

WHAT THE NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE REVEALS ABOUT CONSCIOUSNESS

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The near-death experience is defined as an intense awareness, sense, or experience of "otherworldliness," whether pleasant or unpleasant, that happens to people who are at the edge of death. It is of such magnitude that most experiencers are deeply affected - many to the point of making significant changes in their lives afterward because of what they went through.

The closer an individual is to physical death, the more apt he or she is to have one, although "near-death-like" experiences can occur without the threat of imminent death. We know now because of research done in Europe and North America that drugs, oxygen deprivation, temporal lobe seizures, psychological disorders, and other possible mediators are not causal, neither do they describe or account for the full range of near-death states and the aftereffects which follow. A signature feature of the phenomenon is that no matter how long an experiencer is without vital signs - no pulse, no breath, no indicators of brain activity - not only will little or no brain damage be found afterwards, but, the average individual will begin to display an unexplainable enhancement of intellect. It is a fact. . . most experiencers come back smarter than they were before. How long are these people without vital signs? I and most other researchers agree - somewhere between 5 to 20 minutes. It is not unusual for an experiencer to be without vital signs for about an hour. Nor is it unusual for them to revive in the morgue. . . much to the shock of morgue personnel. None of this is unusual. There are that many.

Most cases with women arise from crises involving birth, miscarriage, rape, or hysterectomies. Most cases from men are heart-related or result from acts of violence. With kids, its either birth trauma or accidents, usually drownings or suffocation; a large number also emerge from surgery and situations of abuse. Near-death episodes are powerfully real, whether brief or lengthy, and defy the label of "hallucinations." None of us can consider ourselves to be professionals if we ignore or fail to study the impact this phenomenon has on experiencers, their families, and the general public who hears about them. Contrary to popular musings on the subject, there are clearly four types of near-death states. I discovered this in my own research which began in 1978 and currently numbers sessions with over 3,000 adult and 277 child experiencers. You all should have a copy of the chart on types. Follow along with me as I go over it. Please notice a subtle, psychological profile that seems to be present with each, as if predicative of who might have what type:

THE FOUR TYPES OF NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

* Initial Experience (sometimes referred to as the "non-experience") Involves elements such as a loving nothingness, the living dark, a friendly voice, or a brief out-of-body experience; perhaps a visitation of some kind. Usually experienced by those who seem to need the least amount of evidence for proof of survival, or who need the least amount of shakeup in their lives at that point in time. Often, this become a "seed" experience or an introduction to other ways of perceiving and recognizing reality.

Incident rate: 76% with child experiencers
20% with adult experiencers

* Unpleasant and/or Hell-like Experience (inner cleansing and self-confrontation) Encounter with a threatening void or stark limbo or hellish purgatory, or scenes of a startling and unexpected indifference, even "hauntings" from one's own past. Usually experienced by those who seem to have deeply suppressed or repressed guilts, fears, and angers, and/or those who expect some kind of punishment or discomfort after death.

Incident rate: 3% with child experiencers
15% with adult experiencers

* Pleasant and/or Heaven-like Experience (reassurance and self-validation) Heaven-like scenarios of loving family reunions with those who have died previously, reassuring religious figures or light beings, validation that life counts, affirmative and inspiring dialogue. Usually experienced by those who most need to know how loved they are and how important life is and how every effort has a purpose in the overall scheme of things.

Incident rate: 19% with child experiencers
47% with adult experiencers

* Transcendent Experience (expansive revelations, alternate realities) Exposure to otherworldly dimensions and scenes beyond the individual's frame of reference; sometimes includes revelations of greater truths. Seldom personal in content. Usually experienced by those who are ready for a "mind stretching" challenge and/or individuals who are more apt to utilize (to whatever degree) the truths that are revealed to them.

Incident rate: 2% with child experiencers
18% with adult experiencers

Life reviews are common components of Pleasant and Unpleasant types, but seldom show up in Transcendent states - not at all with Initial ones. Whether the episode was brief and consisted of only one to three elements, as with Initial Experiences, or lengthy and filled with a complex range of elements, the deciding factor as to its impact is intensity. Please note that even simple experiences with hardly anything to them, if intense enough, can engender the same cascade of aftereffects as those which are more involved.

I have discovered that a true core experience has little to do with the number or type of components in the scenario, but, rather, with the intensity of what was experienced. For instance, children who have their episode in the birth canal or as infants and, once verbal, describe a single spirit visitation or perhaps cuddling snugly into the loving nothingness, can exhibit the same aftereffects as adults who are effusive about angels, heavenly realms, revelations from Jesus, and long talks with their dead grandmother. This makes no sense if compared to the original criteria we, as researchers, were once urged to use; yet it makes perfect sense if studied in light of current challenges from broad-based findings such as my own. Bruce Greyson, M.D., one of the original researchers of near-death states and the editor of the peer-reviewed Journal of Near-Death Studies, said in a press release earlier last year that the phenomenon is stress-related, a natural response to intense trauma. But if you study the fuller implications of his statement, that the concentration of focus and dissociation created by these states correlate to what can result in traumatic situations, you can't help but recognize that his findings uphold what is known historically about the making of a good shaman, wise one, or priest, regardless of culture. And that is, what enabled these individuals to be singled out from their fellows with abilities and awarenesses beyond the norm - was an experience of slipping beyond the pale of death into spirit through some type of traumatic incident or intensely-felt ritual.

If near-death states are a natural response to intense trauma, and if "gifts" conferred by spirit are a natural response to intensely-felt accidents or rituals, then what's really going on here? and why isn't everyone so involved equally affected? I believe the stress Dr. Greyson referred to, is what mystical traditions call "high stress." He even indicated as such in his announcement. High stress describes a state of emotional intensity that is so powerful it overloads or bypasses an individual's ability to think or cope; yet, instead of disordering or destroying sanity, brings him or her to a higher, more positive expression of enhanced behavior that appears as "stress-free." It reorders the mind instead of disorders. High stress exists as a commonality in what pushes human consciousness to transform how it functions. But what causes the peculiarities of high stress? Since the aftereffects of near-death states and consciousness transformations, no matter how caused, are the same or similar, and since near-death states can happen to anyone, at any age, I would like to use them as a model to explore the larger genre of transformations of consciousness. The personal needs of individual experiencers are an important aspect of both near-death scenario storylines and the event's timing Here's a synopsis of what I have noticed about this during the 23 years I have been conducting research:

*** Most episodes happen during major junctures or times of unusual stress in the person's life, when spiritual guidance or direction would be most helpful.

*** With young children, relatives and caregivers can be affected as well - to the degree that it's almost as if the child had the experience for them. Yet, the extent to which the episode transformed the youngster becomes important and more apparent as he or she matures, and can become a quiet but powerful directive in the life path chosen by the child once grown.

*** Causes and conditions of death can reflect, at least symbolically, the experiencer's past or current psychological growth; maturity, or lack of it.

*** The initial spirit greeters at death's threshold always match whatever is necessary to alert or calm the experiencer, be it adult or child.

*** As the episode deepens, the scenario's message parallels almost exactly the subconscious needs of the individual at that moment in time.

*** The life review and any session that covers lectures or advice reflects whatever was omitted, ignored, or not yet learned in life by the experiencer involved.

*** Afterward, the experiencer's behavior tends to shift toward a desire to express that which has been undeveloped or partially developed - physically in the sense of brain function/nerve sensitivity, psychologically in the sense of personal growth/maturity, spiritually in the sense of a personal relationship with Deity or God - as if whatever traits are missing in the individual's overall maturing process are now being "filled in."

I never cease to be amazed at how forthcoming experiencers are when asked to evaluate what happened to them. Almost to a person they say, "I got what I needed." This blunt answer suggests that another agenda may be in force besides that of the personality self: perhaps that of a greater version of the self - the soul. Whatever the truth of this, and it may never be proved one way or the other, the need factor is plainly obvious as to timing, storyline, and outcome of near-death states - not in the sense of predetermination or wish fulfillment, but, rather, in terms of a subconscious "agenda" of a higher, more spiritual order. What impresses me the most is how the scenario people experience always catches their attention in the precise way and manner that is the most effective for them. Near-death scenarios hardly ever touch on what most of us might expect considering the gravity of that person's life choices and deeds.

For instance, murderers hardly ever wind up in dungeons where hellish demons can prick them to pieces with hot pokers. Such criminals usually experience those scenes that infuse them with life's true meaning and purpose - after they have been subjected to "living through" on every level the impact of what they did to others. They are subjected to trading places rather than being punished. Those I know who experienced scenarios like this were so utterly shaken by what they went through that they never returned to a life of crime. One Mafia hitman, for example, after such an episode, devoted the rest of his life to serving the impoverished and often by dishing up meals in a church soup kitchen. His explanation? "I want to make up for what I have done."

The tendency to "get what we need" can sometimes be rather bizarre, as in the case of young children being greeted by the familiar on the other side of death - classmates and teachers quite alive. Once they relax into their scenario and feel more comfortable, the living disappear and imagery more typical of near-death states emerge.

A particular case I discussed in *CHILDREN OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM* involves a four-year-old who drowned in a backyard swimming pool. After being resuscitated, he blurted out that he was met "over there" by his little brother who told the story about Mommy having him pulled out of her tummy when she was 13. This shocker upset everyone, since the four-year-old was an only child (there was no "little brother"), and because Mommy's tearful admission afterward set the record straight about her secret abortion.

There are many reasons to study this case. One question to ask is: would the four-year-old have responded so favorably to his close brush with death had he not been met by someone appearing younger than he, rather than older? Another question concerns the parents. Did their son have his experience for them? Both parents were driven, materialistic achievers who were forced to re-evaluate their lives and their marriage because of what happened. Let's reconsider the four near-death experience types already mentioned.

The subtle psychological profile I discovered to be present with each type seems somehow to be "predictive" in the sense of who has what. This profile is consistent with the vast majority of people I had sessions with - regardless of their race, educational level, status, religious beliefs, or location. Although much more research needs to be done to establish how universal this pattern is, so far it has withstood the scrutiny of researchers and experiencers alike.

Looking again at the four types, you could shorten their general description to read like this:

Initial Experience. Awakening to a greater reality.

Unpleasant Experience. Untangling false perceptions.

Pleasant Experience. Recognizing true values and priorities.

Transcendent Experience. Embracing universal oneness.

When you shorten the subtle psychological profile in this manner, it becomes illustrative of development stages in the growth of human consciousness, both personally and en masse, as consciousness expands to embrace the responsibility we all share as members of the same universal family. During the talks that I give, when I mention this subtle patterning, invariably someone in the audience will ask: "Does this mean we always meet our own beliefs after we die? Do we really determine our hells and our heavens by our attitudes? Is it us doing all of this to ourselves?"

On one hand the answer to these questions appears to be yes. And there is ample evidence to back up this

assumption. Yet, on the other hand, I must say "not necessarily," and here's why: the notion that we alone decide our heavens and our hells based on our own personal beliefs begins to fall apart when we examine shared and group experiences. These events offer a major challenge to any "pat" conclusion we might make about storylines or how to regard the mystical traditions of other cultures.

Consider the following:

Shared near-death states. There are cases in which several experiencers seem to share in each other's episode; that is they have the same or similar elements, scenario type, or basic storyline. Usually these are encountered when two or three people are involved in the same accident at the same time or are in the same general section of the hospital at the same time. Sometimes these states are experienced singly (one individual is not aware of the other during the episode, but learns later on that both apparently had the same scenario). Sometimes the people involved are aware of each other, and are able to confirm the extent of that awareness after they are able to compare their separate stories.

Group near-death states. These are rare, but they do occur. With this kind, a whole group of people simultaneously seems to experience the same or similar episode. What makes these so spectacular and challenging is that all or most of the experiencers see each other actually leave their bodies as their scenario begins, then dialogue with each other and share messages and observations while still experiencing the near-death state. Their separate reports afterward either match or nearly so. Reports like these emerge most often from events of a harrowing nature that involve a lot of people.

Shared and group near-death experiences imply that no matter how sure we are that near-death states mean this or that, and are the result of whatever, no single idea, theory, or pat answer can explain them. Even clues from the powerful patterning that researchers like myself have identified fail to explain all aspects of the phenomenon.

Examine the pattern of their occurrence is physiological as well as psychological. Not only do near-death states tend to enliven and enrich people's lives, and nudge them closer to a more respectful and spiritual nature, there are obvious physical changes that also occur. Here are some of the physiological ones along with the percentage of occurrence I found: Between 80 to 90 percent look and act younger, are more playful afterward. They evidence brighter skin, eyes that sparkle, have substantial changes in energy levels, become more sensitive to light and especially sunlight, become more sensitive to sound and to noise levels, regard things as new even when they're not, boredom levels decrease or disappear, handle stress more easily, heal more quickly, exhibit changes in brain functioning and intelligence levels, become creative intuitives.

73% of those in my research base experience electrical sensitivity, whereby their own energy field affects the electromagnetic fields around them - such as with watches, computers, television sets, tape recorders, security systems, microphones, light bulbs, and so forth. This indicates that their energy can and often does interfere with or enhance the performance of technological equipment. Well over half report metabolic changes that affect digestion and their ability to assimilate substances, like pharmaceuticals (like alcohol). Drug tolerance decreases, as it takes less of anything for a full effect. Allergies increase, especially to chemical additives, strong smells, and pollutants. Blood pressure lowers and pulse rate can also decrease. Synesthesia, or multiple sensing, frequently occurs. Body clocks tend to reverse. Sensations heighten. Cognitive abilities sometimes switch. When you study the full pattern of both psychological and physiological aftereffects, I think you will recognize what I have, and that is: near-death states appear to cause a structural, chemical, and functional change in the brain. It is as if experiencers are rewired and reconfigured - some, of course, more than others. And this is especially evident with children.

The age criteria for having had a near-death experience in my work with child experiencers was from birth to

15 years. 48% of them, when old enough to take the standard IQ test, registered scores between 150 and 160 without genetic markers to account for it. Some educators claim that the score for genius begins at 134 to 136. Others state that it is 140. These kids were well above that, and they excelled in non-verbal intelligence, which is creative problem solving, along with spatial reasoning - with no difference between genders as to the ability. 93% of them had enhancements in math, with the larger majority exhibiting the same enhancement with music. The regions for math and music are located next to each other in the brain. My research implies that math and music are being accelerated in near-death states - as if they were the same unit.

And there are learning reversals - a typical child experiencer comes back abstracting. The younger they are the more noticeable this is. An example I use is that of a first grade boy who, about half-way through the school year, drowned but was fortunately resuscitated. When he was able to return to class, his agemates were still reading simple sentences like "See Spot run." Not him. All of a sudden, he was fascinated by Greek mythology and wanted to know why the book ROBINSON CRUSOE was ever written. He was unable to readjust to the first grade after that, and had to be put in a special class for gifted learners. My study of child experiencers shows large clusters, age-wise, specifically between birth and fifteen months and between 3 to 5 years. If you take these two timespans, as a subgroup, the score jumps to 81 percent genius- level intelligence, indicating to me that the younger the child the more susceptible he or she is to the sudden charge of intensity from the near-death phenomenon. And, the very youngest, if engulfed in a dark light rather than a bright one during their experience, had scores of 182 and higher on standard IQ tests. (Normally, brain circuitry formation skyrockets during infancy; three to five-year-olds typically undergo temporal lobe development as they experience the birth of imagination and creative thought. Near-death states seem to accelerate whatever is normal.)

A correlation can be made here with the work of Linda Silverman, Ph.D., one of the leading authorities in the United States on giftedness. 80% of the most profoundly gifted children in her research, those youngsters whose IQ begins at 180, were born premature and underwent extreme birth trauma. Every one of them exhibits the typical aftereffects of the average near-death experiencer, and with the same shift in consciousness toward social justice, human rights, and spirituality. Take my findings and examine history. Look for people of significant import who nearly died in infancy or childhood and then went on to display the pattern of near-death aftereffects. Either I was possessed of library-luck or there really is an important discovery to be made here, for in one week I located the following people who fit the criteria: Abraham Lincoln, Mozart, Queen Elizabeth I, Winston Churchill, Einstein, and Edward de Vere - the 17th Earl of Oxford - who I now believe is the real Shakespeare. Edward de Vere's case is so dramatic that I devoted a section to it in the appendices to my book, FUTURE MEMORY.

Because of what I have seen in my research, I no longer consider near-death states to be any sort of anomaly. Rather, I consider them to be part of the larger genre of transformations of consciousness, no matter how caused. I include in this genre those episodes of a more turbulent nature, such as religious conversions, near-death episodes, kundalini breakthroughs, shamanistic rituals, sudden spiritual transformations, even certain types of head trauma or having been hit by lightning. I also include those more tranquil in how they're experienced: from slow, steady application of religious or spiritual disciplines, mindfulness techniques, meditation, vision quests, or because in a prayerful state of mind an individual simply desires to become a better person. Because the aftereffects of all of these states, if the occurrence was intense enough, are the same or similar, I now refer to the entire process of transforming consciousness as a brain shift/spirit shift. This is a logical statement to make in light of the cutting-edge research currently being conducted via brain scans to determine the effect something exotic or unique has on brain structure. To quote Marcus Raichle, a researcher at Washington University, during news coverage of his work: "You can essentially rearrange the brain in fifteen minutes." If something unusual or exotic can do that, what of the highly-charged climate of the near-death phenomenon?

Near-death cases are on the increase. As of 1997, U. S. News & World Report estimates over fifteen million in the United States alone. Judging from the extent to which experiencers change - irrespective of personal beliefs and preferences - and the long-term effects of those changes, and we have every reason to believe this is historical, it is evident to me that evolution is involved. And it is also evident to me that transformations of consciousness, especially near-death states, may indeed be the "engine" that drives evolution. The way consciousness is evolving today bears the mark of forces far greater than anything we can isolate or define through research. Experiencers return from transformative states convinced of a mission they are to do, a job they must perform for The Greater Plan of Humankind. They speak of love and oneness, cooperation and service, making a difference in society. And they talk about God. What are we to make of all of this? What are we to conclude?

That there is more to life than we think there is. And that people like myself, for I am a near-death experiencer as well as a researcher, can be so transformed by the intensity of an otherworldly experience. . . that they are never the same again.