

Near-Death Experiences and Dreams Compared

By PMH Atwater, LHD

Skeptics of the near-death experience frequently claim that the episodes are nothing more than dreamlike variations or fabrications of an overactive mind. In other words, wishful thinking. However, there are differences between near-death scenarios and both dreams and hallucinations.

Unlike near-death episodes, dreams are usually surreal, having no cohesive storyline of how the symbols in them are interpreted. Although near-death scenarios may not contain events commonly occurring within the experiencer's real life, they nevertheless develop around an explainable sequence of events that not only has meaning, but immediate significance.

Dream content varies from person to person. Although there isn't a single, uniformly experienced near-death scenario, there are common elements that appear in episodes regardless of culture or belief. Dreams are frequently forgotten. We usually remember that we had a dream or two, but we don't always recall what it was about. With the exception of near-death experiences that happened in childhood and were repressed, only to be remembered later in adult life, the vast majority of near-death experiences are vividly remembered and seldom forgotten.

Dreams can be veridical, but when they are, they're typically dreamt by people considered to have psychic, intuitive abilities. On the other hand, people who were not considered to be psychic that have out-of-body experiences as part of their near-death episodes tend to report, accurately, activities that occurred around them as well as outside their physical field of vision (see P.M.H. Atwater, *The Big Book of Near-Death Experiences*). And the testimonies of experiencers themselves argue against near-death episodes being dreams: Almost all of them maintain that the imagery, vividness, content, and sense of authenticity of their near-death scenarios are completely different from what they experience when dreaming.

The suggestion has been made that there is a correlation between the "fantasy-prone" personality type and near-death experiencers. The fantasy-prone person is deeply invested in fantasy life, has a vivid hallucinatory ability, intense sensory experiences, and a strong visual memory. Comparative studies between fantasy-prone people and near-death experiencers, though, have been inconclusive. In one study, fantasizers – in contrast to near-death experiencers – said that their hallucinatory fantasies were not "as real as real" and were not lifelike, detailed, or stable. Two other studies came out showing substantial differences between fantasy-proneness and those who experience near-death states.

Near-death experiencers maintain that their episodes were real. The vast majority live their lives afterward – in one way or another – on the basis of this conviction. Most make significant life changes because of what happened to them.

Though there have been near-death reports that later proved to be false, there's generally too much veracity in near-death experiences for them to be easily labeled

as hallucinations. (Example: Lloyd L. Haymon saw his pet parakeet in his near-death scenario and realized that the parakeet had died. No hallucination here. Lloyd's wife later confirmed that the bird had died "for no apparent reason" at the same moment that Lloyd suffered his heart attack and was being treated by paramedics – minutes before he was in the ambulance in which he had his near-death experience).

The intensity of hallucinations, no matter how they are caused (and that includes oxygen deprivation, blood loss, drugs, and centrifugal spinning), fade with time or lead to increasing periods of confusion. Conversely, near-death states, regardless of type, are clear and coherent – a re-centering of the mind. Consistently accurate and intense over time, these stories are known to produce significant psychological and physiological aftereffects that expand with the passing years. Powerful in their ability to transform lives, the episodes are "instructive" about reality as it truly exists. Hallucinations do not exhibit such characteristics.

Near-Death Episodes in Dreams

Early in my career as a researcher, I noticed that some people had the most unusual death dreams. Not the kind where you dream you are going to die or see yourself in a coffin or hover above your funeral. Rather, the individuals actually experienced what seemed to be the physical process of dying as if that's exactly what they were doing, and then suddenly awakened with the same traumatic response of an individual who had just been resuscitated in a hospital.

Medical science claims that it's impossible for anyone to dream of their actual physical death as it occurs. Yet that is exactly what some of the people I had sessions with feel that they did.

Although this peculiarity happens to adults, I've discovered more of these cases with school-age children, especially around the time of puberty and the early teen years. Of the child experiencers I spoke with, the majority never told their parents or teachers about the incident for fear that they would either be made fun of or sent to a hospital. All of them were physically stressed afterward, and had great difficulty for a while negotiating tasks expected of them – as if their bodies needed time to repair themselves. A few were already under a doctor's care for various reasons. (One had rheumatic fever, another was fighting a serious staph infection, and still another suffered a sudden, sharp abdominal pain.) But the rest seemed to be reasonably healthy before they "died" during their strange dream.

What we know now is that, contrary to what you might suppose, it is possible to experience a near-death episode during a dreamed "death event." What arises from situations like these can mimic or match all of the elements and patterns typical of near-death states, including the lifelong aftereffects. It has been surmised that such individuals really do die while asleep, but revive before medical intervention is deemed necessary – meaning death dreams *can* be literal.

Although I have alluded to significant changes in dreaming after near-death states ever since I first began publishing my findings in 1982, it wasn't until I wrote about my work with child experiencers in *The New Children and Near-Death Experiences* that I finally published figures: 66 percent of children reported more of an active, vivid dream life afterward. In adults, 79 percent reported more vivid and intense dreams and visions (results published throughout most of my books and on my Web site). I hasten to add here that children often have vivid dreams, future memory episodes (living the future before it occurs or the idea of pre-living as preparation for what is about to happen), and spirit manifestations. Thus, it was somewhat difficult for them to articulate the degree to which their dreamlife differed afterward. Adults had no hesitation describing how their dreamlife had changed: Dreams incredibly more colorful, vivid, intense, and involved – with a substantial increase in the ability to pre-live the future, know the future, be able to heal others through the dreamstate, gain information, travel out-of-body, and explore other environments as well as spirit realms.

An Interesting Discovery

Odd, though, was my discovery that 60 percent of the adult experiencers in the study woke up between 3:00 and 4:00 am most mornings. They did not do this before their near-death episode. The time of 3:00 to 4:00 am, or thereabouts, was not only consistent, but consistently described as a time when they were more creative, musical, inventive, and could easily be in touch with spirit guides and angels. They came to regard that hour as a time for spiritual inspiration and upliftment. Many of the child experiencers agreed.

I call this odd because medical science identifies that time period as the “Hour of the Wolf,” with an elevated likelihood of congestive heart failure, vehicle accidents, errors made by nightshift workers, and the gloom of despair (Jennifer Ackerman, *Sex, Sleep, Eat, Drink, Dream: A Day in the Life of Your Body*). Yet just the opposite occurs with near-death experiencers – and artists, composers, sculptors, mystics, psychics, and religious and spiritual adherents.

This I feel is an important discovery, especially since during that same time period the ambient level of the earth's magnetic field (earth pulse) spikes. The result is a resonance frequency (standing wave) in the neighborhood of 7.83 hertz, which matches the frequency when healing usually occurs and contact with Source deepens. The implication here is that because of the impact of near-death states, an individual can become realigned with the natural current of healing energy, creativity, and spiritual attunement – a sensitivity more typical of gifted artists, inventors, meditators, and mystics – and that realignment can actually protect against possible health problems, mistakes in judgment, and emotional setbacks.

Another oddity is that the onset of sleep can go unrecognized with near-death experiencers, sometimes for months or maybe a year or two after their episode. With child experiencers, a loss of any need for nap time is commonplace. Accompanying this loss is a significant rise in flow states which can become a long-term patterning change in how their brains seem to function. Experiencers of any

age can deal with a fear of sleep, perhaps in apprehension of another fatal event. Any fear of this type is usually short-lived.

In conclusion, I have sought to show that near-death states are distinctive, that the process of dreaming changes in patterning afterward (even as regards to timing factors), and that the onslaught of sleep can alter – at least for a while. These changes, although fascinating, are in my opinion significant indicators that brain function is affected by the near-death phenomenon, perhaps brain structure as well.

Adapted from a presentation at the 2008 Psiber Dreaming Conference.

[Bio]

PMH Atwater, LHD, one of the original researchers in the field of near-death studies, began her work in 1978. From a research base of nearly 4,000 adults and children, she has written nine books about her findings. In 2005, she was awarded the Outstanding Service Award from the International Association For Near-Death Studies, and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Association of Transpersonal Hypnotherapists. Her book *We Live Forever* (A.R.E. Press) is available at ARECatalog.com or 800-333-4499. Her Web site is pmhatwater.com.