Positive Aftereffects of Near-Death Experiences

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A Death blow is a Life blow to Some
Who till the died, did not alive become—
Who had they lived, had died but when
The died, Vitality begun.

*Emily Dickinson*
Reasons Aftereffects Attracted Interest

- Changes positive and of great significance
- Such change could serve therapeutic ends
- They might aid in understanding death
- May serve to validate the NDE itself
- May be studied prospectively and verified by others

Definition of Near-Death Experience

- “NDE a transcendent or mystical experience occurring at the boundary of death” (Greyson, 1999)
- Transcendent: going beyond the limits of
- Mystical: having a spiritual meaning or reality
- Death: physical cessation of life
- NDE may occur with “deaths in life”
Review of Literature
Thirty Years

• Studies of unbiased samples
• Adequate sample size and comparison groups
• Statistical methods to test hypotheses
• Near-Death Experiences Index to Periodical Literature (2006)
• Thesis project of Rozan Christian

Questions About Aftereffects

What are the aftereffects?
• Are they consistent, form a pattern?
• Are they related to the NDE or coming close to death?
• What factors influence their occurrence?
• What happens to them over time?
• What do they teach us about death?
Studies of Aftereffects

- Noyes (1980) initial study
- Ring (1984) developed measures of depth and life change
- Van Lommel, et al. (2001) prospective cardiac arrest study
- Schwaninger, et al. (2002) prospective cardiac arrest study

Percent Reporting Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2 Years</th>
<th></th>
<th>8 Years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to love others</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of inner meaning</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern spiritual matters</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>-8</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of death</td>
<td>-47</td>
<td>-16</td>
<td>-63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Aftereffects

Altered Perception of Self

- Loss of fear of death
- Strengthened belief in life after death
- Feeling specially favored by God
- New sense of purpose, mission
- Heightened self-esteem
- Altered perception of the body

The Aftereffects

Altered Relationship to Others

- Increased concern for others
- Lessened concern for material gain
- Greater empathy and compassion
- More tolerant, less judgmental
- Greater desire to serve others
- Increased ability to express feelings
The Aftereffects

Altered Attitude Towards Life
- Greater appreciation of, zest for, life
- Increased focus on the present
- Deeper religious faith
- Search for knowledge
- Greater appreciation for nature

Psychological and Physical Healing

The Aftereffects

Paranormal Phenomena
- Out-of-body experiences
- Apparitions
- Extrasensory perception
- Precognition
- Healing
- Spiritual, mystical, or transcendent experiences
Percent Reporting Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Before %</th>
<th>After %</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extrasensory perception</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>55</td>
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<tr>
<td>Out-of-body experience</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encounter apparitions</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mystical experiences</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Aftereffects

Alterations in Perception, Consciousness

- Heightened sensations
- Physiological alterations
- Unusual movements, sensations
- Unusual special sensory experiences
- Mental changes
- Increased energy, decreased need for sleep
The Aftereffects

Kundalini Phenomena

- Intense positive emotions 76%
- Changes in speed of thought 61%
- Watching oneself from distance 55%
- Intense negative emotions 52%
- Internal voices 46%
- Internal sounds 42%
- Changes in breathing 39%
- Ascending sensations 37%
- Spontaneous orgasmic sensations 37%
- Becoming locked into position 20%
- Assuming strange positions 17%
- Unexplained hot, cold sensations 10%

Factors that Influence Aftereffects

Pre-existing Factors
- Personality traits
- Religious beliefs
- Cultural variables

Near-Death Event Variables
- Circumstances of NDE
- Closeness to death

Post NDE Variables
- Depth of NDE
- Person’s response to NDE
- Social support
- Coping style of NDEr
Factors that Influence Aftereffects:
Near-Death Event Variables

Depth of NDE strongly related
Coming close to death produces change
  • Literature on post-traumatic growth
  • Meaning found in adverse events
Suicide attempts produce typical NDEs
  • NDEs reduce suicidality
  • Suicide a search for transcendence?

Factors that Influence Aftereffects:
Pre-Existing Factors

• Demographic factors not important
• No evidence of psychopathology
• Developmental factors: child abuse
• Personality predisposition: dissociation
• Religious and cultural factors
Factors that Influence Aftereffects: Post NDE Variables

- NDErs reaction to his or her experience
- Reaction of professionals, family, etc.
- Capacity for change
- Supportive environment

Early Aftereffects and their Progression

Early reactions
- Immediately afterwards ‘dazed and perplexed’
- Lingering contact with alternate reality
  - alterations in time and space
  - detachment from world, body
  - heightened sensation, sensibility
- Initial reactions and disclosure
Early Aftereffects and their Progression

Development and progression

- Integration trajectories (Sutherland, 1992)
  - blocked
  - arrested
  - steady
  - accelerated
- Stages in integration process (Hoffman, 1995)
  - shock/surprise
  - need for validation
  - interpersonal implications
  - active exploration
  - integration

Early Aftereffects and their Progression

Difficulties that may arise
- Some NDErs face beginning a new life
- Aftereffects may be misunderstood
- Changes may strain relationships
- May force reassessment of relationships, career
- Problems adjusting may offset increases in life satisfaction
Clinical Intervention
Immediately after event professionals should

• Be alert for NDE
• Be aware and accepting of NDE
• Avoid labeling as pathological or dismissing
• Be supportive and provide information
• Make other resources available
  - literature on NDEs
  - support groups for NDErs
  - organizations devoted to NDEs

Clinical Intervention
Problems for intervention (Greyson and Harris, 1987)

• Intrapsychic problems
  - distress and difficulty accepting return
  - conflict of NDE with prior beliefs
  - excessive identification as NDEr
  - fear NDE reflects mental instability

• Interpersonal problems
  - a sense of exclusiveness
  - fear of ridicule or rejection
  - conflict with family over changes
  - difficulty conveying meaning of NDE
  - difficulty changing life roles
  - difficulty accepting imperfection
Clinical Intervention

Working with NDErs therapists should
• Regard problems from NDE as life crises
• Be aware of NDE, strong aftereffects
• Avoid idealizing the experience
• Avoid viewing NDEr as victim
• Help NDEr appreciate active role
• Help NDEr distinguish NDE from aftereffects

(Greyson and Harris, 1987)

Clinical Intervention

Specific interventions (Greyson and Harris, 1987)
• Explore NDE features for problem
• Encourage grief work for parts of self lost
• Induce altered consciousness
• Marital or family therapy when needed
• Psychosocial rehabilitation
• Counseling regarding new directions
Clinical Intervention

Therapy for the dying
• Aftereffects of potential value to dying
• Dying persons may have NDEs
• Presently no acceptable method of induction
• Persons with fatal illness may benefit from learning about aftereffects

Meaning of Life Changes

Pattern of positive life change reflects rebirth
• NDE a death-rebirth experience
• Old self dies, a new person is born
• This is not death in the physical sense

Rebirth is manifested in aftereffects
• NDErs refer to themselves as reborn
• They have received precious gift of life
• Have a unique mission
• And a personal relationship with God
Meaning of Life Changes

Loss of death fear yields greater vitality
- Vitality and stasis are qualities of existence
- NDE yields greater vitality
- Characteristics of vitality or “aliveness”
  - sense of invulnerability
  - sense of special importance
  - special favor of God
  - belief in continued existence
- John 6:47 Heaven is now.

Meaning of Life Changes

Loss of fear of death a consistent feature
- Fear of death an ultimate concern
- This fear robs one of life
- This fear is lost through
  - the experience of survival
  - rescue by divine agency
  - receipt of special favor

NDE has two important consequences
- An existential crisis
- A spiritual encounter
Limitations and Future Directions

Some limitations of existing research
- NDE difficult to study
- Small, biased samples
- Retrospective report of change
- Interpretation of differences
  - NDErs vs. non-NDErs

Limitations and Future Directions

Needed are studies
- Defining and measuring NDE
- Examining various dimensions of aftereffects
- Using nonspecific measures
- Comparing groups cross sectionally
- Longitudinal study of trajectories
- Providing corroboration by informants
- Involving community surveys
- Integrating negative and positive effects
CONCLUSION