
IANDS – International Association for Near-Death Studies

- Founders (started 1978, incorporated 1981)
  - Moody, Ring, Greyson, Sabom, John Audette

- Early participants in IANDS
  - Nancy Bush, P.M.H. Atwater, Diane Corcoran

- Resources for NDE researchers
  - Peer-reviewed quarterly *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, the only scholarly journal devoted to NDE research
  - Annual North American conference
  - Index to periodical NDE-related literature through 2005
  - Data base of ~900 NDE accounts
  - Professional member directory
P. M. H. Atwater

- Three-time NDEr and NDE researcher
  - Unique approach to collecting NDE data
  - “P. M. H.” was given to her in a vision
  - Author of 13 books

- *Beyond the Light* (1994)
  - Types of NDEs, pleasant, distressing, transcendent
  - Aftereffects: psychological, physiological, spiritual

  - Comprehensive, very readable overview of NDEs, a great introduction and reference

- *Near-Death Experiences, the rest of the story* (2011)
  - A new model of NDE
  - Children, NDEs, aftereffects, shifts in perception
  - “Brain shift”, “spirit shift”
  - Unusual elements in NDEs
Some other researchers

  - Poll of U.S. adults on immortality, special focus on NDE
  - About 5% of U.S. have had NDE: 15 million people, may be high

  - Groundbreaking NDE study
  - “Negative” NDEs, aftereffects of NDEs

- Arvin Gibson (1990s) – 5 books
  - Numerous Mormon accounts from 19th and 20th centuries

  - Neuropsychiatrist
  - U.K. study of over 300 NDEs, excellent analysis

  - “Map” of the spiritual realms: City of Light, angels, realm of bewildered spirits
  - Purpose of pre-earthly, earthly, post-earthly life
Notable NDE accounts

- **George Ritchie, *Return from Tomorrow* (1978)**
  - Moody connection, extensive veridical OBE
  - Christ as Being of Light
  - Tour of spiritual realities (hellish, earthly, heavenly)

- **George Rodonaiia**
  - Dead and in a morgue 3 days, awoke at start of autopsy
  - Veridical perceptions: baby’s ailment, “merging” with wife’s head

- **Mellen-Thomas Benedict**
  - Revived with miraculous healing, extensive spiritual knowledge

- **Betty Eadie, *Embraced by the Light* (1992)**
  - Apparent Mormon/Native American connection
  - Amazing account of adoptive daughter-to-be
  - Best-seller
Notable NDE accounts...

- Dannion Brinkley, *Saved by the Light* (1994)
  - Two NDEs, two life reviews
  - Less than nice person, turned life around dramatically

  - Initially a hellish experience
  - Attacked, tortured by other discarnates
  - Turned to Christ, healed, tour of higher realms
  - Atheist turned minister

  - Childhood drowning NDE, turned to drugs
  - Suicide led to second, hellish NDE
  - “Scared straight”
Childhood NDEs

- Melvin Morse
  - *Closer to the Light* (1990)
  - First cases of children NDEs, 12 in Seattle study (126 controls)
  - Similar to but simpler than adult NDEs
  - Simpler language used, life reviews rare

- Cherie Sutherland
  - Study of 26 children NDErs
  - Reports of the NDEs of very young, prelinguistic children are quite complex when they were later reported
Aftereffects

  - Major aftereffects of NDEs
  - Psychological, physiological
  - Spiritual implications
  - “Brain shift”: enhanced abilities
  - How to help NDErs

- Cherie Sutherland, *Reborn in the Light* (1992)
  - Changes in attitude to death
  - Changes in religious beliefs, attitudes, practices
  - Psychic phenomena
  - Changes in life direction

- Russell Noyes et al. (2009)
  - Summary of aftereffects research
  - Statistical tabulations
Cross-cultural research

- NDE cases from India
  - Yamaraja – Lord of Death
  - “Mistake” NDEs (compare with ancient Roman NDE)
  - Includes analysis of cross-cultural differences: China, India, Pacific islands, Native American, Australian and New Zealand aboriginal
  - Elements present: OBE, other beings, other world
  - Elements missing:
    - Tunnels versus dark regions versus rivers, etc.
    - Life reviews (mixed – yes and no)

- Culturally specific elements or not?
  - Religious figures typically from one’s culture (a matter of one’s interpretation?)
  - Jeffrey Long (2010) – no difference Western vs. non-Western
    - Tunnels and life reviews
    - Internet based NDE reports
    - Modern (Western) influence present or absent?
Distressing NDEs

  - 3 different types of distressing NDEs
  - Making sense of distressing NDEs:
    - There is always something to be learned
    - Not related to the kind of person you are or the life you led
  - New book to be printed: Dancing Past the Dark and blog dancingpastthedark.wordpress.com

- Barbara Rommer, Blessing in Disguise (2000)
  - 18% of 300 NDErs had “less than positive” (LTP) NDE
  - 4th type of distressing NDE
  - Not all suicides have distressing NDEs; those who do: most experience the void, fewer are hellish

- 4 types of distressing NDEs
  - Inverted NDE: common NDE elements, but felt as frightening (33%)
  - The eternal, featureless void (30%)
  - Graphic hellish experience: threatening demons, dark pit, does not convert to positive (20%)
  - Frightening life review: felt being judged (e.g. a tribunal)
Religious interpretations and controversy

- Interpretations of NDE content
  - NDEs are the Devil’s work
  - Fundamentalist interpretations:
    - Hellish NDEs => Hell
    - NDEs confirm Christian beliefs

- Maurice Rawlings, *Beyond Death’s Door* (1987)
  - Hellish experiences support Christian notions of hell and damnation for the “unsaved”
  - Suicides always lead to hellish NDEs

- Controversy among researchers (2000)
  - Michael Sabom and Kenneth Ring
  - The “religious wars”
  - NDE accounts don’t support either religious interpretation
Prospective studies

- Follow up all cases of cardiac arrest in one or more hospital units
  - Data on NDE incidence, relationship to medical condition, veridical perceptions, accuracy of memory of NDE later

- Michael Sabom (1982)
  - Atlanta study – 116 patients, 53% with OBE perceptions
  - Comparison of description of resuscitation versus controls

- Pim van Lommel et al. – Dutch study (2001)
  - 344 cardiac arrest cases, 62 with NDE, follow up after 2 years and 8 years
  - Recall of NDE still accurate even after 8 years
  - Published in *The Lancet*
  - Led to greater awareness of NDE in scientific community and somewhat greater acceptance

- Sam Parnia et al. (2001)
  - Cardiac arrest, 63 cases, 4 NDEs, no apparent veridical perceptions
Apparent veridical perceptions (AVP)

- NDEr can “see” immediate surroundings during OBE phase, perceptions are later verified

Janice Holden study of AVP cases (2009)
- Scoured the NDE literature
- Of 93 cases of AVP:
  - 92% were verified and completely correct
  - 6% had some erroneous elements
  - <1% were completely erroneous

- Need purely visual perceptions out of patient’s line of sight, verified independently
Famous cases of AVP

- Maria’s shoe (Kim Clark Sharp, Kenneth Ring)
  - Saw tennis shoe on outside window ledge

- Pam Reynolds (Michael Sabom, others – “standstill operation”)
  - Saw bone “drill”, heard doctors’ specific conversation, heard “Hotel California” on return to body

- Missing dentures (Pim van Lommel, Rudolf Smit, Titus Rivas)
  - Recognized male nurse, crash cart where dentures were placed

- Al Sullivan: surgeon flapping his arms (Cook, Greyson & Stevenson)
  - Saw surgeon’s idiosyncratic movements

- Nurse peeking nervously around curtain (Penny Sartori)

- 3 cases (Kenneth Ring, Madelaine Lawrence)
  - NDEr saw a red shoe on hospital roof, later retrieved
  - NDEr saw nurse wearing plaid shoelaces, later confirmed
  - NDEr saw nurse wearing a yellow smock, later confirmed

- Penny on the cabinet top (Morris & Knafl) – confirmed

- Nurse making an error (Raymond Moody)
  - In another room, NDEr saw nurse open vial without protection from glass
Experiments to verify AVPs

- Use of visual targets in hospital settings
  - Generally cardiac arrest patients
  - Various kinds of targets have been tried
  - Follow-up interviews

- Janice Holden (1990)
  - 1 year, no NDEs

- Madelaine Lawrence (1996)
  - 1 year, no full NDEs, 3 in early stage OBE

- Penny Sartori (2004)
  - 5 years, several NDEs, 3 AVPs but none of the target
  - Patient left without looking, was looking in wrong direction, did not rise high enough

- Bruce Greyson (2006)
  - 1 year, induced cardiac arrest for embedding pacemakers, no NDEs
Experiments to verify AVPs…

- Sam Parnia: AWARE study (2008–present)
  - AWAreness during RESuscitation
  - Target on shelf above bed, changed regularly
  - Also, patients’ brain oxygen level is measured during resuscitation using a cerebral oximeter
  - Expecting at least 1,500 cardiac arrest survivors
  - Perhaps 30 to 60 patients will also report an OBE with perceptions of the physical surroundings

- Current status
  - 25+ hospitals (U.K., U.S., Canada, Austria, Brazil, possibly other countries)
  - 1,000 patients so far with cardiac arrest – in process of interviewing them
Skeptics and dogmatism

- Susan Blackmore (U.K.)
  - Ph.D. in Parapsychology, but renounced parapsychology
  - *Dying to Live* (1993)
  - Multiple factor “dying brain” theory

- Keith Augustine (U.S.)
  - M.A. in Philosophy (2001)

- Gerald Woerlee (Holland)
  - Anesthesiologist
  - All the elements can be explained physiologically

- These things *can’t* happen so any purported facts are irrelevant
Alternate explanations

- Altered blood gas levels
  - Hypoxia, hypercarbia
- Neurochemical factors
  - Endorphins, ketamine-like chemicals
- Temporal lobe seizure / abnormal electrical activity in specific brain regions
  - Electrical/magnetic temporal lobe stimulation
- Induced out-of-body experiences (OBEs)
  - Olaf Blanke studies
  - Electrical stimulation in the region of the temporo-parietal junction (TPJ)
- Rapid eye movement (REM) intrusion
  - Intrusion of REM-like states while awake
None of these factors is adequate to explain NDE, because …

1. The reported experiences bear only slight resemblance to NDE,
2. Many NDEs occur under conditions *without* the suggested physiological factor, and/or
3. In cases where the physiological factor is present, NDEs are *not reported* in even a large percent of cases.
Need for education on NDEs

• **Attitudes from medical profession**
  ◦ Typically: discounting, devaluing or implying pathology
  ◦ NDEr is likely to remain confused, isolated, and mute about what, typically, is the most profound experience of their life. This outcome is harmful.

• **Treatment of returning military personnel**
  ◦ Military NDErs are especially likely to receive this dismissive response and to be reluctant to share their story
  ◦ Also harmful outcome
Recent developments

Internet data collection and dissemination

- IANDS web site (iands.org)
  - Archive of NDE accounts, submit your experience
    - Listed on the site and available for research
  - Extensive information for NDErs, families, caregivers

- NDE Research Foundation (nderf.org)
  - Extensive archive of NDE submitted accounts
  - Multilingual and multicultural NDEs
    - 24 languages
  - Basis of research studies

- Near-death.com
  - Extensive compilation of information
  - Web master: Kevin Williams
    - Author of *Nothing Better than Death*
  - Personal interpretations
Recent developments...

Evidence of the afterlife

  • 9 lines of evidence from NDE accounts: lucid consciousness, OBE AVPs, blind sight, conscious with anesthesia, life reviews, deceased relatives, child NDEs, worldwide consistency, aftereffects

  • Consciousness doesn’t depend on the brain and may survive death

NDE and theories of consciousness

  • NDEs imply non-local, “never-ending” consciousness

◦ Robert and Suzanne Mays
  • Nonmaterial mind interacts with brain
  • Based on NDE and phantom limb phenomena
Recent developments...

- Integrating all phenomena surrounding death and near-death
  - Deathbed visions, light/mist/music at time of death, coincidences / apparitions at time of death, clocks stopping, after-death communications
- The search for the soul, dying related to consciousness, NDEs and consciousness

- Shared death experiences
- Persons present at the death of a loved one themselves experience something – 7 elements
  - Room changes shape
  - Mystical light in the room
  - Music, musical sounds
  - Leaving their own body, rising up with loved one
  - Co-living the life review of their loved one
  - Traveling part-way toward the Light, “heavenly” realms
  - Mist rising from body at death
- Significant addition to near-death literature, more compelling case for the afterlife