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An Overview of the Near-Death Experience Phenomenon

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AN OVERVIEW OF THE NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE PHENOMENON



R. David San Filippo, Ph.D.

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Published by: Kimball Publishing – 2006
Orlando, Florida U.S.A.

To my wife Lynn.

**You have been my greatest supporter and friend
and I am thankful for your love and encouragement.**

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Introduction

Near-death experiences appear to be universal phenomena that have been reported for centuries. A near-death encounter is defined as an event in which the individual could very easily die or be killed, or may have already been considered clinically dead, but nonetheless survives, and continue his or her physical life. Reports of near-death experiences date back to the Ice Age. There are cave paintings, in France and Spain that depict possible after life scenes that are similar to reported scenes related to near-death experiences. Plato's Republic presents the story of a near-death experience of a Greek soldier named Er. In this account, the soldier is killed in battle and his body is placed on a funeral pyre. Just before he is to be cremated, he awakens and tells a story of leaving his body and traveling with others to a place where they were all to be judged. Historical figures such as Carl Jung, Thomas Edison, and Ernest Hemingway have also reported their own near-death experiences. Modern researchers, such as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Raymond Moody, Kenneth Ring, and Melvin Morse, have provided modern accounts of near-death experiences. Through their research, they have been able to provide phenomenological evidence regarding these experiences as altered states of consciousness, and qualitatively demonstrated that the great similarities between the different reports of these experiences are not a result of chance or accident.

According to a 1991 Gallup Poll estimate, 13 million Americans, 5% of the population, have reported that they have had a near-death experience. Research has demonstrated that near-death experiences are no more likely to affect the devoutly religious than the agnostic or atheist. Near-death experiences can be experienced by anyone. According to Talbot (1991), near-death experiences appear to have no relationship to "a person's age, sex, marital status, race, religion

and/or spiritual beliefs, social class, educational level, income, frequency of church attendance, size of home community, or area of residence" (p. 240).

Near-death experiences have been recorded in folklore, religious, and social writings throughout the world. Reports have been recorded from societies such as Native American, Tibet, Japan, Melanesia, Micronesia, Egypt, China, India, Africa, Australia, Europe, and the United States. There does not appear to be any relationship between, on one hand, an individual's spirituality and religious practices, and on the other hand, the likelihood of experiencing a near-death experience or the depth of the ensuing experience.

The Phenomenology of the Near-death Experience

Near-death experiencers consistently report similar experiences. According to Talbot (1991), "One of the most interesting aspects of the ND phenomenon is the consistency one finds from experience to experience" (p. 240). Although most near-death experiencers may not experience all of the traits associated with near-death experiences or in the same order, experiencers consistently report similar experiences. The following is a constructed description of the content of a near-death experience representing most of the major traits: At the onset of the near-death experience, the individual may experience a sense of being dead, and surprise at being dead, yet will remain peaceful and have no feelings of pain. Following the peaceful awareness of being dead, the experiencer may have an out-of-body experience, a perception of separating from the physical body and moving away from the deceased body. The individual may experience a sense of moving through a tunnel, during the stage of entering into the darkness. As the individual passes through the tunnel, there may be an awareness of a bright

light towards the end of the tunnel. While experiencing the consciousness of the light, ethereal forms recognizable by the experiencer may be seen in the light. In the later part of the near-death experience, the individual may sense that he or she is rising rapidly towards the light into what he or she may consider heaven or another plane of consciousness. During this ascension, the experiencer may encounter a Being of Light reported to be either God, another spiritual deity, or an energy form recognized by non-theists. The encounter with the Being of Light engulfs the experiencer with a sense of unconditional love that emanates from the Being. During this encounter, the near-death experiencer may become conscious of having a total panoramic review of his or her life and may experience a sense of self-judgment when observing his or her life events in review. The judgment is not by the Being of Light but is a personal judgment by the experiencer. Throughout each of the stages, and particularly in the latter stages of the near-death experience, the individual may be reluctant to return to his or her former life.

Although most near-death reports are positive, in that they are pleasurable experiences, there are some reports of negative or "hellish" type experiences. The reports of negative near-death experiences appear to be rare. Of all the reported near-death experiences, a 1982 Gallup poll estimated that less than 1% are considered to be negative, hellish, and frightening experiences. The negative near-death experiences are reported to contain similar traits as positive experiences but are associated with a sense of extreme fear, panic or anger, a sense of helplessness, and possible visions of demonic creatures.

Many individuals who have experienced a near-death experience claim a fuller understanding of their religious or spiritual insights and their impact on their lives. They report that they feel closer to God after their near-death experience. Ring (1980) comments:

The way in which post-incident religiousness reveals itself among core experiencers is primarily in terms of an inward sense of religion: They feel closer to God, are more prayerful, are less concerned with organized religion and formal ritual, and express a sense of religious tolerance and religious universalism. It isn't clear that their belief in God per se grows stronger, although it is clear that their religious feeling does. Following their incident, they are significantly more inclined than nonexperiencers to be convinced there is life after death (p.173).

The effect of this spiritual awakening on the experiencer is a more positive attitude towards life, a lack of fear of dying, and a sense of service towards others.

Models of Near-death Experiences

The phenomenology of the near-death experience can be described by reporting the various stages of the experience, the characteristics or traits of the experience - which occur during various stages of the experience, by the constellations or related conscious experiences associated with near-death experiences, or by the experiential grouping of stages, traits, or constellations of the experiences. Experiencers may experience some or all of these stages, traits, consciousness, and types. The stages of near-death experiences relate to the experiencer's sense of progression towards a destination. The traits are associated with a sense of consciousness or knowledge concerning the activities within the near-death experience. Noyes, Slymen and Sabom further categorize the stages and traits of near-death experiencers into constellations and group types to analyze further the phenomenology of the near-death experience. The statistical analysis of the data presented in the Ring, Evergreen, Noyes and Slymen studies, and the

research of Sabom demonstrate the consistency of these models of classification of near-death experiences.

Kenneth Ring has devised a model of stages of near-death experiences that are recognized by near-death experiencers. The stages are:

1. A sense of peace at the time of death.
2. A sense of separation from the body.
3. A sense of entering into darkness.
4. Seeing a bright light.
5. A sense of entering the light.

Raymond Moody identifies nine distinguishing qualities, characteristics or traits that have been associated with near-death experiences and may be perceived within the stages of the near-death experiences identified by the Ring study. The Moody defined near-death experience traits are:

1. A sense of being dead.
2. A sense of peace and painlessness.
3. A sense of separation from the physical body.
4. The sense of passing through a tunnel.
5. A sense of an encounter with recognizable ethereal entities, such as family, friends, angels or religious personages. These spirits may appear to be enveloped in light.
6. A sense of rising rapidly into the heavens.
7. A sense of an encounter with a Being of Light which emanates unconditional love. This being has been described as God or Allah.

8. An experience of a panoramic, total life review and sense of self-judgment about one's life while bathed in the unconditional love of the Being of Light.
9. A sense of reluctance to return to the world of the living.
10. A sense of a compression or absence of time and sensing that no restrictions of space but are freedom to go where the experiencer chooses.

According to a study performed by Noyes and Slymen, near-death experiences can be classified further into three consciousness constellations of the type of event: mystical, depersonalized, and hyper-alert. The mystical type includes a sense of harmony and unity, color or visions, and a feeling of great understanding. Depersonalization relates to the loss of emotion, detachment from the physical body, and an altered sense of the passage of time. The hyper-alert constellation refers to the experiencer's sense that his or her thoughts are sharply defined, vivid, and accelerated.

Sabom also has divided near-death experiencers into three experiential group types: autoscopic, transcendental, and mixed experiences. The autoscopic experiencers include the individuals who have experienced the sense of leaving their bodies, having out-of-body experiences. The transcendental group include individuals who have a sense of entering into a "spiritual realm". In the mixed experiences, the near-death experiencer may experience a mixture of autoscopic and transcendental experiences. Regardless of the methodology used to classify near-death experiences, the anecdotal nature of the near-death reports are similar and consistent between experiencers.

Transpersonal and Reductionist Theories Concerning Near-death Experiences

Near-death researchers such as, Moody, Morse, and Ring suggest that near-death experiences are related to a state of consciousness, separate from the physical body, which occurs at the time of death. Near-death researchers have collected hundreds of phenomenological descriptions of individual near-death experiences and have statistically correlated the occurrences of the stages and traits associated with these experiences. The consistencies of near-death experience reports provide support for the theories that these experiences are not a result of hallucinations or mental dysfunctions. Individuals, regardless, of age, race, religion, or national origin have reported similar experiences during a near-death episode. The chi-square method of statistical analysis has been used by near-death researchers to determine if the similarity of events reported during the near-death experience, by experiencer, are a result of chance or is to be expected elements of the near-death experience. The chi-square method is a non-parametric statistical test that is used to determine the statistical significance of the difference between the frequencies of reported outcomes with the expected frequencies of outcomes. In other words, did the events reported in near-death experiences happen by chance or can the events anticipated. The statistical significance of near-death research provides that the similarity in the reports of near-death experiencer do not happen as a result of chance but are consistent phenomena of the near-death experiencers.

Some theologians, medical practitioners, and psychologists do not believe that near-death experiences are paranormal experiences. Some theological, medical, and psychological theorists attempt to explain near-death experiences as physical or mental phenomena that have more to do with brain and neurological-biological dysfunctions associated with the dying process.

Researchers such as Blackmore, Sagan, and Siegel attempt to debunk the near-death experience by stating that it is a result of a chemical reaction within the brain during the dying process. They postulate that as the eyes deteriorate following death they produce the bright light that is reported to be seen during the near-death experience. The tunnel effect and a sensation of being out-of-body is believed to be caused by the chemical reactions in the body during the death process. According to researcher Ronald Siegel (1981), "The descriptions given by dying persons are virtually identical to descriptions given by persons experiencing hallucinations, drug-induced or otherwise," (p. 65). Carl Sagan (1979) states that some of the near-death experiences can be associated with "a wiring defect in the human neuroanatomy that under certain conditions always leads to the same illusion of astral projection/out-of-body experience," (p. 47). Some researchers attempt to explain near-death experiences as the mind's defense against the fear of dying, that the mind creates positive images of an afterlife in order to control the fear of dying.

Many near-death researchers regard three consistently repeated reports as providing credibility for the transpersonal theories that near-death experiences are the expression of an altered state of consciousness separate from the physical or mental realm of human existence that have a profound impact on the experiencer's life. These reports thus are crucial to cite in responding to the theorists who attempt to debunk the near-death experience as a transpersonal phenomenon. These three factors reported are:

1. Consistent reports of out-of-body experiences of individuals who sense that they separate from their physical body during the near-death experience and can observe their body and surroundings from a detached position.
2. The consistent reports of near-death experiences of children that are similar to those experiences reported by adults.

3. The attitudinal and personality changes of the near-death experiencers following their experience.

The following discussion of out-of-body experiences, children's near-death experiences, and the post-experience attitudinal and personality changes of near-death experiencers, suggest reasons why the reductionist or debunking theories are implausible.

Out-of-Body Experiences

During an out-of-body experience, experiencers report that they leave their physical body and view their body, and other activity, from a detached, uninvolved perspective. Upon recovery from the near-death experience, many experiencers recall details of medical procedures being performed on them that they had no prior knowledge of the technique. Some experiencers report that they travel to other locations, other than the place where the body may be lying "dead." The out-of-body experiencer is then able to report things that he or she may have seen during the out-of-body experience, and there is no other logical explanation for the source of this knowledge. An example of this experience is a story told by a very nearsighted woman. During her out-of-body experience, she reports that she was first lying on an operating table with the anesthesia machine behind her head. She then became aware that she had detached from her body and was able to see, without difficulty, the equipment identification numbers on the anesthesia machine. These numbers were out of her normal visual range and behind her body's head. She then floated up to the top of the room and noted that the top of the light fixtures were dirty. After her recovery from her near-death experience, she returned to the operating room and was able to ascertain that the numbers she had seen on the machine were correct and that the light fixtures

were in need of cleaning (Ring, 1985, p. 42-43). This experience supports the belief that near-death experiences involve separation from the physical body and mind.

Studying the out-of-body phenomenon leads to doubt about the beliefs of those who attempt to debunk the theory that near-death experiences are transpersonal experiences that transcend the physical and mental realm of human consciousness. The knowledge that the experiencer gains during the out-of-body experience, in most cases, could not have been learned in any other method other than by a consciousness detached from the physical body. The ability of experiencers to report things and events that they had no prior knowledge of provides for the plausibility that the out-of-body experience is a transpersonal event and not a psychological response to dying.

Children and Near-death Experiences

Young children have reported having near-death experiences. Their reports are similar to adult near-death experiences even though they may not have had time to be enculturated with the same socio-religious beliefs regarding death as adults, or developed a fear of death through their psychological development. Children report having out-of-body experiences, passing through a tunnel, and encountering spiritual forms during their near-death experiences. Of interest are the reports of children meeting spiritual entities that are later identified as deceased relatives who the child could not have known prior to his or her near-death.

The accounts of young children's near-death experiences suggest the unlikeliness of the debunking theory that near-death experiences are the mind's psychological defense towards dying. Children who have not had time to learn of their mortality do not usually fear dying.

According to child psychologists, children, until between the age of five and seven, consider death to be reversible and generally do not have a fear of dying. They, therefore, do not have a need to create an afterlife experience, such as is experienced in a near-death experience, in order to overcome a fear of dying. Furthermore, following near-death experiences, children share similar after-effects of the experience as adult experiencers. They grow to have a sense of purpose and direction in their lives, and as they mature, do not develop a fear of dying.

Attitudinal and Personality Changes Following Near-death Experiences

The real importance of the near-death experience is in the after-effects it has on the life of the experiencer. The usual psychological and spiritual after-effects of a near-death experience consist of changes in personality and values and an attitudinal change towards religion and death. There is a heightened sense of appreciation of life, especially of the world of nature and of other people. The near-death experiencer achieves a sense of understanding of what is important to him or her in life and strives to live in accordance with his or her understanding of what is meaningful. Consistently reported after-effects of near-death experiences are the lack of fear of death, an attitude of unconditional love and service towards others, and the desire to seek knowledge.

According to Ring (1985), many near-death experiences act as a catalyst to a spiritual awakening for the experiencer:

What is noteworthy...is the particular form that this spiritual development takes in many NDErs - i.e., the real significance of the NDE here may not be

simply that it promotes spiritual growth as much as the kind of spiritual growth it promotes (p. 144).

This awakening appears to move the experiencer toward what Ring (1985) calls a "universalistically spiritual orientation" (p. 145). He defines universalistically spiritual orientation as consisting of:

1. A tendency to characterize oneself as spiritual rather than religious, per se.
2. A feeling of being inwardly close to God.
3. A deemphasis of the formal aspects of religious life and worship.
4. A conviction that there is life after death, regardless of religious belief.
5. An openness to the doctrine of reincarnation (and a general sympathy towards eastern religions).
6. A belief in the essential underlying unity of all religions.
7. A desire for a universal religion embracing all humanity (p. 146).

The long-term positive effects that the near-death experience has on the experiencer's life give evidence for supporting a plausible argument for the transpersonal nature of the near-death experience. This aspect of the near-death experience has not been addressed by reductionist theories in the literature reviewed. The profundity of the after-effects of a near-death experience on the experiencer's life have not been able to be achieved through pharmacological or psychological methods. Most of the sensory nature of the near-death experience can be induced through drugs or hallucinations but the positive change in the individual's personality and attitudes do not appear to be capable of replication. Follow-up research on experiencers indicates that these after-effects appear to remain with the individual for the remainder of her or his mortal life.

Conclusion

Due to the subjective nature of near-death experiences there can be no conclusive proof that these experiences provide visions of life after death: however, the reports of out-of-body experiences, the near-death experiences of children, and the notable changes in the near-death experiencer's life following his or her experience support the possibility of the validity of this theory. Because of the transpersonal nature of near-death experiences, it is sometimes reported that it is difficult to describe the experience in words. Near-death experiencers report that there are not appropriate words to accurately describe their near-death experiences. They therefore interpret the experience using words, phrases, and metaphors that reflect their religious-cultural backgrounds and experiences.

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