

Distressing Western NDEs: Research Summary

General Studies, no dNDEs

Note: Please keep in mind that figures for "n NDE" and "n dNDE" are numbers *reported*, not necessarily the number of actual experiences in most samples. Under-reporting, especially of distressing NDEs, has been recognized as common. (Hoffman, Greyson-Bush, Bache, Bush, Clark Sharp)

Study	Pop/type	n NDE	n dNDE	%	Findings	Comment
<i>General Studies</i>						
R. Moody 1975	Anecdotal General pop	50	0	0	...In the mass of material I have collected no one has ever described to me a state like the archetypal hell.	The classic on NDE, established the pattern & the field No 'archetypal hell' but does not mention other types of dNDE
K. Ring 1980	Quantitative Self-select general	46	0	0	sometimes ... scared or confused near ... beginning of their experience, none felt ... either on their way to hell or ... had "fallen into" it. ... affective tone and visionary aspects of the near-death experience ... predominantly and highly positive.	First quantified study of NDE, introduced Weighted Core Experience Index (WCEI)
1984		62	0	0	[Frightening features] appear to have been, in the main, <i>hallucinatory visions</i>	Beyond descriptive data, speculative as to mechanics and purpose of NDE (holographic universe)
Sutherland 1987	General, self- select	50	0	0	No mention	Modified WCEI
<i>Medical Studies</i>						
Sabom 1982	Quantified, prospective In-patient	78	0	0	"In my sample ... I did <i>not</i> encounter a "hellish" NDE ... Since [then], I have encountered a few distressing NDEs..."*	*Sabom JNDS 14(3) 208
Parnia et al 2001	Cardiac arrest	73	0	0	Mentioned but not discussed; no data	Greyson scale
vanLommel 2001	Cardiac arrest	62	0	0	"No patients reported distressing or frightening NDE"	
Greyson 2003	Cardiac in-pts	27	0	0	No mention of fNDE	
Schwanner 2005	Cardiac arrest	11	0	0	"None of the NDErs reported resignation, curiosity, anxiety, fear, anger, dread, despair, or anguish"	WCEI & Greyson scale
9		n=459	0	0%		

General Studies: with Distressing NDEs

* = see Comment column; c = estimate based on reported percentage

Name	Pop	n NDE	n dNDE	%	Findings	Comment
Rawlings 1978 1993	Anecdotal Most cardiac in-patients	"Several hundred" *33 *32	*12 *15	39 48	Accounts taken as evidence of literal biblical hell, urgent need for salvation to avoid dNDE Interview immediately post-resuscitation or NDE will be repressed, forgotten or recalled as pleasant	* Sabom calculations (JNDS 14(3)) Vivid accounts but shaky data: factual errors; accounts inconsistent in retelling; conclusions not replicated by others Intent is to rescue non-believers more than to provide research data.
Garfield 1979	Cancer patients	47	Almost half c 22	<50	4 types: classic radiant; demonic or nightmarish images; dreamlike images – "blissful," "terrifying," or alternating; Void, tunnel, or both (contrast freedom/constraint). Almost as many dying patients reported negative visions as blissful experiences, while some reported both	Additional survey of 36 cardiac patients over 3 interviews showed consistency of recall (contrary to Rawlings)
Evergreen 1981	Self-select clinical death or believed self died & back	55	11	20	One (<2%) hellish; fiery pit, devil. 18% "negative": "...extreme fear, panic, anger...visions of demonic creatures that threaten or taunt"; most transform to positive NDE, but some positive to negative	First academic study following Ring LAD Interview, WCEI
Gallup 1982	Random sample, national poll	Not given		1- <28	1% sense of hell or torment; but "picture is more complex than that. [M]any...had either a neutral or negative experience." Void; nothingness; uncaring God; tricked or duped; featureless, forbidding figures; confusion, fear of death	Note 1% is not all dNDEs but a single hellish account with elements of biblical hell ("gnashing teeth, searing flames")
Evans Bush 1983	Most self-sel, 2 mothers	17	2	12	1 child in darkness, threatened by mysterious presence 1 child met "the devil" but rebuffed him	First report of NDE/dNDE in children, based on retrospective accounts, 2 mothers of then-4-year-olds
Grey 1985	Self-select	41	5	12	"extreme fear or panic...anguish...lost... desolation... fire/ devil... brink of a pit...the edge of an abyss...being tricked into death	Explicit definitions; distinguishes between hellish and negative NDEs; notes similarity of pattern & elements in radiant & frightening NDEs
Atwater 1992	Anecdotal Self-select	700	105	14	Void, limbo, hellish, indifference; seem to have deeply suppressed/repressed guilts, fears, angers/ expect punishment or discomfort at death	Attuned to experiencer perspectives. Insightful, wide-ranging, detailed exploration of dNDEs, marked by metaphysical pronouncements, without evidence, of cause, effect, and mechanics of phenomena

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General Studies: with Distressing NDEs, cont.

Name	Pop	n NDE	n dNDE	%	Findings	Comment
Serdaheily 1995	Non-random NDErs	12	4	33	"Frightening, scary, unpleasant" but no hellish images	Two other (secondhand) reports include hellish imagery
Rommer 2000	Self-select	300	53	>18	"Feelings of terror, despair, guilt, and/or other overwhelming aloneness" "Every [distressing near-death] experience I have studied has been transforming"	Strong collection of dNDE reports, but tendency to project own beliefs onto experiencers; draws conclusions without substantiation: "He had no life review because it wasn't necessary."
Knoblauch et al 2001	Random German national poll	82	c 36	43	Structure differs from classic NDE ; accounts are scenic more than narrative, less emotional; improved outlook but not major moral life changes dNDE: More E Ger (60%/) than W Ger (29%)	Culturally anomalous
Bonenfant 2001	Case study	1	1		1 child encountered "putrid rotting flesh" identified as devil	
11		1,320	c 266	c 20.1		

Studies of Distressing NDEs

Name	Pop	n NDE	n dNDE	%	Findings	Comment
Greyson-Bush 1993	Self-select dNDE	50	50	100	No single "dNDE" but three types: classic elements perceived as terrifying; Void; images of traditional hell	First analytical study of exclusively dNDE accounts; reports patterns, does not speculate as to causes
1		1,370	50			
<i>All categories</i>		n NDE	n dNDE	%		
21		1,829	316	17.2		

Distressing NDEs: What can be concluded with relative certainty

While this list seems to me to represent facts about distressing NDEs that can be concluded with relative certainty, this is one person's view; its constitution and wording are open for discussion.

- Near-death experiences, both radiant and distressing, are not a unique type of event but belong to a family of experiences of the deep psyche; the family that includes experiences of prayer, meditation, shamanic initiation, near-death, and other circumstances.
- Some NDEs produce intense terror, guilt, panic, loneliness, despair; as radiant NDEs represent the heights of spiritual/human experience, these represent the depths.
- Distressing experiences are more common than has been thought.
- There is no evidence that “good” people have good experiences and “bad” people have bad experiences; as many individuals have survived them, they are not permanent.
- They are underreported out of fear, shame, social stigma, the sense that the person cannot burden others with such horrific information, or other reasons.
- There is no *single* distressing NDE; at least three general types have been identified, (inverted, void, hell-like), with a possible fourth (guilt-laden life review).
- Not all dNDEs are associated with clinical death; they occur in both life-threatening and non-life-threatening situations.
- A conclusion about the meaning of the NDE is determined by the predominant emotional tone within the experience.
- An experience may remain emotionally consistent, move from negative emotions to positive, or from positive to negative.
- The general pattern and elements of blissful and distressing NDEs are similar: OBE, darkness, encounter with beings, ineffability, life-changing messages, intense emotions, sometimes transcendent elements (symbols, archetypal and cross-cultural images).
- While *content* of the experiences may be to some extent culturally conditioned; certainly post-NDE *interpretations* are culturally derived.
- A distressing NDE may produce long-lasting emotional and psycho-spiritual trauma.
- After a dNDE, a person may find meaning through conversion or reductionism, or may struggle to come to resolution.
- Physiologically, some temporal lobe involvement seems central as a mediator of the affective component of NDEs.