

Fact Sheet: End-of-Life Experiences: Deathbed Visions (DBV)

A DBV is a subjective experience in which a dying person, while awake, perceives and interacts with deceased loved ones—people or pets—or religious/spiritual figures that are imperceptible to others who are with the dying person.

What forms do DBVs take?

DBVs typically include several features.

Someone experiencing a DBV:

- Can describe who or what they are seeing at the time of the experience – for example, “He’s [deceased person] here now. Don’t you see him?”
- Can report it sometime later—for example, “Yesterday, I saw my mother [deceased] sitting on the end of my bed.”
- Behaves in a way that implies they are experiencing a DBV—for example, smiling or pointing in the direction of someone or something that no one else can see.

Features of a DBV include the dying person:

- Communicating and conversing responsively with the unseen (by others) visitor – for example, speaking out loud or mouthing words
- Staring or gazing fixedly at a spot in the room—such as, in a room, at the doorway, foot of the bed, an empty chair, or the upper ceiling corner
- Pointing or reaching out one or both arms toward the unseen visitor
- Expressing feelings of happiness, joy, and peace verbally and nonverbally—for example, smiling
- Trying to sit up or get out of bed—sometimes involving physical movements others thought the dying person was no longer capable of (see Fact Sheet: Terminal Lucidity: <https://iands.org/education/fact-sheets/fact-sheet-terminal-lucidity/>)
- Apparently journeying with their unseen visitor to a different reality – often a beautiful place where they will go when they die

DBVs occur most frequently in the hours, days, weeks, or, more rarely, months before death and are widely

recognized as an indicator that death is near. In the literature, deathbed visitors tend to appear in the dying person’s room; in principle, however, they could appear when a person dies outdoors.

Who has DBVs, and how common are they?

A wide variety of dying people have reported DBVs; they are not uncommon.

DBVs have been observed since ancient times among people of different ages, cultures, religious practices, socioeconomic levels, educational levels, and genders.

The frequency of DBVs varies depending on who is reporting them—for example, healthcare professionals, nursing home staff, hospice volunteers, death doulas, family caregivers, or dying persons themselves. In one U.S. study, 88% of the hospice patients interviewed reported experiencing at least one end-of-life dream or vision (Kerr et al., 2014). In a Canadian study, 88% of the death doulas surveyed reported witnessing a dying person experiencing a DBV in the previous five years (Claxton-Oldfield & de Ste-Croix Killoran, 2025).

Are DBVs hallucinations?

Many factors indicate that DBVs are not hallucinations.

- Although low oxygen in the brain can cause hallucinations, people whose oxygen levels are good report DBVs.
- Although some medications can cause hallucinations, dying persons who are not on painkilling medication—or on any medication at all—report DBVs. In fact, people on large doses of painkilling drugs are less likely to report DBVs.
- Whereas hallucinations brought on by oxygen deprivation, drugs, or delusional states such as delirium, high fever, or dementia are usually

confusing, disordered, and bizarre (make no sense), DBVs make perfect sense to dying people and usually to those who witness or learn about the DBV, as well.

- Whereas someone who had a hallucination considers it unreal, someone who had a DBV reports that it felt real.
- Whereas drug- or disease-induced hallucinations are generally perplexing and frightening, DBVs are usually pleasurable, comforting, and reassuring.
- In some DBVs, the dying person receives information not normally available but later confirmed as accurate, indicating the experience was not a hallucination. Examples include when:
 - The dying person is visited by a deceased loved one whose death was not known to them—who they believed was still alive but who is later confirmed to have been dead at the time of the DBV.
 - The dying person is told by their ‘visitor’ the estimated time of their death, and that time is when the person actually dies.

What is the purpose and impact of DBVs?

DBVs appear to comfort and reassure the dying person and those around them.

According to Peter Fenwick, a British neuropsychiatrist and expert on end-of-life experiences, the dying say that their ‘visitors’ have come:

- to greet them
- to reassure them that they will be with them when they die—that the dying person will not be alone in the process
- to tell them when it is their time to go
- to give them a “preview” of where they will be going when they die
- to take them away on their journey to the afterlife

For both DBV experiencers and those who witness or later learn about them, DBVs typically:

- bring feelings of peace, joy, and happiness

- are comforting and reassuring
- reduce fear of dying and of death

Because those who love and care for dying people are comforted by thinking their loved one is not, or will not be, alone while dying or after death, DBVs can help with the grieving process—that is, reduce some painful aspects of grief.

Recommended resources

Readings include:

- Callanan, M., & Kelley, P. (2012). *Final gifts: Understanding the special awareness, needs, and communications of the dying*. Simon & Schuster.
- Claxton-Oldfield, S. (2022). Deathbed visions: Visitors and vistas. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, 90(1), 21–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00302228221095910>
- Claxton-Oldfield, S., & de Ste-Croix Killoran, M. (2025). Death doulas’ experiences with and perspectives on unusual end-of-life phenomena. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00302228251318400>
- Fenwick, P., & Fenwick, E. (2013). *The art of dying*. Bloomsbury.
- Kellehear, A. (2020). *Visitors at the end of life: Finding meaning and purpose in near-death phenomena*. Columbia University Press.
- Kerr, C. W., Donnelly, J. P., Wright, S. T., Kuszczak, S. M., Banas, A., Grant, P. C., & Luczkiewicz, D. L. (2014). End-of-life dreams and visions: A longitudinal study of hospice patients’ experiences. *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, 17(3), 296–303. <https://doi.org/10.1089/jpm.2013.0371>
- Videos include:
- Fenwick, P. (2013). *End-of-life experiences: A spiritual perspective* [video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UP9IM82F_Tc
- Kerr, C. (2015). *I see dead people: Dreams and visions of the dying* [video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbnBe-vXGQM>

The information in this Fact Sheet is based on research cited in the Recommended Resources.

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