

are pleasurable and a minority are distressing. NDEs, both pleasurable and distressing, occur to all types of people all over the world: all ages, races, backgrounds, and religions. For more information, see the IANDS brochure “Distressing Near-Death Experiences.”

#### ***What causes a near-death experience?***

More than a dozen theories have been put forward to explain the NDE and its associated physical mechanisms, but none of them singly or together fits all cases.

#### ***This is the nuttiest thing I ever heard.***

Like other things that have no rational explanation at the present time, NDEs may at first seem “nutty.” An NDE is a genuine experience—an event that one individual experiences and remembers—and it usually has aftereffects, but it cannot yet be explained in terms of what we usually think of as “normal.”

#### ***This sure doesn't sound very scientific***

Science deals with *objective* matters that can be observed, tested, and measured by someone else. An NDE is a *subjective* experience: It can be felt and reported only by the person who has it. For this and other reasons, some people claim that the NDE cannot be scientifically “real.” Conversely, other scientists consider NDEs as scientifically valid as any other intense personal experience. The difference may be that some scientists demand physical proof of reality, while others are less troubled by ambiguity.

In any event, tens of thousands of NDEs are being reported from all parts of the world. Something does seem to be happening, whether or not everyone agrees that it is scientifically understandable.

#### ***My doctor says NDEs are dreams or hallucinations.***

Everyone dreams, and most people remember their dreams at least occasionally. People who have had NDEs say their NDEs were totally different than their dreams. For example, upon awakening, a dreamer usually knows the dream was not “real,” whereas upon returning to normal consciousness, NDErs usually say the NDE was more real than normal reality.

Similarly, people who have experienced both an NDE and hallucination say the two experiences are quite different. Again, in retrospect, a hallucination is known to have been “unreal” whereas an NDE usually is perceived to have been “hyperreal.” Your doctor may

understand dreams and hallucinations more than (s)he does NDEs. In particular, extensive research has shown that NDEs are not an indication of mental disorder.

#### ***Don't NDEs prove that there is life after death?***

Certainly this is a very popular interpretation, although there is no “proof” in a statistical sense and no consensus of opinion. A more cautious explanation is that NDEs *suggest* that some aspect of human consciousness may continue after physical death. No means currently exists to demonstrate whether this speculation is true.

#### ***Are the people who have NDEs very religious?***

People who report NDEs are no better or worse—and no more or less religious—than people in any cross-section of the general population. NDErs come from many religious backgrounds and from the ranks of agnostics and even atheists. Similarly, NDEs occur in both adults and children. The latter topic is addressed in more detail in the IANDS brochure, “Children’s Near-Death Experiences.”

#### ***How do people react when they come back?***

A person who has just had a near-death experience probably has very mixed feelings. One person may express anger or grief at being resuscitated; another may express relief. Other typical reactions:

- ◆ fear that the NDE signified some kind of mental disorder;
- ◆ disorientation because reality has shifted;
- ◆ euphoria, feeling special or “chosen”;
- ◆ withdrawal to ponder the experience.

#### ***Does an NDE really change a person's life?***

Almost every near-death experiencer reports changes after the experience. The changes may be numerous. They may occur at the physical, psychological, and/or spiritual levels. They may be very difficult or impossible for the NDEr to describe or explain. The changes reflect a fundamental shift in the NDEr’s ideas of what life is all about. For more information about changes spawned by NDEs, see the IANDS brochure, “Aftereffects of Near-Death States.”

#### ***I had one of these experiences, but no one told me I was in danger. Was my doctor lying to me?***

Probably not. Dr. Raymond Moody, in his 1975 book *Life After Life*, created the term “near-death experiences” to describe the clinical death experiences of people he

had interviewed. However, although being close to death is a fairly reliable “trigger,” identical experiences happen under very different circumstances, even to people who are in no way close to physical death. The best known experiences are those of saints and religious mystics. Deep prayer and meditation can produce events like NDEs, as can other altered states of consciousness, without the person being near physical death.

#### ***When my mother was dying, we thought she was hallucinating, but what she described sounds like an NDE. Could this be true?***

People who are dying frequently describe seeing a wonderful light or a landscape they want to enter. They may talk with people who are invisible to everyone else, or they may look radiant and at peace. Such “deathbed visions” may be related to NDEs. For more information about these kinds of experiences, see the IANDS brochure “Near-Death Experiences and Nearing-Death Awareness in the Terminally Ill.”

#### ***If You Have Had an NDE***

You are not alone, and you have not lost your mind. An NDE is an extraordinary experience that happens to normal people.

You may want to tell the world about your NDE, or you may want to think about it, possibly for a long time, before trying to say anything. You will probably feel frustrated trying to find words to describe it, and fearful that no one else will understand. You may find the IANDS brochure “Caring for the Near-Death Experiencer: Considerations for Experiencers ” as well as the resources listed at the end of this publication, to be helpful in the aftermath of your NDE or similar experience.

#### ***If Someone You Know Has Had an NDE***

It is as if the other person has returned from a country you have never visited and cannot even imagine. The best thing you can do is listen. Simply being with the person and letting him/her talk will be more helpful than you may think; you are not expected to have answers or opinions. There are many interpretations of NDEs, and only the individual can decide the meaning of this particular experience.

An NDE is not an indication of mental disorder, but its effects are often powerful. Some people adjust easily afterwards, while others feel challenged to integrate the experience into their subsequent lives. In the latter case, professional help may be needed for the person to get back

on track. For a more in-depth discussion of how to be helpful to someone who has had an NDE or similar experience, consult the IANDS brochure “Caring for the Near-Death Experiencer: Considerations for Caregivers.”

#### ***Where Can I Get More Information?***

IANDS offers several print sources of further information as well as resources for referral to others who’ve had similar experiences. Visit the IANDS website or contact the IANDS office to access the following resources:

#### ***For further reading material:***

- ◆ A list of IANDS’ free brochures on specific NDE-related topics.
- ◆ A free copy of the Introductory Bibliography of Near-Death Experiences that lists recommended book readings on NDEs in general and on specific NDE-related topics.
- ◆ A purchasable “Near-Death Experiences Research Bibliography, Part I” on CD-ROM that lists articles—organized by NDE-related topics—from IANDS’ *Journal of Near-Death Studies*. If you do not have access to free reprints, you may purchase reprints from the Near-Death Literature Clearinghouse.

#### ***For audio resources:***

- ◆ Audiotapes of presentations from past IANDS annual conferences

#### ***For referral to others who've had similar experiences:***

- ◆ The list and locations of the approximately 55 “Friends of IANDS” local support groups across the U.S., elsewhere in North America, and around the world.
- ◆ The IANDS website Message Boards, especially the one “For Experiencers Only.”

For information about how to find a mental health professional with whom to discuss NDEs or related experiences:

- ◆ The IANDS brochure “The Experiencer’s Guide to Psychotherapy.”

If you found this brochure helpful and would like to help others have access to such information, you can support IANDS through

- ◆ ongoing membership,
- ◆ donations of money, and/or
- ◆ donations of your time and talents.

Please use the contact information that appears on this brochure.



**For More Information, write . . .**

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**or visit . . . our web site at  
[www.iands.org](http://www.iands.org)**

Incorporated in Connecticut in 1981 as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization according to Internal Revenue Service regulations, the International Association for Near-Death Studies, Inc. (IANDS) mission is to respond to needs for information and support concerning near-death and similar experiences. IANDS' goals are:

- ❖ To encourage thoughtful exploration of all facets of near-death and similar experiences;
- ❖ To provide reliable information about such experiences to experiencers, caregivers, researchers, and the public;
- ❖ To serve as a contact point and community for people with particular interest in near-death and similar experiences.

IANDS maintains no "party line" on the interpretation of near-death or similar experiences and is open to the presentation of varying responsible points of view. The Association is committed to scholarly investigation of the NDE and to providing accurate information based on those findings.

IANDS publishes two quarterly periodicals, the scholarly *Journal of Near-Death Studies* and the newsletter *Vital Signs*, in addition to other informational materials. It sponsors a national conference in North America annually and other conferences occasionally.

## *Coming Back...*

# *Understanding Near-Death and Similar Experiences*



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When the bleeding wouldn't stop, Bill knew he was dying. "I was going, but I felt totally at peace. There was a golden kind of light, brighter than the sun, but it didn't hurt my eyes. I never wanted anything as much as to go into that light, but something or somebody—it felt like my dad, who died when I was a kid—communicated to me, 'It isn't your time. You must go back to finish what you have to do in your life.' The next thing I knew, I was slammed back into my body. It felt like a wet sock, and the pain was just awful."

For Marilyn, in the emergency room with a heart attack, the pain suddenly stopped. "All at once I just popped out of my body and floated up to the ceiling. I could see dust on top of the light fixtures, and I thought, 'Boy, somebody's going to catch it for this!' I could see doctors working on someone on the table when, all of a sudden, I realized it was me—I mean, my body. I thought it was kind of silly they were working so hard. My family was waiting down the hall, and I wished my kids could stop crying; I wanted to let them know I was fine, but they couldn't hear me. Then it seemed I had to get back, that it was my job to take care of them, see them grow up okay."

When the car stopped flipping, Kurt thought he had been thrown into outer space. "I was alone, all by myself out in the universe. I could hear noises, sort of like moans, and I could see these figures in the distance. They were in torment. They were helpless and gesturing to me to join them. Then I was realizing it would be like that forever. Being there was absolutely terrifying. I've never felt so relieved as I did when I regained consciousness."

What Bill, Marilyn, and Kurt have shared are near-death experiences. NDEs have occurred throughout history, in all parts of the world. It is even possible that experiences like these helped to create the world's religions, ideas about heaven and hell, and other beliefs about what may happen at or after death.

### *What is a Near-Death Experience (NDE)?*

Although most people who have come close to death say they remember nothing, as many as a third may later report that "something happened." That "something" might be a near-death experience, an NDE.

No two NDEs are identical, but when numerous NDE reports are considered together, a pattern becomes evident. Any single experience is likely to include one or more of these aspects of the overall pattern:

- ❖ Feeling that the "self" has left the body and is hovering overhead. The person may later be able to describe who was where and what happened, sometimes in detail.
- ❖ Moving through a dark space or tunnel.
- ❖ Experiencing intensely powerful emotions, ranging from bliss to extreme distress.

- ❖ Encountering a light. It is usually described as golden or white, and as being magnetic and loving; rarely, it is perceived as a reflection of the fires of hell.
- ❖ Receiving some variant of the message "It is not yet your time."
- ❖ Meeting others: may be deceased loved ones, recognized from life or not; sacred beings; unidentified entities and/or "beings of light"; sometimes symbols from one's own or other religious traditions.
- ❖ A life review, seeing and re-experiencing major and trivial events of one's life, sometimes from the perspective of the other people involved, and coming to some conclusion about the adequacy of that life and what changes are needed.
- ❖ Having a sense of understanding everything, of knowing how the universe works.
- ❖ Reaching a boundary—a cliff, fence, water—some kind of barrier that may not be crossed if one is to return to life.
- ❖ In some cases, entering a city or library.
- ❖ Rarely, receiving previously unknown information about one's life—i.e., adoption or hidden parentage, deceased siblings, glimpses into future events.
- ❖ Decision to return may be voluntary or involuntary. If voluntary, usually associated with unfinished service to loved ones.
- ❖ Returning to the body.

Most NDEs are pleasurable, but others are deeply distressing. In either case, virtually all NDErs sooner or later come to see the experience as beneficial.

### *Questions People Ask about the NDE*

#### *How many people have had this experience?*

The Gallup Organization and near-death research studies have estimated that, as of 1982, some 13 million adults NDEs in the U.S. alone had had one or more NDEs. Add children's NDEs, all experiences worldwide, and all experiences since 1982, and the figure would be much larger. Near-death experiences are uncommon but not rare.

#### *Why doesn't everybody close to death have one?*

No one knows why, among people in similar circumstances, some people do and others do not report near-death experiences, and why most reported NDEs