

Find a Therapist (City or Zip)

✓ Verified by Psychology Today

Bright Lights, Big Mystery

Offers a look at near-death experiences-- How they have become psychology's newest cottage industry and questions how real they are.

By James Mauro published July 1, 1992 - last reviewed on June 9, 2016



Near-death experiences have become a cottage industry—but how real are they?

By James Mauro

"No wonder. No wonder. No wonder."

It's hard, talking to Barbara Harris, not to believe in near-death experiences. Even though she speaks of a Star Warslike "force" pervading her DNA; even though she describes encountering "a cloud of bubbles, each one representing a different moment of my life"; even though she says her experience led her to a realization about herself that she never had before.

"No wonder I am the way I am," she gasps.

Barbara Harris is like the eight million other Americans who, according to a recent poll by George Gallup, Jr., claim to have

taking them to a place of beauty, harmony, and peace, and they all say they have been profoundly changed by the experience.

Despite literally thousands of stories such as Harris's, however, science is not yet a true believer: There exists no absolute proof that such experiences are more than the product of fancy, fear, or fever. Indeed, almost all of the research to date relies upon anecdotes reported by "NDErs" rather than empirical corroboration of the events.

Stories of an afterlife have been captivating people ever since the sixth century, when Pope Gregory the Great wrote *Dialogues*, a collection of wonder-tales that included reports of return from death. Although each has the earmarks of a morality tale—with visions of hell instead of heaven—many also contain such elements of modern NDEs as "shining" angels and personality transformations.

But it wasn't until 1975, when psychiatrist Raymond Moody, M.D., wrote a book called *Life After Life*, that fascination with the subject became widespread. Coining the phrase "near-death experience," Moody reported story after story about the same, now-familiar encounter. The book intrigued a cross-section of curious individuals who begged to know more about what to expect when they die.

Fifteen years later, there are no new answers, but there is a spate of new books containing, mostly, more anecdotes. There is also a growing acceptance by the scientific community that something may be happening to these eight

have undergone a personality transformation—usually in the form of decreased anxiety about death, less concern with material matters, and a general feeling of peace about their lives.

It is this phenomenon that has finally attracted researchers. Rather than attempting to prove the existence of an afterlife, they have begun to study NDEs in order to learn more about brains, minds, and that elusive quality called well-being. If NDErs have truly benefited from their experience, perhaps they have something to teach us that might advance therapeutic methods for all kinds of problems—from the dilemmas of suicidal patients to the enduring pain of those who have been abused as children. And possibly, along the way, we just might learn something about what happens when we die.

A Real "Event" or Mass Hysteria?

What exactly constitutes a near-death experience? By examining thousands of reports, researchers such as Seattle pediatrician Melvin Morse, M.D., have identified the common elements that define the experience. In his book, *Transformed by the Light* (Villard; 1992), he lists nine traits that generally characterize a "full-blown" NDE:

- 1) A sense of being dead: the sudden awareness that one has had a "fatal" accident or not survived an operation.
- 2) Peace and painlessness: a feeling that the ties that bind one to the world have been cut.

to regenerate.

4) Tunnel experience: the sense of moving up or through a narrow passageway.

5) People of Light being met at the end of the tunnel by others who are "glowing."

6) A Being of Light the presence of a God-like figure or a force of some kind.

7) Life review: being shown one's life by the being of light.

8) Reluctance to return: the feeling of being comfortable and surrounded by the Light, often described as "pure love."

9) Personality transformation: a psychological change involving loss of the fear of death, greater spiritualism, a sense of "connectedness" with the Earth, and greater zest for life.

Although Morse's compilation of characteristics is drawn from the self-reports of NDErs, that doesn't mean there's nothing to them. In fact, evidence of their validity may be found in the startling consistency of such reports:

"I felt myself floating up, out of my bed. Looking down, I could see myself lying there, motionless."

"I moved through something dark and churning. I guess you could call it a tunnel, or a passageway."

...bright light was so intense, warm and loving. I never felt anything so peaceful and beautiful."

Yet there are enough variations to lead critics to discount NDEs as mere hallucinations. Morse relates the following story of a 45-year-old Midwestern teacher:

"I entered into a dark tunnel and suddenly I was in a place filled up with love and a beautiful, bright light. The place seemed holy. My father, who had died two years earlier, was there, as were my grandparents. Everyone was happy to see me, but my father told me it was not my time and I would be going back. Just as I turned to go, I caught sight of Elvis! He was standing in this place of intense bright light. He just came over to me, took my hand and said: 'Hi Bev, do you remember me?'"

If such experiences are real and not hallucinations, critics argue, why does Elvis appear in the place commonly inhabited by God? And what about those who see Jesus? Or Buddha? Or children who report seeing pets or parents not yet dead?

Simply stated, there are common elements shared by all NDErs. These seem to be intrinsic to the experience, and usually include the sense of leaving one's body, of traveling through a tunnel, and of seeing a bright light. Along with this so-called core experience come secondary embellishments, which account for the differences in NDE reports. The descriptions of various details and people are more personal aspects of NDEs, which are derived from an individual's life

and heaven.

To some researchers, the symbols serve to help make sense of the experience. Whereas a bright white light and a feeling of warmth and peace might not fully convey the notion that one has "died," the point is driven home in greetings by dead relatives or pets, as well as a personification of God as Buddha or Jesus--even Elvis Presley. For the Midwestern teacher, Elvis may have inspired the same awe in her life that she felt when she met the Light.

That still leaves open the question whether NDEs are a uniquely Western experience. Does a woman from Boise, say, have the same type of experience as an African farmer? Morse cites the work of Dr. Nsama Mumbwe of the University of Zambia. The African physician wondered whether NDEs were strictly an American phenomenon, and, if not, how the accounts of Third World subjects would differ from those of Westerners.

Studying 15 NDErs in Lusaka, Zambia, Mumbwe found that all had had the same core experience as those in other parts of the world.

That isn't to say there aren't cultural differences:

- o Many of the Africans interpreted the event as somewhat evil; half thought the experience signified that they were somehow "bewitched." Another called it a "bad women."

frequently appear as images in Japanese art.

- o East Indians sometimes see heaven as a giant bureaucracy, and frequently report being sent back because of clerical errors!

- o Americans and English say they are sent back for love or to perform a job.

- o Natives of Micronesia often see heaven as similar to a large, brightly lit American city with loud, noisy cars and tall buildings.

To Morse and other investigators, these experiences are not as different as they seem. It is merely the individual interpretations that differ. Many report that their NDEs are, like dreams, "difficult to put into words." That forces them to borrow images from personal experience and apply them to their NDE. And the discrepancies found in reports do not signify mass hysteria or hallucinations. On the contrary, the similarities across a wide variety of cultures, ages, and religions support the idea that being near death not only triggers a specific type of experience, but that the experience is "transcendental"—that there is entry into another dimension of being.

A Trip of the Brain or a Journey of the Mind?

There has long been a "medical-school bias"--as Morse puts it--against near death experiences. Dismissed for years as hallucinations, patients' stories were routinely ignored by their doctors, and grant money for research has been scarce.

advent of modern neuroscience, the famous Canadian neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield identified an area of the brain that gives rise to near-death experiences. When he electrically stimulated certain sites of the temporal lobe, patients reported retrieving vivid memories as if they were actually "seeing" them. The findings prompted some researchers to search for a neurophysical explanation for NDEs—as some episode of temporal-lobe dysfunction. The implication of this line of investigation is that NDEs take place entirely within the brain, courtesy of some chemical shift or misfiring neuron.

Researchers have pursued endorphins as a cause of the euphoria and visions of heaven; compression of the optic nerve by lack of oxygen as a cause of the tunnel image; and, most recently, the neurotransmitter serotonin, putatively released by the stress of dying, to explain the typical NDE phenomena. But a direct cause-and-effect relationship has yet to be established.

What is known is that people who have a large number of paranormal experiences, such as NDEs, also have a higher incidence of anomalous temporal-lobe functioning. "Not abnormal," insists Vernon Neppe, M.D., director of the division of neuropsychiatry at the University of Washington, who developed a set of questions designed to stimulate the temporal lobe of the brain. "Just different. If you stimulate certain areas of the temporal lobe, you'll get certain reactions. And those subjects with some paranormal experience will react differently."

does not indicate whether or not these experiences are transcendental--that is, whether the event is a journey into afterlife or a blip in the firing of brain cells. If a spiritual journey occurs entirely in the brain, however, does that make it any less a transformative phenomenon?

Other researchers have attempted to explore whether actually being near death is essential to experience an NDE. Ian Stevenson? M.D., and Justine Owens, Ph.D., of the University of Virginia's Institute for Personality Studies, wondered whether some of those reporting NDEs--and all of their characteristic traits--were not actually near death at the time of their experience, but simply believed they were? Surely, they argued, someone who wasn't really dying couldn't transcend into an afterlife, and therefore their experience couldn't be "real."

Stevenson studied the medical records of 40 patients who had reported NDEs, and found that more than half were not close to death at all. He suggested that "the belief of being about to die had been the principal precipitant of their experiences"(Omega, Vol. 20, 1989-90). In other words, a psychological reaction to trauma--what the teams calls "feardeath"--had sparked their NDE.

But Stevenson and Owens didn't stop there. They then interviewed 58 NDErs--30 of whom (52 percent) had not actually been near death (Lancet; Vol. 336). What they found startled them: A significantly greater number of patients who actually were near death reported elements of the core experience--including the bright light--than those who were

interpretation. Those who were in a physical state wherein they might transcend into death appeared to do so; the others did not.

Still, whether near-death experiences are neurochemically induced hallucinations, psychological reactions to fear, or transcendental encounters may be moot. As one researcher puts it, in our search for firm answers we may be "overestimating the tether of mind to body."

Encounter-Prone Personalities

For Psychologist Kenneth Ring, Ph.D., author of *The Omega Project* (Morrow, 1992), research into NDEs began with a very down-to-earth approach. He wanted to determine whether there are any distinguishing features between people who remember and report paranormal encounters and those who do not.

He quickly discovered an extraordinary similarity in the backgrounds of those who had near-death experiences. There was, he says, "a consistent tendency for them to report a greater incidence of childhood abuse and trauma."

One common response to such trauma is dissociation—a psychological phenomenon in which a person separates from a reality that is too painful to process by conscious means, and retreats into a world of their own invention.

In fact, Ring acknowledges that those with histories of child abuse score higher on measures of dissociation, or even develop serious dissociative disorders such as multiple

ready or being abducted by a stranger and forced into an unfamiliar car.)

He suggests that NDErs are dissociating from the trauma of being near death. But that, for him, does not invalidate the spiritual nature of the experience. Yes, these people are dissociating, he acknowledges, but he sees it as a pathway to another dimension.

"The ability to dissociate makes you more receptive to alternate realities," he explains. "You are dissociating in response to trauma, so you are more likely to register an NDE as a conscious event." By developing a dissociative response style as a psychological defense, you are more able to tune into other realities as well—becoming what Ring calls "an encounter-prone personality."

And that leads back to Barbara Harris, who had her own NDE—actually two experiences within a week—in 1975. A fall in a swimming pool exacerbated her congenital sclerosis and eventually left her in traction, lying immobile in a therapeutic contraption called a circle bed. When a breathing machine failed to allow her to exhale, Harris felt herself "being blown up like a balloon, and then . . . total blackness.

"Soon, I felt hands and arms around me, and then my grandmother's chest. I experienced myself through my grandmother. It was so much more than words; there was a perfect sharing between the two of us. The darkness was churning and I felt my hands expanding. I could hear a low, droning noise. All of a sudden I was back in my own body."

~~~~~

Her second experience was more intense. "I felt myself separating again; saw myself, as if in a bubble. I was one-year old, in my crib, crying. I kept looking back and forth between my real self lying in bed and as this baby. And the second or third time I turned around, I saw this God-force, if you want to call it that. It moved through me, pervaded my DNA, held me up.

"As soon as I acknowledged it, we moved toward the baby, and it was as though it became part of a cloud of bubbles--each one being a different moment in my life. I relived all the abuse I suffered as a child at the hands of my mother. But I felt detached, the way I did as a kid, and I felt a realization of something I didn't know before. All my adult life I felt like a piece of dirt on somebody else's shoe, and I never knew why. And yet, re-experiencing all of those moments, I realized I had chosen to believe I was bad. I understood why I always felt so worthless.

"And my first thought, watching all this abuse, was, No wonder I am the way I am."

Harris was transformed by her experience: She speaks of acquiring a "general realization about the way everything works." Her experience led her, fittingly, to become a respiratory therapist, and to work with dying patients. She feels she may indeed have something to offer others who are suffering without knowing why.

or her own intention, the way she defines being as a child in the face of her mother's abuse? Does the coupling effect—her linking of her NDE and the recollection of abuse—reveal a pattern of dissociation, of simply tuning out reality? Or, as she puts it, did her earlier experience with dissociation leave her with a special "pathway" or channel through which she was able to reach such otherworldly levels?

"Yes, I am dissociating," she admits, "but I am also out of my body and I am someplace else. My real separation and tuning out was my misery all my life. When I had my NDE, it was easier for me to slip out of my body because I already knew how. The ability was there to let go. And what I experienced was a sense of who I really am--the person I would have been had I not been abused. I had forgotten her, the part of me that remained intact. The part of me that is the spark of God."

Like Ring and other investigators, Harris believes that childhood dissociation may provide the adult with a kind of "road map" to be followed later, a receptiveness to paranormal experiences. As proof that she did indeed leave her body, she recalls overhearing a nurse's conversation that in fact took place in another room—while she was confined to her circle bed. The conversation was later confirmed by those present.

### The Transformative Question

Of all aspects of near-death experiences, personality change is the one most scrutinized for insight into what is actually occurring. It attracts researchers of all persuasions. There are

What can be learned from these transformations?

"The public wants to know where they go when they die," contends John Sappington, M.D., professor of psychology at Augusta (Georgia) College. "As scientists, we can't answer that question. Nevertheless, there are ways to study NDErs as a group, things we can learn from them and possibly apply to a therapeutic situation which would benefit a client."

For Sappington and others, the issue is not whether the person is actually meeting God, but why NDErs routinely seem better adjusted, more at peace and content with themselves and the world after their experience. Disregarding, for the time being at least, how they got that way, and focusing on the changes themselves, psychologists would like to borrow this newfound sense of well-being and utilize it in therapy.

Reports are highly consistent and common: "I understand things so much more" and "My senses all seem heightened." Subjects claim "sudden knowledge and comprehension of complex mathematical theorems." Psychologist Ring has identified a consistent set of value and belief changes. They include:

- a greater appreciation for life

- o higher self-esteem

- o greater compassion for others

- o a heightened sense of purpose and self-understanding

- o greater ecological sensitivity and planetary concern
- o a feeling of being more intuitive, sometimes psychic.
- o He also observes "psychophysical changes," including:
  - o increased physical sensitivity
  - o diminished tolerance to light, alcohol, and drugs
  - o a feeling that their brains have been "altered" to encompass more
  - o a feeling that they are now using their "whole brain" rather than just a small part.

NDErs undergo radical changes in personality, and their significant others—spouses, friends, relatives—confirm these changes, reports Bruce Greyson, M.D., clinical psychiatrist and associate professor at the University of Connecticut. Like Sappington, he is concerned with what can be learned from such new outlooks on life.

Specifically, Greyson wondered whether they could be of help to those of his private clients who were suicidal. "Suicide is generally unthinkable among near-death experiencers," he says. "They exude a peace about death which is very comforting." And yet, ironically, he found, "their experience imparts a sense of purpose to those with thoughts of suicide." Those who are suicidal come away with a "renewed hope in

Whether such experiences can be used regularly in therapy is another matter. First, there needs to be some objective evidence that NDErs are indeed changed by their experience. He would like to see more first-hand accounts of what the subjects felt before their NDE. Lacking such information, he says, "we have to rely on the person to tell us that he or she has changed, rather than seeing it for ourselves."

One approach could be standardized psychological testing of patients who for medical reasons may find themselves in near-death situations. For example, Greyson thinks patients suffering from cardiac arrhythmia would be ideal. They often undergo a process known as cardioversion, in which their hearts are stopped for a brief period by a massive electrical charge intended to correct the irregular beating. Many of those who undergo cardioversion report NDEs.

"What I'd like to do is interview each patient before and after this procedure," Greyson explains. And, in order to confirm reports of an out-of-body experience—patients often say they floated above the operating table—he would "even plant targets near the ceiling to determine whether or not the subject actually saw them when they rose from their bodies." (Such research of arrhythmia patients is, in fact, about to get underway at the University of Wisconsin.)

Those who report out-of-body experiences often tell of listening in on conversations which took place in another room, or being aware of an event (such as the tipping-over of



later accidents and coming targets, however, Croisson and others would take it as hard evidence that out-of-body experiences are real.

## The Big Question

What, in the end, are near-death experiences? And exactly how far can research go in trying to answer that question?

"People with NDEs routinely report that they had an omniscient feeling—a brief conclusion that they were everywhere at once and that time had no meaning," says John Sappington. "I can't help but wonder what is happening to these people—do they tend toward histrionics in general, or have they had access to information that transcends the beyond?"

"Of course we're never going to provide hard proof of an afterlife," he laments. "As a scientist, I find it frustrating that I can't empirically test all these theories. The big question—is there life after death—is still going to remain a mystery."

PHOTO (COLOR): Near-death experiences have become a cottage industry—but how real are they?

PHOTO (COLOR): "There were people I knew who were lit from within. I felt myself pulled toward this bright light. It was so forceful, warm and loving. I never felt anything so peaceful and beautiful."

NDES--REAL OR IMAGINED?

...sudden, suddenly I was in a black tunnel, and at the end was a light. As I got closer to it, it got brighter and brighter. It wasn't like any light I could describe to you. It was beautiful.

When I was almost at the end, the light was so bright it surrounded me and filled me with a total love and joy. I felt intense-ly pure, calm, and reassured. I just wanted to stay there forever."

"I was floating up near the ceiling and saw myself on my bed. I felt no pain, like an observer between two worlds. In time it seemed as though the ceiling was paved with clouds, and the air seemed sprinkled with gold dust.

It became very bright, and I found myself standing at the entrance to a very long canopy made of blue and silver rays. A powerful light was at the other end, and I felt other presences who were joyous with my coming. Then a doctor started banging on my chest and I opened my eyes."

—From *Transformed by the Light* (Villard), Copyright 1992 by Melvin Morse, M.D.

## Most Popular

---



The 5 Worst Psychological Things People Do to Each Other



The Introvert Advantage