

NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES

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Let me start out by giving a few disclaimers. I am a skeptic when it comes to anything that I can't personally see and touch or reason out. I'm not a mystic, although I truly would LOVE to have a mystical unexplainable happening. If I could just see an alien from outer space, or talk with a ghost standing at the foot of my bed, I would be ecstatic. I enjoy hearing stories about paranormal things or unexplained events, but I always wind up thinking, much to my disappointment, that they are just stories. Near Death Experience falls into that category for me. Thousands of people have had these experiences and the reality of what they feel cannot be explained away. They are mystical and spiritual and, for me, not convincing.

I can't prove aliens have not visited our planet. I've met some pretty alien people—maybe they really are from another galaxy. I can't prove they're not. But, I'm skeptical.

I can't prove that the dead can't come back to haunt us or to talk to us. Maybe John Edwards has it right and he's really channeling the thoughts of the dear departed. But, I'm skeptical.

I can't prove that people don't leave their body, hover over the operating room where their body lies dying, and then re-enter their body and come back to life. Maybe that really happens. But, I'm skeptical.

Last winter I read The Mystical Mind by Eugene d-Aquili and Andrew Newberg. Much of it was a review for me of how the brain works. I had read their Why God Won't Go Away earlier and shared that with you about a year ago. One of the chapters in The Mystical Mind explored near-death experiences and this is what I plan to focus on today. I am not an expert in the field—I'm not sure anyone can be. But, I want to share with you the research that has been done because it's just another key perhaps to unlocking a mystery that has everyone intrigued.

Near-death experiences have been reported at least since medieval times. It is, apparently, one of the most compelling, and often life-changing, experiences that a human can encounter.

Kenneth Ring and Raymond Moody conducted extensive research on these experiences in an attempt to find commonalities and to try to make sense of it all. They found that there are several basic aspects of the core Near Death Experience. Not everyone has each and every one of these aspects, but most are encountered.

- First, the person feels an ineffability.
- He reports others talking about his death.
- He feels a sense of deep peace and quiet.

- Often he hears a great noise, followed by seeing a dark tunnel.
- He may have an out-of-body experience.
- Sometimes he meets others, either people he knows who have died or people who want to be his guide.
- He may encounter a realm of light.
- His life is reviewed before him.
- Then he reaches some border and returns to life.

Not all of these characteristics occur during each Near Death Experience. They are described differently by different people. And, the specific characteristics seem to vary, depending on the circumstances of the actual Near Death Experience.

I'll go back and expand on a few of these characteristics. Nearly everyone who experiences a Near Death Experience describes feelings of peace and calmness. Nearly everyone.

The next major phase—the Out Of Body Experience—occurs in about one-third of all people with a Near Death Experience. Subjects have a sense of being detached from their body. They often describe themselves as being an objective observer, without emotion. They are usually at some vantage point, such as a corner of the ceiling, looking down on the events taking place. They report seeing their own body and hearing and seeing the people surrounding their body trying to administer aid.

The next phase consists of entering a dark tunnel or vastness. These tunnel experiences are simple and consistent regardless of the experiencer. This tunnel has been described as empty, as space, or as nothingness, and has been compared to describing the end of the universe. The darkness is usually described in positive terms.

After the tunnel, the subject may sense a light toward which they are traveling. This light has been described as golden, brilliant, and of ineffable beauty. The light often takes on a symbolic meaning that is usually culturally dependent. For example, it is frequently identified as God, heaven, or other spiritual entities, depending on the religious beliefs or culture of the person.

Only a few people who have a Near Death Experience actually enter the light. This appears to be the final stage of the experience. Nobody reports experiencing anything beyond the realm of light. Apparently, the light is the most transcendent realm attainable during the Near Death Experience. The realm of light is associated with descriptions of beautiful music as well as the place where others are met. Who and what type of beings are met is highly dependent on the culture of the person having the Near Death Experience. Subjects from India tended to see more religious and sacred figures, while those in the US tended to see more deceased relatives and friends.

It should also be mentioned that there is often a presence associated with the light. This presence is not directly seen, but it is sensed and understood by the subject.

Finally, there is the return to life. This is made up of a life review, an encounter with a presence or an encounter with deceased loved ones. The life review is often a panoramic, like a replay, often sequential of one's entire life in a matter of seconds. The actual decision to return is sometimes that of the subject, or else the decision to return is made for the subject.

Most subjects feel that their cognitive functions are clear and sharp during the Near Death Experience. They describe feeling calm, in control, and rational. They report feeling a state of hyper-alertness, in which they have heightened visual and auditory sensations in addition to mental clarity. However, there seems to be a slowing down or absence of time. Space is generally perceived as being either infinite or non-existent.

People in medieval times or in certain oriental religions where punishment for a lifetime of sins or the horrors of hell were taught often had negative Near Death Experiences, while people in western cultures tend to have pleasant or tranquil Near Death Experiences.

Until recently, almost all contemporary accounts of Near Death Experiences were reported as being positive experiences. However negative Near Death Experiences are now being reported with increasing frequency. Most negative Near Death Experiences are reported by people who believe strongly in hell and punishment for sin. The negative experience reported is sometimes that the subject is "losing control" and seeing the radiant light as a reflection of the fires of hell instead of seeing it as a radiant light. Or, they may report being trapped in a terrifying emptiness after which the subject felt profound despair. The positive Near Death Experience is highly structured, sequential, and even rather stereotypical. But, the negative Near Death Experience does not appear to be structural or to have any predictable sequence. It is horrible and terrifying.

Children also have Near Death Experiences. Current research estimates that 85% of children who experience cardiac arrest have a Near Death Experience. As cardiac resuscitation techniques improve, more and more are surviving cardiac arrest and are able to report such experiences. One researcher studied over 270 children Near Death Experiences. She found that three-fourths reported having a comfortable experience, saying things like it was a loving nothingness, hearing a friendly voice, a visit by a loving being, having an Out of Body Experience and the peacefulness of either a safe light or a safe dark place. Three percent reported a negative experience. Two percent reported an experience where they felt that they had acquired special knowledge.

So, now I have given you a quick look at what makes up a Near Death Experience. The experiences exist—many many people have had one. There's no denying that. No one—not the subjects themselves nor the researchers and especially nor I—can explain them. Perhaps people really do leave their body. Perhaps they really see a radiant light of the gates of hell. Perhaps they do meet the dead loved ones. Or, perhaps it's all in their minds.

Last year I gave a talk called, “Why God Won’t Go Away”. It was basically reporting research done on the human brain attempting to explain mystical experiences. I won’t repeat that talk now, but I need to briefly repeat some of the stuff I explained then.

Our mind can fool us in extreme situations or in cases of induced trances such as deep meditation. A person can become so totally cut off from outside stimulation that the bodily functions slow down to an alarming extent. The brain becomes alarmed because of so much loss of sensation coming in to the sensors that the brain’s exciting center cuts in and creates way too much stimulation in an attempt to make sense of what’s happening, and the mind then creates its own sense of reality.

Same thing if the sensors are getting an overload of strong input from many directions. The brain becomes alarmed and tries to quiet the situation to maintain the body’s well-being. This sudden jolt of quieting imposed on the greatly stimulated brain creates a false reality. The brain can’t make sense of what it’s receiving, so it tries to create sense on its own.

This is a very very simplified version of what happens chemically in your brain. Now, maybe I can tie this into Near Death Experience.

In about 1892, Albert Heim did some extensive research on Near Death Experiences and examined the experiences of people who were trapped in avalanches. He found that many people in this kind of situation had Near Death Experiences without ever actually being physiologically near death. They thought they were in a life-threatening situation. They had been on a mountain. An avalanche, within seconds, buried them in heavy snow, trapping them, cutting off light and air and no one knew where they were. And yet, these people often had no anxiety, despair, or pain. They obviously survived to report these feelings. They usually described a “calm seriousness, profound acceptance, a mental quickness and a sense of surety”. Similar results have been found where people faced other situations that they perceived as life-threatening but they were not actually near death.

Kenneth Ring considered Near Death Experience subjects in three separate categories—people who had terminal illness, people who had serious accidents, and people who had attempted suicide. Ring found people who had attempted suicide tended not to progress too far into their Near Death Experience. They didn’t reach the light. He suggested that the use of drugs, which is the preferred method of suicides, apparently, may have affected their brain function and therefore altered the Near Death Experience.

Ring also found that subjects who have a Near Death Experience as a result of an accident are more likely to relate a panoramic life review. These findings were corroborated by other investigators.

The work of Roger Penfield, another researcher in this area, found that in a Near Death Experience, the feeling of dissolution—of feeling like your body is drifting apart,—is rarely, if ever, found unless a person is actually physiologically near death. And, he

found that transcendence—your body exists above or apart from you-- seems to arise more typically by the perception of almost certain death. In other words, if you are actually really truly about to die because of real damage to your body, your Near Death Experience will have you feeling like you are becoming detached and you will have a negative Near Death Experience, while if you only think you're about to die, but your body is pretty much fine, then your Near Death Experience will have you feeling positive.

Penfield believes that when a person is actually dying, there are several physiological mechanisms that kick in—there is decreased oxygen to the brain, electrolyte imbalance, productions of endorphins, and probably a dozen or more chemical changes that may initiate an extreme physiological response which results in an arousal drive that, when it becomes intense enough and activates the fear centers in the amygdala and that creates a negative Near Death Experience. It is thought by researchers that the mind, where the body is really dying—the mind senses the dissolution of the body and thus in the Near Death Experience it senses the loss of self.

And, what happens when the subject does not come close to physically dying, but instead has the conscious perception that death is close, like when someone falls off a cliff but lands with some broken bones, but basically safe. Certainly, there is an initial brief phase of terror—“Oh, my God, I’ve fallen off a cliff!!! I’m dead!” His brain immediately goes into full arousal mode—all switches are on, all systems are geared up to full. But the brain sees all this arousal as a danger to the body and tries immediately to quiet things down—bring the systems back under control. It is believed that this kind of situation—of perceived death—the movement toward maximum arousal is much faster than in the case of actual physiological distress. The mind more quickly reaches the Out of Body Experience and then onto the transcendent state very quickly. This would explain why in perceived Near Death Experiences, the subject almost never reports a horrible type of experience and, in fact, only very rarely reports an Out of Body Experience.

People who only feel they are dying, like this guy at the base of the cliff, have a positive Near Death Experience, perhaps caused by the brain’s need to dissociate itself from the pain and trauma of the fall and wanting to prevent the body from going to shock, creates a tranquil calming experience.

All of this makes good sense to me. Suppose you’re driving along the highway at night. Suddenly, you see headlights rushing toward you in your lane. You swerve, you slam on the brakes. Your car smashes head-on into a tree. Your airbag explodes. Your foot is crushed by the impact. Flying glass from the windshield imbeds itself in your face. Your heart is pumping as fast as it can, you’re pumping more air into your lungs, your adrenalin is rushing through your body. All systems are on the defense. The intense pain, the fear, the noise, the lights, too much adrenalin, too much oxygen—your brain is aware it must immediately calm your body down so it sends a huge shot of quieting reaction in to restore order. When this super-charged arousal comes full impact with this super-charged quieting, your brain suddenly has a confusion of input and your body feels a sense of disorientation with itself, with where it is in space and time. You feel an

immediate sense of peace and calm. Your brain feels itself disconnected in space and you feel yourself drifting over your own body, no longer feeling attached to it. Your brain is sending you calming images—images of family long dead, images of holy saints, telling you you are all right. You hear beautiful calming music. Then the chemicals of arousal and quieting in your brain come back into balance. You begin to regain your contact with your self, with your memories, your life experiences. Slowly, you return to a complete sense of self. You have “returned to life”. Your brain has protected you through a terrifying situation.

There will be those of you who protest, “yeah, but what about all those reports of paranormal events during Near Death Experiences?” You know the stories—meeting someone during your Near Death Experience who, unbeknownst to you, had just recently died. Or, you report being able to tell events that occurred somewhere else in the hospital that you supposedly visited during your Out of Body Experience. Researchers in all these studies, even the one put out by a staunch believer in Out of Body Experiences, treat these paranormal reports very skeptically. They say that they are usually told in anecdotal form, long after the event. Some Near Death experiences have been able to describe events that occurred in other rooms, but it is quite difficult to prove that any of those events actually occurred or were accurate as reported. Same thing with reports of subjects of Near Death Experiences being able to see into the future. There have been no studies done to show how many of these predictions turned out to be accurate. Reports of paranormal events have been very rare and very sloppily reported.

All in all, Near Death Experiences are beneficial to the subjects. The brain has protected the body from shock and overwhelming trauma. And, there is an unexpected side effect. Very often, the subject regards this as a profound life-altering experience. Adults often become more involved with church or spirituality and face life with an increased sense of purpose.

In the study of children who had Near Death Experiences that I mentioned earlier, common changes, not all positive, included:

- Altered biological patterns, such as amount of sleep or attentiveness
- Increased interest in universal love rather than love of specific people
- A lessening of the parent/child bonding. May be less demonstrative of feelings in the family, but has increased sensitivity to others’ feelings
- Distress from watching news reports and violence on television
- Increased interest in being of service to others
- Increased interest in spirituality
- A hunger for knowledge and anything philosophical, which often leads to unusual choices of reading material for their age
- Often appear more mature than children of their own age
- Have difficulty relating to children of their own age
- Communication with spirits, often labeled by children as angels, and by parents as imaginary friends
- Increased sensitivity to medications, bright lights, loud noises
- Strong desire to volunteer for charitable causes

Judging from this study of children alone, it is clear that Near Death Experiences are not to be dismissed. They deeply impact the lives of the subjects who have them.

But, are they religious experiences? Are they evidence of God or life after death? The jury is still out on that, but scientific evidence suggests not.

Is the Near Death Experience just a fascinating side-effect of what happens when the body goes through real or perceived near-death or was it planned by some higher being that we would be able to reach a transcendental plane and thus touch God?

I suppose this all begs the question of just what reality is. According to Trudy, my favorite bag lady, reality is nothing more than a collective hunch. All us humans have come to an unspoken agreement on what reality is. It's what our senses perceive and what our brains translate into common sense, I suppose. But there are a lot of unagreed upon happenings that some people see as reality and others just plain don't see at all.

An alcoholic going through DT's sees pink elephants on the ceiling. He can feel, with utter certainty, that there are spiders crawling up his legs. No one else can see them or feel them, but to that guy, that is reality. Who is to say that what he is experiencing isn't real?

People say that they have talked to Jesus who visits them, in person, in times of troubles. They hear Jesus talk. They know they have talked to him. No one else hears it.

Which is the realer reality? I don't know. Does reality have to be governed by majority rule? Can both realities be valid?

I was intending to end this talk about here. Talking about the definition of reality.

But, I had two surprising conversations two Sundays ago, here at UUFR. They both totally floored me, so I think I'll share them with you and see what you think.

I happened to mention to two people what my talk today was about—that I was going to talk about Near Death Experiences and Out of Body Experiences and try to explain how they occur in our minds. One guy asked me if I had ever had a Near Death Experience or an Out of Body Experience. I said no. Then he said, "So, you don't know what you're talking about, do you?" And walked away.

Shortly after that, I was talking about this book I had read and the research I had seen debunking the mysticism of Out of Body Experiences and how I was planning to talk about that book today. A woman said that, in that case, she wouldn't be at fellowship that week because she had read the Other Book.

My first reaction was, are these Unitarians? What happened to the willingness to explore ideas?

But, I think the issue that is most important is, what is it about Near Death Experiences that is so vital to people that they become rude or even angry when their belief in the mysticism of the experience is challenged?

Do they feel that if the Near Death Experience is only a trick of the brain that therefore God doesn't exist? That life after death does not exist? It's true that if Near Death Experiences are a way that God or the Infinite talks to us, then it's definite proof that life really does exist after death. But, if it's all in our brain, that doesn't disprove life after death. It merely says we have a truly amazing brain.

Do people need a sense of mysticism in their lives? Am I taking away their spirituality by exploring the source of Near Death Experiences? Do we need a large chunk of unexplained stuff in our lives to complete us?

What is it? Any thoughts?