



Fall 2018

Profound Impacts and Benefits of Near-Death Experiences

Abigail D. Reitz
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Life Sciences Commons](#), and the [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Reitz, Abigail D., "Profound Impacts and Benefits of Near-Death Experiences" (2018). *Student Publications*. 678.
https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/678

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/678

This open access student research paper is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Profound Impacts and Benefits of Near-Death Experiences

Abstract

In his 1975 book, *Life After Life*, Dr. Raymond A. Moody coined the term “near-death experience (NDE)” as an umbrella term to describe the personal experiences and sensations that occur during an altered state of consciousness on the threshold of death. While controversy arises over the highly subjective nature of near-death experiences and the empirical research surrounding them, NDEs are usually marked by similar sensations and certainly have one thing in common: they often have profound, positive impacts on affected individuals that change their outlooks moving forward. Birk Engmann comments on the impact of NDEs in *Near-Death Experiences: Heavenly Insight or Human Illusion?*, and claims that “any threat to one’s own existence in the imminent future can lead one to rethink one’s life,” a true statement that captures the power of NDEs in changing individuals lives (Engmann 6). This paper will explore the fascinating ways in which NDEs not only change but benefit individuals’ lives.

Keywords

near-death experience, death, NDE, benefit, impact

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Life Sciences | Medicine and Health Sciences

Comments

Written for FYS 150: *Death and the Meaning of Life* and presented at the 2019 Celebration of Academic First-Year Engagement Symposium.

Abby Reitz

Professor Myers

FYS 150

29 November 2018

Profound Impacts and Benefits of Near-Death Experiences

In his 1975 book, *Life After Life*, Dr. Raymond A. Moody coined the term “near-death experience (NDE)” as an umbrella term to describe the personal experiences and sensations that occur during an altered state of consciousness on the threshold of death. While controversy arises over the highly subjective nature of near-death experiences and the empirical research surrounding them, NDEs are usually marked by similar sensations and certainly have one thing in common: they often have profound, positive impacts on affected individuals that change their outlooks moving forward. Birk Engmann comments on the impact of NDEs in *Near-Death Experiences: Heavenly Insight or Human Illusion?*, and claims that “any threat to one’s own existence in the imminent future can lead one to rethink one’s life,” a true statement that captures the power of NDEs in changing individuals lives (Engmann 6). This paper will explore the fascinating ways in which NDEs not only change but benefit individuals’ lives.

To define it simply, a near-death experience is an account from an individual who spent time in a realm “at the cutting edge between life and death,” or in other words, the affected person, often referred to as an NDE-er, could or may have been pronounced clinically dead (clinical death is defined as a bodily state in which blood circulation and breathing cease), but they have been revived back to life and are able to recount details of their experience (Engmann 49). The elements NDE-ers choose to disclose regarding their experiences often surround answers to the questions of “where” they went, “what” happened, and “who” they saw in the de.

Though many assume near-death experiences rarely occur, studies show that approximately five percent of Americans report having a near-death in their lifetime, and near-death experiences are, surprisingly, a common human experience (Engmann 49). Thousands of theories attempt to explain the medical and psychological aspects of a near-death experience but cannot be verified due to the highly personal nature of NDEs. Interestingly enough, however, narrations from individuals who have undergone a near-death experience often parallel each other closely, and it can be concluded that, though highly personal, elements of NDEs do not deviate much among individuals. Moody interviewed 150 individuals who had undergone near-death experiences and found enough similarities among their stories to construct a “model” that outlines the typical stages of a near-death experience. According to Moody, one will feel great physical distress at the moment death is “pronounced,” he or she may hear a loud ringing or buzzing, he or she will feel as though they are traveling through a long tunnel, and he or she may see his or her own body from a distance (Moody 22). He or she may be surrounded spirits of deceased family members or friends, encounter a “Being of Light” that radiates warmth and peace, and eventually reach a barrier that separates earthly life and the afterlife permanently (Moody 22). Engmann discusses additional sensations commonly shared by NDE-ers, including the viewing of light that appears to have a zigzag or spider web-like pattern, the “reviewing” of life in fragmental, “film-like” clips, and the feeling of an altered sense of time (Engmann 105). A study conducted by Russell Noyes Jr. and Roy Kletti revealed that a few more “symptoms” of an NDE include unusually vivid mental imagery, increased thought speed, a sense of detachment, sharper vision or hearing, a sense of unity and harmony, and a greater understanding of existence (Lundahl 53). These sensations are so unimaginably intense that experiencing one or more of these them leads NDE-ers to have no doubt in the reality of their near-death experience.

While these sensations sound frightening to some, the consensus among NDE-ers is that near-death experiences, and in fact death itself, are actually peaceful and pleasurable – somewhat counter-intuitive to those who have never had an NDE but confirmed by countless individuals who have. For example, in his *Collection of Near-Death Research Readings*, Dr. Craig Lundahl includes an account from a 22-year old woman who took an overdose of barbiturates in a suicide attempt, and as she lost consciousness described a process in which “reality vanished and visions, soft lights, and an extreme feeling of calm acceptance passed over me like waves,” portraying her transition to the afterlife as enjoyable (Lundahl 36). The immense sense of peace conveyed here is consistent among most near-death accounts, as other case-studies in Lundahl’s research collection described death as “eternal bliss” that is “far too wonderful to be described,” as well as “the sweetest, tenderest, most sensuous sensation,” again displaying death in a positive light (Lundahl 36). One woman likened her experience with death to a “homecoming” in which she was reunited with previously deceased family members, and others have compared it to a graduation or an event that signifies progress (Lundahl 107). Moody additionally found that among his interviewees, “the moods and feelings associated with the experience linger on for some time,” indicating that these NDE-ers certainly appreciated the feelings of peace they felt during their NDE and these feelings may go on to influence the following weeks, months, or even years of their lives (Moody 83). Overall, the majority of NDE-ers seem to develop an understanding of death as positive and even beautiful following their experience, and this new perspective translates into drastic changes in their views on death, life, and more.

For example, “finding out” that death is blissful and a heavenly afterlife exists typically leads NDE-ers in the middle of their NDE to fall in love with the afterlife and quickly become comfortable with the idea of staying there. One WWII survivor recounts his thoughts while

“setting” into the afterlife immediately after his Jeep exploded due to a German mine, stating, “I cannot stress strongly enough the feeling of total peace of mind and of total blissful acceptance of my new status, which I knew would be never-ending,” demonstrating that this NDE-er, upon tasting and seeing the afterlife, was immediately willing to spend eternity there knowing he would be forever sound (Lundahl 61). Often, NDE-ers are so comfortable in this position that they, knowing they have the opportunity to return to their life, may be hesitant to do so. David Lester, in *Is There Life After Death?*, reports that many individuals express “a sense of loss at leaving the afterlife behind,” and the fact that they are emotionally affected demonstrates the “goodness” of the afterlife in these individuals’ eyes (Lester 67). Mark Fox claims in *Religion, Spirituality, and the Near-Death Experience* that NDEs may even temporarily give sight to the blind or restore other bodily deficiencies, which would undoubtedly make choosing to return to life with physical afflictions difficult for affected individuals (Fox 205). However, most people do return to life when given the opportunity, for the two most common reasons of: loyalty to their family, especially seen in mothers who feel obligated to take care of children, and the idea that they have been given a mission to fulfill or have unfinished duties in life (Lundahl 104). But most NDE-ers admit that there comes a moment when the thought of not returning crosses their mind.

However, once this thought passes, NDE-ers reflect on their experience and realize that their temporary death was positive and perhaps even pleasant, and therefore the most common result of a NDE is a significantly reduced fear of death since these individuals now “know what to expect.” Moody explains that nearly every person he interviewed claimed he or she was no longer afraid of death following their NDE, and concluded that this must be due to the fact that he or she “no longer entertains any doubts about his survival of bodily death,” and now realizes

that the afterlife is not “merely an abstract possibility” but a known destination (Moody 92). Tassell-Matamua and Nicole confirm this by claiming that 43% of NDE-ers cite the fact that they have died once as the reason why they are no longer afraid of death (Tassell-Matamua and Nicole). In other words, seeing is believing – what was unknown (what comes after death) becomes known to these individuals, and since the root of most common fears is the unknown, the fear is eliminated altogether. Plus, not only is the afterlife now known, but it is highly desirable and attractive. To live without a fear of death and to actually have a sense of confidence in what comes after life is one of the most beneficial aspects to NDEs, something that those who have never experienced one cannot fathom

Not only are their views on death significantly altered, but NDE-ers’ views on life are rocked following an NDE, and they commonly become more reflective, philosophical, and morally upright. Moody notes that his NDE-ers claimed that life felt more precious and was “broadened and deepened” by their near-death experience (Moody 88). Nearly all of Moody’s interviewees stressed wanting to cultivate love towards others and to generally be more accepting, and also expressed an increased interest in taking advantage of the ability to learn and had a new desire to develop their spirituality (Moody 88). A greater desire to spread love is in fact a common “theme” among NDE-ers, as demonstrated by Dr. Eben Alexander, author of *Proof of Heaven*. In this book, Dr. Alexander recounts his NDE in which he came to the ultimate realization that love is “not only the single most important emotional truth in the universe, but the single most important *scientific* truth as well,” demonstrating his belief, inspired by his NDE, that love is the basis of all existence (Alexander 71). Beyond increasing capacities for love, compassion, spirituality, and wisdom, Lester compiled various studies and deduced that NDEs cause individuals to “live more intensely,” which may be the result of a newfound sense of

purpose that they were given insight into while in the afterlife (Lester 63). In relation to an increased sense of purpose, Lester found that NDE's cause individuals to generally feel more connected with all things in nature, gain a more open-minded attitude toward life, and place less emphasis on materialism and impressing others (Lester 63). An extremely common result of a NDE is a greater concern for others and a new or heightened interest in philanthropy. These noticeable shifts in personality may result in visible life changes such as the termination of relationships and new directions in employment (Tassell-Matamua and Nicole). Regardless of what specific personality changes take place, NDE-ers almost always gain new perspectives and outlooks on life that result in positive changes that benefit them and those around them. Engmann puts it beautifully, pondering about "...how much astonishment and wonder may be inspired by a glimpse of heaven...we can only marvel at our own existence," which highlights the influence that "a glimpse of heaven" or an NDE naturally has on individuals (Engmann 9). At the very least, NDE-ers typically become more reflective and appreciative of life with regards to their own life and the lives of others.

As mentioned above, Moody found that NDE-ers expressed an interest in developing their spiritual sides, another common result of near-death experiences. Perhaps this desire is inspired by encounters with the seemingly universal "Being of Light" that is featured in most NDEs. According to Tassell-Matamua and Nicole, the seeing, hearing, or sensing of a "light being" is a core element to more than 50% of near-death experiences (Tassell-Matamua and Nicole). NDE-ers mention the presence of a bright light and often describe it as a light that first appears dim but rapidly grows brighter until it reaches a level of "unearthly brilliance" that, despite its intensity, does not harm their vision (Moody 56). However, the light is typically not simply a physical, scientific concept but a "personal being" with a "definite personality" that

emanates warmth and love and seems to magnetically attract the dying individual towards it (Moody 56). Spiritual individuals and Christians in particular believe this light is an angel, Jesus Christ, or God. Dr. Alexander believes without a doubt that he was with God in during his NDE, “a Creator who cherishes us beyond any ability we have to comprehend,” as the Bible tells Christians (Alexander 96). Dr. Melvin Morse, in his book *Closer to the Light*, discusses his findings after interviewing individuals who underwent childhood NDEs, and confirms this by explaining that most of his patients describe the light “essentially as a pure light of unconditional love,” demonstrating that this light, regardless of who or what it is, makes individuals feel loved and accepted (Morse 116). The majority of individuals, apart from their degree of spirituality, report that this being is kind and welcoming. They also claim that after encountering this being, the common belief in a “reward-punishment” model of the afterlife is disavowed, as the being responds with understanding and acceptance toward their life choices rather than with rage or judgment (Lundahl 108). This famous “light” or “Being of Light” and its outpouring of goodness often go on to inspire change in the spirituality of NDE-ers.

To demonstrate this spirituality change, Greyson Bruce conducted a study in which he discovered that 76% of 135 individuals described themselves as “spiritual” following an NDE, and increase from an initial 16% prior to having an NDE (Bruce). Khanna Surbhi’s data concurred with this, as participants of this study “reported more daily spiritual experiences after their brush with death” than those who had not undergone a near-death experience (Surbhi). A greater interest in spirituality and religion may be the result of several factors: for example, coming face to face with God, Jesus, spiritual beings, the famous “Being of Light,” or another spiritual figure that is important to the individual would likely be a transformative experience that would inspire one to implement more spirituality into their life. Other NDE-ers claim that

God “allowed” them to live or sent them back to complete unfinished tasks or carry out a specific “mission,” and a new awareness of duties they are to carry out would cause increased spiritual awareness in life (Lundahl 103). To illustrate an example of this, Dr. Michael Sabom in *Light and Death* presents a case study that follows 34-year-old Darrell Pell, who suffered ten cardiac arrests during a span of four days, and today believes he is “radically changed for the long haul” and has dedicated his life to Christian evangelism using his NDE story (Sabom 24). Pell had an NDE in which he met God, and since that time, he has felt called by God to read scripture to hospital patients, juvenile delinquents, and motor cycle enthusiasts, an unusual combination of folks but the perfect example of a highly specific “mission” that an NDE-er may feel has been vested upon them by God (Sabom 29). Interestingly, an area of controversy arises over whether these individuals feel “special” or “chosen” in having undergone an NDE – while Moody found that none of his interviewees gained a “holier-than-thou” attitude, Noyes’ 1982 study reported that NDE-ers did in fact gain a sense of invulnerability or a feeling that they were destined for something special (Moody 89) (Lester 64). This depends simply on the way an individual interprets their near-death experience. Beyond learning about Earthly tasks to complete or a mission to carry out, some NDE-ers believe that they returned to life at God’s discretion upon hearing the urgent prayers of family members, another factor that could potentially inspire belief in a higher being.

There is a chance that none of these factors may be the “cause” of an NDE-er’s spiritual progress following a near-death experience. Surbhi reminds readers that many rely on major world religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism to alleviate or “get through” life’s trials, and perhaps the spiritual growth often observed after an NDE may not be the result of the NDE, but the individual’s attempt at psychological and personal recovery after this bizarre or

traumatic event (Surbhi). Regardless of the source, increased levels of spirituality certainly benefit NDE-ers. According to Dr. Ryan Howell, incorporating spirituality into one's life often leads to the development of a gracious attitude, compassion, high self-esteem, optimism, self-actualism, and the ability to savor life experiences (Howell). NDEs are beneficial in this sense since greater levels of spirituality translate into positive attitude changes.

Another interesting area surrounding the influence of near-death experiences involves the lasting impact that a childhood NDE has on an individual as he or she progresses through his or her life. For example, Dr. Morse writes about 55 year-old Victor, a WWII veteran who underwent a near-death experience at age five when his heart stopped due to a severe case of pneumonia (Morse 147). According to Morse, Victor described meeting God in his NDE and God informed him that they would "meet again soon," and ever since the experience, Victor longed for the day when he would "see God" again. Victor felt this "deep longing" throughout his childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, and though Army psychiatrists even labeled him schizophrenic for continuously expressing his desire to be with God, Victor claimed the sureness he felt that his reunion with God would happen was what ultimately helped him to persevere through the war (Morse 147). Countless other childhood NDE-ers discuss the fact that thinking back to their near-death experience brings them peace when they face life's trials. Morse also introduces readers to 64-year old Bob, who, while siphoning gas at age six, inhaled too much gas and underwent a near-death experience in which he traveled through Moody's famous tunnel but returned to life, and since the experience, Bob has had an incredible talent for deciphering blue prints as easily as an engineer despite his limited education (Morse 151). Bob calls this talent his "awakening" that was sparked by his NDE, and while many finds this hard to believe, Morse credits Bob's incredible ability to his exposure to the Being of Light (Morse 151). The ability of

NDEs to motivate and comfort individuals during difficult times, and perhaps even gift them with unearthly talents, once again demonstrates their potential to positively influence lives.

In his book, Morse also explores the concept of NDEs and their impact on NDE-ers' perceptions of suicide. He includes Beverly's story, a 47 year-old woman who grew up in a home so abusive that she was driven to attempt suicide by sledding down a snow-covered hill into a bench at the age of seven (Morse 158). She severely injured herself during this attempt, and recounted her NDE that included visions of a symbolic tree – Beverly watches this tree, initially dead and snow-covered, blossom and bear fruit in the springtime (Morse 159). Beverly realized that this symbolism, conveyed to her by the "Light," was shown to her to make her realize that she too would "blossom" in life, and today, Beverly is glad to be alive, is an advocate for child-abuse, and is raising her own happy, healthy family. This example sheds light on the positive, transformative impacts of near-death experiences in proving to distraught individuals that suicide is not the answer and life gets better. Tassell-Matamua and Nicole confirm this, stating that "suicide survivors who experienced an NDE were far less likely to suffer from subsequent suicidal ideation or to reattempt suicide," and NDE-ers are actually more likely to object to suicide, revealing the power of NDEs steering people away from suicidal ideation (Tassell-Matamua and Nicole). Reversed opinions on suicide may stem from the fact that NDEs often result in an increased sense of life purpose, a deepened spiritual focus, greater levels of self-actualization, or perhaps other unexplained insights given to individuals during NDEs.

One final area that supports the argument that NDEs improve lives compares the health of those who have undergone NDEs versus those who have not undergone them. Those who come close to death *without* a near-death experience commonly report adverse physical "symptoms" following their brush with death. In a 1976 study conducted by Druss and Kornfeld,

patients who survived cardiac arrest without an NDE developed insomnia and longstanding emotional problems, and had frightening dreams (Lester 63). These results were compared to those of cardiac arrest survivors who did have NDEs, and significantly lower levels of psychological distress were found in those who did have NDEs (Lester 64). A 1983 study by Kohr demonstrated that non-NDE-ers became more concerned with their own death after their brush with death, which contrasts the common loss of fear of death seen in NDE-ers (Lester 64). Since insomnia, emotional problems, troubling dreams, and death-related anxiety may lead to a gradual decline in overall health, having an NDE is beneficial to individuals even in a physical sense as they are without the above disturbances.

Evidently, near-death experiences have tremendous impacts on those who undergo them and benefit individuals in incredible ways. Near-death experiences are often intense yet “positive” and peaceful experiences that give NDE-ers a new appreciation for the afterlife that typically results in a reduced fear of death. Simultaneously, a brush with death often brings new meaning and an increased sense of purpose to NDE-ers lives, and they become more philosophical, compassionate, and grateful. Near-death experiences usually feature the famous “light” or “Being of Light,” which goes on to inform the development of more spirituality in one’s life, and increased spirituality comes with several benefits of its own. The advantageous nature of near-death experiences is observed in the cases of childhood NDE’s and the way they continue to “motivate” NDE-ers through their adult lives, and also in case of suicide in which NDEs seem to discourage individuals from taking their own lives. Unfortunately for those who come close to death *without* an NDE, higher levels of anxiety and psychological distress have been observed, while those who have NDE’s lead happier and healthier lives. The “gains” of a near-death experience demonstrate their profound and positive impact on previously “ordinary”

lives. To be given the title “NDE-er” means that this individual’s life has been changed drastically, often for the better, and their story will inform the rest of their days.

Bibliography

- Alexander, Eben M.D. *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife*. Simon and Shuster, 2012.
- Basford, Terry K. *Near-Death Experiences: An Annotated Bibliography*. Garland Publishing, 1990.
- Bruce, Greyson. "Spiritual transformation after near-death experiences." *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, vol. 1(1), 2008, pp. 43-55,
<http://ezpro.cc.gettysburg.edu:2118/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=b186fee9-2657-4b7e-96b9-4dcdaa24ec0f%40sessionmgr104&bdata=JnNjb3BIPXNpdGU%3d#AN=2014-10697-006&db=pdh>. Accessed 10 Nov. 2018.
- Engmann, Birk. *Near-Death Experiences: Heavenly Insight or Human Illusion?* Springer, 2014.
- Fox, Mark. *Religion, Spirituality, and the Near-Death Experience*. Routledge, 2003.
- Howell, Ryan T Ph.D. "Why be Spiritual? Five Benefits of Spirituality." *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 27 February 2013, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/cant-buy-happiness/201302/why-be-spiritual-five-benefits-spirituality>.
- Lester, David. *Is There Life After Death? An Examination of the Empirical Evidence*. McFarland and Company, 2005.
- Lundahl, Craig R Ph.D. *A Collection of Near-Death Research Readings*. Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1982.
- Moody, Raymond A Jr M.D. *Life After Life*. Mockingbird Books, 1975.
- Morse, Melvin M.D. and Paul Perry. *Closer to the Light: Learning from the Near-Death Experiences of Children*. Villard Books, 1990.
- Sabom, Michael M.D. *Light and Death*. Zondervan Publishing House, 1998.

Surbhi, Khanna. "Daily spiritual experiences before and after near-death experiences."

Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, vol. 6(4), 2014, pp. 302-309,

<http://ezpro.cc.gettysburg.edu:2117/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=26969c14-65e8-4e17-8f16-c27dbd5c475b%40sessionmgr4009&bdata=JnNjb3BIPXNpdGU%3d#AN=2014-33989-001&db=pdh>. Accessed 10 Nov. 2018.

Tassell-Matamua, Natasha A. and Lindsay Nicole. "'I'm not afraid to die': the loss of the fear of death after a near-death experience." *Mortality*, vol. 21(1) pp. 71-87,

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=111242979&scope=sit>e. Accessed 10 November 2018.