



ESSAY

The Darker Side of Near-Death Experiences

Bruce Greyson

brg4@uvahealth.org
enid.org/0000-0002-2192-7898

Division of Perceptual Studies,
Department of Psychiatry & Neuro-
Behavioral Sciences, University of
Virginia Health System

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INTRODUCTION

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are powerful percepts with features often considered spiritual, typically occurring to individuals close to death or in intense danger. While life-threatening situations are reliable triggers for NDEs, comparable mystical experiences can occur in a wide variety of other circumstances.

HIGHLIGHTS

Although most near-death experiences involve profound bliss, research also shows that some involve different types of negative or frightening perceptions which deserve detailed study.

ABSTRACT

Modern research on near-death experiences (NDEs), powerful spiritual experiences triggered by a close brush with death, has focused on experiences characterized by profound positive feelings, ranging from incredible peace and calmness to bliss and ecstasy. However, throughout history there have been accounts of frightening deathbed visions and terrifying journeys to a hellish realm peopled by evil forces or beings. It is difficult to determine the prevalence of these distressing NDEs because the anxiety and judgmentalism they evoke deter experiencers from acknowledging and revealing them. Nevertheless, most recent studies estimate their prevalence at between 11% and 22% of all NDEs. Their phenomenology varies widely, but attempts to categorize distressing NDEs have yielded several distinct types. Various researchers have attributed distressing NDEs to the personal characteristics of the experiencer, to biological factors of the brush with death, or to other circumstances around the event. Overall, distressing NDEs appear to be associated with fewer permanent aftereffects than the more common pleasant NDEs, which may reflect the reluctance of experiencers to focus attention on unpleasant experiences. Nevertheless, some distressing NDEs lead to long-lasting emotional trauma. Several strategies have been described by which experiencers try to come to terms with and find meaning in their distressing NDEs. Much research remains to be done on the causes and aftereffects of distressing NDEs and their relationship to other dark spiritual experiences.

KEYWORDS

Near-death experience, frightening near-death experience, distressing near-death experience, hellish near-death experience, void near-death experience.

Most reported NDEs include profound feelings of peace or bliss, joy, a sense of cosmic unity ("being one with everything"), an out-of-body experience, passing through a darkness, encountering a light (often described as "a loving being of light"), meeting spiritual beings and/or deceased persons, a life review, and an altered sense of time. In contrast to most people's idea of the dying process, for the most part, NDErs are not terrified or panicking as they



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