

In which circumstances do NDEs occur ?

The near-death experience (NDE) can occur spontaneously when a person is close to death, clinically dead, in a coma, or, more rarely, exposed to a heavy trauma or an intense dread without any physical damage (in this last case, we talk of *fear-death experiences*). A comparable phenomenon can take place during the final stage of a terminal illness, called “deathbed” visions.

An NDE is characterized by the sensation of leaving the body, the impression of penetrating a transcendental reality and the perception of a being of light irradiating with love.

How does an NDE unfold ?

The persons who undergo an NDE (near-death experiencers or NDErs) have the sensation of leaving their body (**out of body experience**). They view their bodies and the surroundings from an external vantage point at some distance above (scene of accident, resuscitation, hospital ward, and so on). Typically, NDErs memorize the ongoing events, words and gestures which can be subsequently corroborated. The NDErs immediately experiment a feeling of **absolute bliss**, notice the absence of pain and lose interest in their bodies which they leave behind without any regret. Testimonies typically agree on the lucidity which characterizes the NDE, quite different from a dream or a hallucination. At this stage, NDErs have the impression of being “sucked” into a dark **tunnel** and of moving at an extremely high speed toward a brilliant light beckoning at the end of the tunnel, still very far away. The NDErs approach this light, which attracts them like a magnet, at dazzling speed and finally enter the light in an explosion of joy and beatitude. Next comes the encounter with a **being of light**, which is described as the vision of a dazzlingly beautiful light, personifying total love and absolute understanding, more intense than any earthly light, yet not blinding. Many make the analogy with “coming home” or “having reached their destination”. Communication between the being of light and NDErs happens instantaneously and without words, like telepathy. The encounter with the being of light produces a feeling of absolute **happiness**, total **understanding** and profound **peace**. At this state, a **life review** might occur. NDErs witness a three-dimensional and atemporal review of their whole life, from the most significant to the most banal events. In the presence of the being of light, they relive the events from their own perspective but also from the point of view of the persons who were involved in the action which is analyzed. This NDE feature has a strong didactic connotation, as it allows the NDErs to feel simultaneously the emotions of all the participants of the scene which permits them to fully understand the significance and implications of their actions.

According to numerous NDErs, **guides** and **guardian angels** were waiting for them at this stage of the experience in order to comfort and accompany them. They also encounter **deceased loved ones** which they identify more by recognition by spirit rather than by the perception of their bodies which are often described as translucent or fluid, with indistinguishable lines, or indeed totally absent. NDErs regularly report

seeing a limit or **boundary**, symbolized in various ways, which, if crossed, would make returning to the body impossible. The near-death experience terminates with the **reintegration of the physical body**, more often imposed than requested, rarely described in a precise manner but frequently associated with the idea of a mission to fulfill on earth.

It should be noted that one rarely finds all the above-mentioned features in a single near-death experience.

Bruce Greyson, M.D., Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia and editor in chief of the *“Journal of Near-Death Studies”* proposes the following original classification of the near-death experience:

A **cognitive** component, including time distortion, thought acceleration, life review, and sudden understanding; an **affective** component, including feelings of peace, joy, and cosmic unity, and an experience of a brilliant light ; a **paranormal** component, including enhanced vision or hearing, apparent extrasensory perception, precognitive vision, and an out-of-body experience; a **transcendental** component, including encounters with an apparently unearthly realm, a mystical being and visible spirits, and a barrier of “point of no return”, that, had the NDEr crossed it, would have precluded his or her return to life.

What are the most significant specificities of the NDE ?

Nationality, religion, education, intellectual level, social background, age or gender of a person do not determine the nature of their NDE, nor the probability of their occurrence, only their *interpretation* might be influenced by cultural factors, such as religious ones, but without shaping the experience (e.g. a practicing Catholic woman who said that *nothing* she was told by the Church during her whole life matched with what she experienced during her NDE). No difference has been noted between believers and non-believers as far as the frequency or the nature of NDEs are concerned.

The circumstances which bring a person at the threshold of death (accident, illness, cardiac arrest, suicide attempt) are not determinant factors.

Children, even very young ones, experience classical NDEs, even if they are told in a simpler way, with the words of children. Only the life review seems to be absent of these childhood NDEs (Morse and Perry, 1990).

A most remarkable study (Ring and Cooper, 1999) demonstrates that blind persons, even those blind from birth, can see during their NDE. The authors came to the conclusion that it is not a matter of normal visual perceptions but rather of a *vision through the spirit* or a state of omniscient consciousness.

Each near-death experience is unique in that it is linked to an individual, yet all NDEs share the same basic nature and produce the same effects. NDErs all describe a

nearly identical NDE progression and undergo very similar emotions. We can therefore start with the assumption that these are data that apply to human beings in general and inform us of their reactions when at the extreme edge of existence.

Although the NDE itself remains unverifiable (despite the astounding similarity of the accounts of millions of NDErs), based as it is on testimonies replete with subjective feelings, the same cannot be said for the positive transformations observed in those who have undergone the experience. Here again, these transformations are characterized by great similarity, despite the diversity of the NDErs.

The hypothesis triggered by the NDE that consciousness and memory continue to function during a state of clinical death intrigues, opens new perspectives and is the purpose of numerous scientific investigations.

What are the current statistics on NDEs ?

A recent study estimates that 15 millions of Americans or 5% of the population has experienced an NDE. 774 near-death experiences occur every day in the United States (Long, 2005).

A German study (Knoblauch, 1999) indicates that 4.3% of Germans have undergone an NDE, corresponding to 3.3 millions.

For France, the number of 2 millions of NDErs has been advanced.

It is commonly accepted that about 20% of persons who had a close brush with death under diverse circumstances had an NDE.

During 13 years, the Dutch cardiologist Pim van Lommel undertook a prospective study, including 344 consecutive cardiac patients who were successfully resuscitated after cardiac arrest in ten Dutch hospitals. The result of this research study, (published in *The Lancet* in 2001), indicates that 62 patients (18%) reported NDE, of whom 41 (12%) described a core experience. Occurrence of the experience was not associated with duration of cardiac arrest or unconsciousness, medication, or fear of death before cardiac arrest.

4 % to 5% of all NDEs are described as being negative or distressing (dNDE).

These figures show that an impressive number of individuals have experienced this phenomenon, and that doubts concerning its authenticity are no longer justified. Since all the studies conducted have unequivocally shown the NDE to be universal, not linked to a specific geographical area or culture, but rather to the general human condition, we can assume that an equivalent percentage of NDEs may be found in other countries around the world.

What is the impact of NDEs on the life of NDErs ?

Although NDEs have not (yet) been proven to be an objective reality, they are a reality of life for NDErs. This transcendental experience provokes a major crisis in their lives, a major questioning of their values and a new comprehension of the world. The abolition of the notion of time and space which occurred during the NDE, the experience of leaving their physical body and yet remaining themselves, with their personality, their biography, their emotions, their intellectual abilities - even heightened - constitute in themselves a major shock. The encounter with the being of light is equivalent for many to a revelation and represents without doubt the most deeply transformative stage of the experience. The emotional intensity of the near-death experience and the difficulty of putting it into words (some name it ineffability) isolate the NDErs from their family and friends and put them on the fringe of society. This feeling of isolation is even more accentuated by the difficulty of finding their place in a family and a community which values, aims and preoccupations they no longer share.

NDErs are made more fragile by the fact that, having come so close to death, they have undergone a major trauma. After their NDE, they often find themselves in a critical physical state, as a result of the illness or accident that had led them to the brink of death. Nevertheless, the fact of having been so close to death is certainly a traumatic event but does not explain by itself the totality of the changes observed in the lives of NDErs (Ring, 1980).

In many cases, NDErs are unable to give a name to the event they have experienced, but are utterly convinced that it is of vital importance to them. This marks the beginning of a period of destabilization and an often painful return to daily life which suddenly seems dull and devoid of sense.

The process of transformation extends over years, even several decades of years. A study of Pim van Lommel, M.D. (2000) indicates an average of 8 years for the complete unfolding of the after-effects of a near-death experience. The profound modification of life style and values of NDErs is so obvious that it can be easily corroborated and analyzed. The quest of a new way of living is often complicated by the necessity which the NDErs consider as imperative to give a meaning to their life and fulfill their "mission" which justified their return to the physical body. NDErs find peace only when they have understood and accepted the new path opening before them. They then harvest the fruits of their ceaseless efforts, of their obstinate quest, liberated of the fear of death, convinced that each event, joyful or painful, which they will live is infinitely just and reassured by the conviction that they will "go home" when the time will come to leave definitely their physical body.

Does the personality change after an NDE ?

NDEs provoke a massive and fundamental questioning of values, of aims and the way to live one's life.

The major changes concern:

Social issues: primacy of love, empathy, greater concern for interpersonal relationships, tolerance, caring for others.

Material issues: diminution or renunciation of attachment to material possession, of professional and financial achievements, of social status.

Issues of **self conception:** transformation of value scale, increased self-acceptance and self-esteem, thirst for knowledge and understanding, aspiration for self-development, notion of a “mission” to accomplish.

Issues of **conception of life:** increased joy of living, meaning of life takes shape and deepens with the passage of time, capacity of fully and intensely living the present time, spiritual awakening, diminution or disappearance of fear of death, conviction that consciousness survives bodily death, certainty of the existence of a spiritual reality.

Do NDEs induce psychic abilities ?

A significant number of NDErs develop psychic abilities following their NDE. These newly-acquired abilities include telepathy, prophetic or precognitive visions, ability to see at distance, to read the thoughts of others as well as to diagnose illnesses and even heal some of them. There are frequent reports of NDErs who see apparitions of loved ones at the precise moment of the latter’s death. During an NDE, it seems that an access to an enlarged state of consciousness has been opened in which a larger reality – which transcends time, space and matter – encompasses ordinary reality. And seemingly, this opening does not close up entirely after the experience. It seems, as Kenneth Ring expresses it, that a seed has been planted which is free to sprout over time or not. Some quotes illustrate these newly appeared psychic abilities:

- *“After my NDE, I had several out-of-body experiences”.*
- *“... My sensitivity is much more developed, I have telepathic abilities and a great facility for decoration, I am also able to heal and help others.”*
- *“My sensitivity is heightened, I learn much quicker, I concentrate better, I have a better memory and some psychic abilities, but, overall, I try to incarnate myself and not leave my body anymore: it is in and through my body that life experience unfolds, and nowhere else !”*

These abilities might be a burden on times, for it seems that the phenomena of precognition mostly concern events with a strong emotional connotation (Jourdan, 2005).

As far as I am concerned, I believe that all human beings have the potential for these abilities, but they are dormant. All it needs to activate them is to have one’s consciousness widened, such as it occurs during a near-death experience.

What is the state of NDE research to date ?

History

Scientific NDE research started 1978 with the setting up of the *“International Association for Near-Death Studies” (IANDS)*, co-founded and chaired by Kenneth

Ring. Since then, reputed researchers belonging to different disciplines and located in many countries have studied this phenomenon and its implications.

Specificities

The impressions and feelings of someone who has undergone a near-death experience are, by definition, subjective, intimate, and difficult to convey. NDE research is faced with a phenomenon that cannot be measured, quantified, or observed by the usual scientific means. With the exception of the out-of-body experience (OBE), which is relatively easy to corroborate, NDE research necessarily entails a thoughtful inquiry into transcendence.

Methodology

In the first place, NDE research consists in collecting and analyzing NDE testimonies by the means of standardized protocols (Ring, Greyson) and treating them statistically and qualitatively in a multidisciplinary approach.

To date, researchers (mostly Europeans and Americans) have gathered, analyzed and described thousands of NDE testimonies. This data is studied from the perspectives of psychiatric, psychological, pharmacological, neurological and neurophysiological hypothesizes. Besides the typology of the experience itself, its psychological consequences have been investigated in many scientific research studies.

Comparative studies with closely related experiences are also conducted in order to understand better the specificity of NDEs compared to similar experiences. Mystical revelations consecutive to many long years of practicing present certain similarities with NDEs.

Controversy

Controversy, sustained by materialistic researchers (such as Susan Blackmore) goes on concerning the question whether the near-death experience is a phenomenon which proves the survival of consciousness after physical death or if it is just a epiphenomenon of the dying brain.

State of research

The moderate progress of the comprehension of the functioning and the nature of the NDE confirms its complexity. The medical, psychological and parapsychological models and hypothesizes formulated so far are unable to neither explain NDEs in their universality nor clarify all of their components.

Nevertheless, research of the after-effects of NDEs on the lives of NDErs starts to bear fruit as it facilitates their individual and social integration. The NDE phenomenon begins to be widely known, its frequent appearance in the media, though often sensationalist, allows for an informed public.

The challenge remains to draw conclusions and gain full benefit of this transcendental experience, on the scientific as well as on the philosophical level.