

# Researchers' and Experiencers' Descriptions of Near-Death Experiences: In Search of a Conceptual Model

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**ABSTRACT:** Near-death experiences (NDEs) have been known for millennia and studied rigorously for the past 50 years. In that time, scholars have developed comprehensive tabulations of NDEs' commonly associated physical circumstances, phenomenological features, and aftereffects, as well as quantitative scales to measure the occurrence and depth of NDEs. Yet despite this extensive research literature, no one has proposed a simple, widely acceptable conceptual description of what an NDE is. Consequently, when asked by interviewers or members of a lay audience for a brief statement as to what NDEs are, researchers have had no consensually agreed-upon answer. In this study, I sought to identify an acceptable conceptual description of NDEs by surveying 100 near-death researchers recruited from academic indexing databases and 100 near-death experiencers recruited primarily from a vetted experiencer database, as to how they would characterize NDEs in a brief, "sound-bite" statement. Researchers and experiencers agreed on the most common NDE associated physical circumstances, phenomenological features, and aftereffects, from which I propose a model brief conceptual description.

**KEYWORDS:** near-death experience, definition, description, researchers, experiencers

Remarkable accounts of the subjective experience of apparently surviving death can be found in the folklore and writings of European, Middle Eastern, African, Indian, East Asian, Pacific, and Native

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American cultures (Greyson, 2021). However, no widely known term for such experiences existed until 1896 when, in a series of articles in a French philosophical journal, French psychologist and epistemologist Victor Egger proposed the expression *expérience de morte eminent* (experience of imminent death).

Eight decades later, psychiatrist Raymond Moody translated this term into *near-death experience (NDE)* and popularized the phenomenon in his groundbreaking 1975 book *Life After Life*. Moody identified NDEs as the experiences of persons who were resuscitated after having been thought to be or pronounced clinically dead by their doctors, or of those who, in the course of accidents or severe illness or injury, came very close to physical death (1975, p. 19). He identified 15 different elements that recurred frequently in the narratives he collected, but cautioned that no one of those elements appeared in every NDE. Two years later he defined an NDE rather broadly as “any conscious perceptual experience which takes place during a near-death encounter” (1977a, p. 124); he further defined “near-death encounter” as “an event in which a person could very easily die or be killed (and even may be so close as to be believed or pronounced clinically dead) but nonetheless survives, and continues physical life” (1977a, p. 124). In an article in a medical journal that same year, he rephrased that broad definition of NDEs as “phenomena experienced by persons who almost die in the course of serious illness or injury, or who are believed ‘dead’ but subsequently revive or are resuscitated” (1977b, p. 687).

A few years after Moody’s book was published, the first scientific investigations of NDEs followed, many of them adopting Moody’s general definition of the phenomenon. For example, psychiatrist Russell Noyes (1979, p. 74) defined NDEs as “subjective experiences during moments of life-threatening danger.” However, various researchers began using the term NDE to refer to any experience of clinically dead persons who return to life, of any individuals who are judged to be near death, or of any persons who have subsequent personal transformations whether or not they had been near death (Smith, 1991). Several researchers defined NDE as *any* conscious experience that a person can recall following a close brush with death (e.g., Morse et al., 1986; Pasricha, 1993; Sabom, 1981; Schnaper & Panitz, 1990). That definition would confound NDEs with other conscious experiences near death, from demoralization over a hopeless situation to eager anticipation of relief from pain to anoxic delirium, much as defining “sunburn” as “*any* skin reaction to exposure to the sun” would confound it with

a host of other possible reactions from benign suntan to heatstroke to malignant melanoma.

Other researchers, however, began qualifying the definition to limit the phenomenological range. One example is pastoral counselor Stephen Sabom (1980), who defined NDEs as

occurring to a critically injured person during unconsciousness and near clinical death . . . [involving] 1) viewing their bodies from a detached position of several feet above their anatomy . . . [and/or] entering a strange 'world' of warmth and peace containing relatives and friends. (p. 130)

Another is myself (Greyson, 1981), who defined them as “profound subjective events with transcendental or mystical elements . . . on the threshold of death” (p. 10).

In the ensuing years, researchers have developed standardized criteria for identifying when an experience qualifies as an NDE and for quantifying how “deep” an NDE is. In 1980, Kenneth Ring developed the Weighted Core Experience Index (WCEI); soon thereafter, I followed with the NDE Scale (Greyson, 1983), developed as a statistically more rigorous improvement over the WCEI. The NDE Scale has since been translated into 14 different languages and has been used in thousands of studies worldwide. Recently, Charlotte Martial and colleagues updated that scale as the NDE-C (Martial et al., 2020) to include additional features identified in the past four decades and to add additional statistical rigor to the measure. The NDE-C has since been criticized as achieving statistical rigor at the expense of ecological validity, being more difficult for near-death experiencers to relate to (Bush, 2021; Mays & Mays, 2020). Nevertheless, the remarkably high correlations between these scales (for the NDE Scale and the WCEI,  $r = .90$  [Greyson, 1983]; for the NDE-C and the NDE Scale,  $r = 0.77$  [Martial et al., 2023]) suggests that they are essentially equivalent tools.

Despite the widespread acceptance of these scales as operational criteria for NDEs, however, no one has ever proposed a simple, widely acceptable conceptual description of NDEs. Because there is no authoritative body to establish such a description, such as the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013) for psychiatric conditions and the World Health Organization’s *International Classification of Diseases* (World Health Organization, 2022) for medical conditions, individual researchers have been left to develop their own definitions of NDEs (Craffert, 2019; Evrard et al., 2022; Long, 2014;

Parnia et al., 2022; van Wees et al., 2011). And as historian of religions Gregory Shushan put it, “While even the most skeptical of researchers acknowledge that there are a number of typical subexperiences that make up the NDE, they do not always agree on what they are” (2025, p. 10).

Nevertheless, when researchers are asked by an interviewer “What is an NDE?”, they are expected to deliver a short description that can summarize the phenomenon in a sentence or two. Of course, the answer may depend on the intended audience: A researcher might give one answer to an audience of neuroscientists and a different answer to an audience of philosophers. However, the present concern is for an audience of the general population, without presuming any prior knowledge or background. The question, which turned out to be quite challenging, was essentially, “What are the few most important qualities that differentiate NDEs from other experiences?”

Robert and Suzanne Mays (2024) presented one path to resolving this question:

What would you say to a journalist who wants a soundbite answer to “What is a near-death experience?” Would you simply list the different NDE features? In our view, a phenomenon cannot be defined in terms of its phenomenal elements or features. The definition can be expressed only in terms of the phenomenon’s *underlying framework*, that is, the conceptual architecture that describes what *lies behind* the phenomenal features. What is happening during an NDE that gives rise to the NDEr’s phenomenal experience? The phenomenal elements that fit the framework are *essential*, while other elements would be derivative or even incidental features. The collection of the *essential* features can be considered the archetype of the phenomenon. (p. 96)

Do other NDE scholars and near-death experiencers (NDErs) agree that the phenomenon can be defined only in terms of its theoretical framework, and not in terms of its common features?

## Method

The primary question addressed in this study was: How would people very familiar with near-death experiences describe the phenomenon in a brief sound-bite? A secondary question was whether NDE researchers who had not themselves had NDEs would describe the phenomenon differently than would NDErs.

The study design was an e-mail survey to a convenience sample of

100 scholars who had published research into NDEs in peer-reviewed academic journal and a comparable sample of 100 NDErs who had shared their accounts with the author.

## **Participants**

The plan of the study was to recruit 100 researchers who had published scholarly articles in peer-reviewed academic journals that reported original research with NDErs and/or showed familiarity with the scholarly literature on NDEs. The only inclusion criterion was such publication in the scholarly literature within the past 20 years. The only exclusion criterion was having had an NDE themselves, in which case they were included in the experiencers group.

The pool of NDErs was recruited from three sources: the University of Virginia Division of Perceptual Studies' database of NDErs, who were well-known to the author; NDErs who had contacted the author in the past two years to share their accounts; and researchers identified for the researcher pool, as above, but who had also had NDEs themselves.

## **Recruitment**

The pool of NDE researchers was identified by searching Ovid MEDLINE, the National Library of Medicine's database of biomedical scholarly literature, and PsycInfo, the American Psychological Association's abstracting and indexing database covering the behavioral and social sciences, using the search term "near-death experience" and the publication dates 2004-2024. Authors of articles identified in these searches were invited by e-mail to participate in the survey; the first 100 responses were included in the researcher sample.

All experiencers from the three sources described above for whom the author had current e-mail addresses were invited by e-mail to participate in the survey; the first 100 respondents who met NDE Scale criteria (see below) were included in the experiencer sample.

## **Procedure**

Each of the candidates in the two groups was e-mailed a survey that asked them to compose a brief "sound-bite" conceptual description of an NDE. The survey introduction clarified that what was sought was not a comprehensive definition of an NDE, nor a criterion for decid-

ing whether an experience was or was not an NDE, nor an inclusive summary of every possible variation of NDE. The survey asked rather for a very brief response (a “sound-bite”) to an interviewer’s asking, “What is an NDE?” which could serve as introduction to NDEs for a naïve listener and as a stimulus for further interview questions and elaborations.

The survey also asked for the respondent’s sex and geographic location, but not for age, ethnicity, or religiosity. In addition, respondents in the researcher group were also asked for their academic discipline and whether they had themselves ever had an NDE; and respondents in the experienter group were also asked to complete the NDE Scale (Greyson, 1983) to confirm that they had had NDEs and to indicate how much time had elapsed since their NDEs. Experiencers who scored fewer than 7 points on the NDE Scale, the standard criterion for an NDE, were not included in the sample.

### **Treatment of Data**

For quantitative analysis, comparisons between the responses of the researchers and the experiencers were assessed statistically by  $\chi^2$  tests for independence; statistical significance was set at  $p < .05$ . Effect size was evaluated with  $\phi$  coefficients for 2x2 tables and by Cramer’s  $V$  for larger tables. To assess practical significance, in the absence of norms for these types of data, I used Jacob Cohen’s (1988) cautious specifications: for  $df = 1$ , .1 to indicate a small effect, .3 to indicate a medium effect, and .5 to indicate a large effect; and for  $df = 3$ , .06 to indicate a small effect, .17 to indicate a medium effect, and .29 to indicate a large effect.

Data are presented in aggregate to protect respondents’ confidentiality. When individual verbatim responses are quoted, they are identified by the respondent’s coded number, ranging from 1 to 100 for researchers and from 101 to 200 for experiencers. Respondents in the researcher and the experienter groups are presented as raw numbers—which are the same as percentages because each group contained 100 respondents.

## **Results**

Sample demographics are presented in Table 1 for the researcher and experienter groups. As noted in the Table, the two respondent groups differed significantly, with a medium effect, in sex distribution, with

**Table 1** *Participant Demographics*

	Researchers	Experiencers	$\chi^2$	df	<i>p</i>	<i>V</i>
Gender			28.74	1	< .001	.38
Male	74	37				
Female	26	63				
Geographical area			35.20	3	< .001	.42
North America	57	89				
Europe	31	5				
Asia	7	2				
Other	5	0				
Profession						
Health	64					
Humanities	27					
Natural sciences	5					
Computer science	4					
NDE Scale score		16.82 ± 6.36				
Years since NDE		34.40 ± 14.67				

*Note.* Total *N* = 200: 100 Researchers and 100 Experiencers. **Bold font** indicates statistically significant differences.

the researchers being predominantly male and the experiencers predominantly female.

The two groups also differed significantly in terms of geographical distribution, with a large effect, with researchers located in 24 separate countries on six continents and experiencers residing almost exclusively in North America.

Among the 100 researchers who participated in this survey, 64 were in health professions, including medicine, psychology, nursing, physiotherapy, pastoral counseling, and medical social work; 27 in humanities, including philosophy, sociology, religious studies, education, and linguistics; 5 in natural sciences, including neuroscience and biology; and 4 in computer science. The 100 researchers who participated in this survey had published articles suggesting a wide variety of attitudes toward NDEs, ranging from those who suggested NDEs were hallucinations caused by neurophysiological chemical or electrical artifacts, to those who suggested NDEs were psychological defenses

against the threat of death, to those who suggested NDEs were spiritual encounters with a different dimension of reality.

The 100 NDErs who participated in this survey had all been vetted by the author to ensure that they had had NDEs as manifested by their scores of 7 or higher on the NDE Scale. Their mean NDE Scale score of 16.82 was slightly above the typical mean score of 15. Prior participants in the University of Virginia Division of Perceptual Studies' database of NDErs comprised 87 of the 100 participants, with the remaining 13 including seven academic researchers who had also had their own NDEs and six new contacts.

### Participant Responses: Quantitative Results

The various descriptions suggested by the 200 participants included references to different aspects of NDEs that, through the inductive analysis strategy, were grouped into four categories. In order of frequency from most to least mentioned, they were: their phenomenological features; their associated physical circumstances—sometimes called proximal causes, triggers, or precipitants; their aftereffects; and their interpretation or ultimate meaning. Numbers of researchers and experiencers who included each of these different aspects in their descriptions of NDEs are presented in Table 2.

As indicated in the Table, the distribution of responses from researchers and from experiencers differed significantly, in that more researchers included phenomenological features (a small effect) and NDE circumstances or precipitants (a large effect), whereas more experiencers included their interpretation or the meaning of the NDE (a small effect). Equivalent numbers of both groups included NDE aftereffects in their descriptions.

Table 2 *Number of Researchers and Experiencers Who Included Various Factors in Defining NDEs*

	Researchers	Experiencers	$\chi^2$	df	<i>p</i>	$\phi$
Phenomenological features	99	86	12.18	1	< .001	.247
Physical circumstances	77	26	52.07	1	< .001	.510
Aftereffects	40	48	1.30	1	.254	-.081
Meaning/interpretation	22	41	8.37	1	.004	-.205

*Note.* Total *N* = 200: 100 Researchers and 100 Experiencers. **Bold font** indicates statistically significant differences.

### Phenomenological Features

Phenomenological features of NDEs mentioned by respondents in their descriptions were coded into themes that emerged from the inductive analysis, which are presented in order of frequency in Table 3.

Despite researchers including phenomenological features in their

**Table 3** Number of Researchers and Experiencers Who Included Phenomenological Features in Their NDE Descriptions, in Order of Frequency

	Researchers	Experiencers	$\chi^2$	df	p	$\phi$
Transcendental/mystical features	64	65	0.02	1	.883	-.007
Transcendence of space/time	16	16	0.00	1	1.000	.000
Sense of hyperreality	13	10	0.44	1	.506	.047
Unity/oneness	7	16	3.98	1	<b>.046</b>	-.141
Out-of-body experience (OBE)	45	35	2.08	1	.149	.102
Veridical OBE perceptions	11	4	3.53	1	.060	.133
Exceptional lucidity	44	31	3.61	1	.058	.134
Exceptionally strong emotions	41	35	0.76	1	.382	.062
Positive emotions	27	33	0.86	1	.355	.065
Unconditional love	16	16	0.00	1	1.000	.000
Negative emotions	3	1	1.04	1	.308	.072
Encountering other beings	34	23	2.97	1	.085	.122
Encountering deceased entities	17	10	2.10	1	.147	.102
Encountering divine entities	13	11	0.19	1	.663	.031
Brilliant/living light	24	23	0.03	1	.868	.012
Panoramic life review	19	5	9.28	1	<b>.002</b>	2.15
Future vision	1	3	1.02	1	.312	-0.071
Return to the body	14	9	1.23	1	.268	.078
Tunnel or dark passageway	9	5	1.23	1	.268	.078
Border of point of no return	8	5	0.74	1	.390	.061
Ineffability	4	7	0.87	1	.352	-.066
Absence of pain	1	7	4.69	1	<b>.030</b>	-0.15
Desire to remain in other realm	0	4	4.08	1	<b>.043</b>	-0.14
Loss of control	0	3	3.05	1	.081	-.123
Void or dark nothingness	1	1	0.00	1	1.00	.000
Vague or nonspecific description	17	15	0.15	1	.700	.027

*Note.* Total  $N = 200$ : 100 Researchers and 100 Experiencers. **Bold font** indicates statistically significant differences.

descriptions more frequently than experiencers, both groups agreed on the six most common phenomenological features, in statistically equivalent numbers: (1) transcendent or mystical features, (2) out-of-body experiences, (3) exceptional lucidity, (4) exceptionally strong emotions, (5) encountering other beings, and (6) brilliant or living light.

### **Physical Circumstances or Precipitants**

Physical circumstances or events precipitating NDEs that respondents mentioned in their descriptions were coded into themes that emerged from the inductive analysis, which are presented in order of frequency in Table 4.

Despite researchers including circumstances in their descriptions more frequently than experiencers—significantly more, in two cases—both groups agreed on the three most common circumstances: (1) unspecified nearness to death, (2) psychological nearness to death, and (3) clinical death.

### **Aftereffects**

NDE aftereffects that respondents mentioned in their descriptions were coded into themes that emerged from the inductive analysis, which are presented in order of frequency in Table 5.

Both researchers and experiencers agreed on the three most common aftereffects, in statistically equivalent numbers: (1) decreased fear of death, (2) enhanced spirituality, and (3) shift in worldview.

### **Interpretation or Meaning of NDEs**

Personal interpretations of NDEs or statements of their meaning mentioned by respondents in their descriptions were coded into themes that emerged from the inductive analysis, which are presented in order of frequency in Table 6. Both researchers and experiencers agreed that the most common interpretation or meaning of NDEs was an encounter with a different (spiritual or ultimate) reality.

### **Participant Responses: Qualitative Results**

Because the primary data in this survey consisted of qualitative descriptions, it is instructive to consider typical samples of the descriptions offered, comparing the responses of researchers and of experienc-

**Table 4** *Number of Researchers and Experiencers Who Included Physical Circumstances in Their NDE Descriptions, in Order of Frequency*

	Researchers	Experiencers	$\chi^2$	df	<i>p</i>	$\phi$
Unspecified nearness to death	53	14	34.14	1	<b>&lt; .001</b>	.413
Psychological nearness to death	14	3	7.78	1	<b>.005</b>	.197
Clinical death	10	7	0.58	1	.447	.054
Physiological nearness to death	8	2	3.79	1	.052	.138
Unconscious near death	7	2	2.91	1	.088	.121

*Note.* Total *N* = 200: 100 Researchers and 100 Experiencers. **Bold font** indicates statistically significant differences.

**Table 5** *Number of Researchers and Experiencers Who Included Aftereffects in Their NDE Descriptions, in Order of Frequency*

	Researchers	Experiencers	$\chi^2$	df	<i>p</i>	$\phi$
Unspecified transformation	18	19	0.03	1	.856	-.013
Decreased fear of death	13	12	0.46	1	.831	.015
Enhanced spirituality	13	12	0.46	1	.831	.015
Shift in worldview	9	11	0.22	1	.637	-.033
Positive emotional effects	3	4	0.15	1	.700	-.027
Unique or helpful memory of NDE	1	5	2.75	1	.097	-.117
Physiological changes	2	3	0.21	1	.651	-.032
Paranormal phenomena	2	3	0.21	1	.651	-.032
Desire to share the NDE	0	4	4.08	1	<b>.043</b>	-.143
Negative emotional effects	0	1	1.01	1	.316	-.071
Interpersonal problems	0	1	1.01	1	.316	-.071

*Note.* Total *N* = 200: 100 Researchers and 100 Experiencers. **Bold font** indicates statistically significant differences.

**Table 6** *Number of Researchers and Experiencers Who Included Interpretation of NDEs in Their NDE Descriptions, in Order of Frequency*

	Researchers	Experiencers	$\chi^2$	df	<i>p</i>	$\phi$
Different reality	8	21	6.82	1	<b>.009</b>	-.185
Separation from the body	5	8	0.74	1	.390	-.061
Transition between life and death	2	11	6.66	1	<b>.010</b>	-.183
Experience of death	4	7	0.87	1	.352	-.066
True nature of all reality	0	6	6.19	1	<b>.013</b>	-.176
Natural biological process	3	0	3.05	1	.081	.123
Vague interpretation	3	0	3.05	1	.081	.123
Reunion with the Divine	0	2	2.02	1	.155	-.101
Transition and return to life	0	2	2.02	1	.155	-.101

*Note.* Total *N* = 200: 100 Researchers and 100 Experiencers. **Bold font** indicates statistically significant differences.

ers. As noted above, when individual verbatim responses are quoted, they are identified by the respondent's coded number, ranging from 1 to 100 for researchers and from 101 to 200 for experiencers. I found it noteworthy that the experiencers' descriptions usually involved more detail and more lyrical language than did the researchers' descriptions of the same features.

## Phenomenological Features

Following are typical descriptions of phenomenological features mentioned by respondents, in order of frequency.

**1. Transcendental/Mystical/Spiritual Features/Oneness/Otherworldly Environment.** The phenomenological feature most commonly mentioned by the 200 respondents was some kind of transcendental, mystical, or spiritual, or otherworldly environment. Researchers typically described this environment in terms of "some un-earthly realm or dimension" (30); "a transcendent, mystical, or spiritual

reality” (42); “transmaterial environments not of the material world” (43); “realities or dimensions beyond our earthly experience” (48); or “another plane of existence, outside the physical” (52).

Experiencers typically described transcendental features in terms of “a non-corporeal transition through a previously unknown dimension, outside of ordinary reality, beyond imagination” (162); “leaving body/Earth, being ‘home,’ as in, this place is exceptionally familiar” (145); “a phantasmagorical reality now sensed to have always existed just beyond the limits of mundane sensory input” (126); “an envelopment with the ‘divine’ yet at the same time it is personal, a ‘one-on-one,’ universal/individual in the same energy” (166); or “a state or realm characterized by a revelation of enormous proportions beyond our physically bounded perceptions” (144).

Three subcategories of transcendental features merit separate mention:

*1a. Transcendence of Space or Time.* The most common subtype of transcendent environment mentioned was transcendence of space and/or time. Researchers typically described this transcendence of space or time in terms of “a different spatiotemporal dimension” (30); “an acceleration, slowing, or nonlinear transformation of subjective time” (62); “transcending the ordinary confines of time and space” (37); “altered perception of time and space in a manner beyond physical or scientific explanation” (75); or “a non-temporal reality” (16).

Experiencers typically described temporospatial transcendence in terms of “a dimension of space and time beyond our normal understanding” (196) “entering into perceptions of a reality beyond the limits of linear space and time, which dissolve away, being not just unimportant but rather having no meaning, no existence” (126); “free of physical confines; there is no space or time” (161); “a placeless place that was everywhere and nowhere, and contained everything and nothing” (187); or “time and space distortion – everything happens at once, in one moment, past, present, and future coalesced” (181).

*1b. Hyperreality.* The second-most-commonly-mentioned transcendental feature was a sense of hyperreality. Researchers typically described this in terms of “‘realer than real’ or hyperreal” (72); “much more real and certain than this world” (89); or “an intensity that makes them different from coma experiences/visions” (3).

Experiencers typically described hyperreality in terms of “a sense of being in a reality more real than our usual one” (111); “somewhat like a dream only more real than life itself” (112); “a reality that feels more real than the one we live in” (127); “it is very real, and remains

so long after the experience; no matter how many people in the world could try telling you that NDEs are not real, you know they are real with your whole being” (151); or “it is more real, authentic, more to-be-trusted than things you experience in my normal day-to-day life; you know it is real” (153).

*1c. Cosmic Unity/Oneness.* The third-most-commonly-mentioned transcendental feature was cosmic unity, or a sense of oneness with everything. Researchers typically described this feature in terms of “a sense of oneness and loss of ego” (60); “a sense of interconnectedness” (27); “a connection with a unitive consciousness, the life force, divinity” (18); or “an inspirational feeling of total union with ‘Everything That Is,’ part of an all-encompassing cosmic unity that remained absolute; We are One or All is One” (92).

Experiencers typically described unity or oneness in terms of “a complete Oneness with the Light and the infinite other pieces of the Light that composed the Oneness of unconditional Love and Caring” (179); “slowly dissipating and becoming part of a whole, embracing it as it were” (113); “we are all ‘one thing’: the Universe, our planet, the animals, the rocks and trees, insects, the oceans – everything, all of it, simply one thing perceiving itself through a diverse multitude of senses” (180); “seeing humanity in a nutshell and how everyone is connected to the rest of humanity” (106); or “the Great Spirit that really has no name is inside of us, or we are was inside of it—we become one with each other and you know somehow that we’d always been one; the final step is to merge with the light” (187).

**2. Out-of-Body Experience.** The second-most-commonly-mentioned phenomenological feature was an out-of-body experience. Researchers typically described out-of-body experiences in terms of “the sense of a center of consciousness existing apart from the body” (88); “clear and vivid perception of having left the physical body” (37); “subjective awareness escaping the spatial confines of the body” (98); “altered proprioception, with a sense of disembodiment” (60); or “perceiving the material world from a location outside the physical body” (43).

Experiencers typically described out-of-body experiences in terms of “spirit or soul lifts out of the body, rises up to ceiling, looks down on self” (138); “a separation of the eternal spirit from the body, and the act of leaving the dying body behind” (114); “it’s not a *sensation* of leaving your physical body, it *is* leaving your body” (137); “seeing your own body from far above, confirming that soul/ spirit/consciousness is separate from this body, mind, intellect, and ego” (147); or “being decoupled from one’s physical body, free from the constraints of material existence” (106).

One subcategory of out-of-body experience bears separate mention:

*2a. Veridical Out-of-Body Perception.* A subtype of out-of-body experience was a veridical or corroborated out-of-body perception. Researchers describe this subtype of out-of-body experience typically in terms of “visual awareness of objects, entities, or events in the environment that can be confirmed by third parties” (88); “accurately and veridically perceiving events in the here-and-now” (98); “evidential features” (17); “sensory experiences of surrounding areas that are confirmed later” (20); or “viewing one’s surroundings, with subsequent corroboration” (40).

Experiencers typically described this subtype of out-of-body experience in terms of “able to see accurately outside of the body, either a few feet then looking back, or really out and about; able to see anything” (102); “veridical perception— sensing/seeing and hearing sounds that actually took place while detached from the physical body— verified upon returning back into the body” (181); or “a complete absence of physically-based sensory stimulation, making it possible for the spirit/identity to perceive that which is really there but which one is unable to perceive otherwise in the environment” (154).

**3. Exceptionally Lucid Thoughts or Perceptions/Expanded Consciousness/Omniscience.** The third-most-commonly-mentioned phenomenological feature was an exceptional lucidity of thoughts and/or perceptions, or a greatly expanded consciousness. Researchers typically described this exceptional lucidity in terms of “heightened awareness, clarity, and sensory vividness” (62); “exceptionally lucid thought processes and perceptions under conditions that preclude conscious experience” (59); “hyperlucid consciousness and accelerated thought processes surpassing that linked to physical brain function” (18); “an expanded/unlimited state of consciousness and a sense of all-knowing” (33); or “an intense, lucid experience, different from dreams/hallucinations or psychedelic trips” (3).

Experiencers typically described exceptional lucidity in terms of “instantly filled with a ‘Knowing’ and ‘Feeling’ about everything that ever existed” (179); “a realm of pure knowledge, seeing grass where each blade is lit from inside” (116); “remembering (rather than being given) ‘The Answers’ to all of the existential questions we think of now that seem very important, having no more questions and experiencing the truth of everything” (108); “the colors and sounds are alive and have depth and vibrancy in a way you have never experienced before or since” (112); or “when the body dies and every bit of our awareness is fully functioning in an accelerated rate, there is a consciousness level vastly greater than the one we draw upon and employ in our daily lives” (144).

**4. Exceptionally Strong Emotions.** The fourth-most-commonly-mentioned phenomenological feature was exceptionally strong emotions. Researchers typically described these strong emotions in terms of “heightened emotions, ranging from profound love and serenity to fear or awe” (62); “highly emotional aspects” (64); “extremely intense and emotional” (28); or “overwhelming emotional aspects” (40).

Experiencers typically described these strong emotions in terms of “emotionally intense” (149); “by far more emotionally impactful than anything one will ever experience on this earth” (127); or “either blissful, frightening, or painful” (144).

Two subcategories of exceptionally strong emotions bear separate mention:

*4a. Exceptionally Strong Positive Emotions.* The most commonly mentioned subtype of strong emotions was exceptionally strong positive emotions. Researchers typically described these strong positive emotions in terms of “profound feelings of love, well-being, peace, acceptance, or serenity” (7); “ineffable peace, tranquility, and joy” (80); “an ecstatic state accompanied by feelings of profound peace, love, and homecoming” (10); “deeply meaningful, positive, and loving exchanges” (78); or “all-pervading peace, bliss” (89).

Experiencers typically described exceptionally strong positive emotions in terms of “a place of contentment, all about calmness, helpfulness, peace of mind-body-spirit, safety, and a pleasant security that does not exist in the physical world” (186); “without any worries or questions, you feel a tranquility, serenity, calmness, peacefulness, bliss, and sense of wellbeing you’ve never known” (107); “an all-encompassing peaceful ‘void,’ exhilarating, peaceful, safe, and welcoming” (174); or “an overwhelming sense of unconditional love, forgiveness and acceptance, and joy to your toenails” (156).

*4b. Unconditional Love.* A subtype of exceptionally strong positive emotions was a sense of unconditional love. Researchers typically described unconditional love in terms of “a sense of extreme love and well-being” (75); “a profound sense of unconditional love and serenity” (62); “a feeling of overwhelming love” (81); “an immediate, all-encompassing, and everlasting, ineffable peace and love” (92); or “a connection with a unitive consciousness and love” (18).

Experiencers typically described this subtype of positive emotion typically in terms of “an overwhelming feeling of unconditional pure love, unlike any love that exists here” (150); “the #1 thing is the total unexpected love bath that you keep with you upon return, never to be forgotten” (116); “the love that this divine presence shows you is

unconditional and all encompassing” (112); “nothing but the purest unconditional love and acceptance imaginable” (180); or “unconditional love being the central core message of the experience” (115).

*4c. Exceptionally strong negative emotions.* A less commonly mentioned type of strong emotion was exceptionally strong negative emotions. Researchers described strong negative emotions as “heightened emotions, ranging ... to fear or awe” (62); “sometimes fear” (70); and “sensations of fear or panic” (57)

The single experiencer who mentioned negative emotions described them as “frightening or painful, grief” (102).

**5. Encountering Other Beings or Entities.** The fifth-most-commonly-mentioned phenomenological feature was a sense of encountering other (nonphysical) beings or entities. Researchers typically described these encounters in terms of “a profound, benevolent entity emitting feelings of love, peace, or guidance” (62); “interacting with entities not of the material world” (43); “conversations with spiritual beings” (17); “visual and auditory hallucinations, including meeting spirits” (53); or “encounters with ‘otherworldly’ personages” (32).

Experiencers typically described such encounters in terms of “one can ‘see’ spiritual people who try to help you understand where you are and what the ‘scene’ is all about” (186); “an interview with someone there at your arrival, and perhaps being asked a question such as, ‘Do you want to go on, or go back?’” (146); “seeing someone, or hearing ‘faint murmurings’” (170); “beings made of brilliant unearthly light” (111); or “you sense unseen entities present” (137).

Two subcategories of “other beings or entities” bear mentioning:

*5a. Encountering Deceased Beings or Entities.* A subtype of encounters with other beings or entities was encounters with deceased people. Researchers typically described encountering deceased people in terms of “seeing deceased spirits” (65); “meeting deceased relatives” (79); “encountering departed friends and relatives” (20); “conversations with loved ones” (17); or “being welcomed or guided by a respected and trusted loved one” (31).

Experiencers typically described encounters with the deceased in terms of “seeing the dead and they are perfectly alive and healthy” (102); “encountering (or ‘sensing’) the energy of deceased beings, some of whom are familiar” (162); “seeing relatives emanating from the light coming towards you” (200); “there are deceased family members alive within the bright light” (121); or “encountering dead relatives you never previously met, or those you didn’t know had died” (133).

*5b. Encountering Divine Beings or Entities.* Another subtype of en-

counter was with entities considered to be divine beings. Researchers typically described encounters with divine entities in terms of “encountering a mystical being or presence” (65); “encountering the divine or divine-like beings” (91); “an encounter with the creative intelligence of the universe” (10); “being guided by a spiritual figure” (31); or “communicating with some kind of transcendent higher powers” (83).

Experiencers typically described such encounters in terms of “meeting angels, spiritual beings, Jesus, or God” (102); “the universal something, the ‘divine’” (166); “the Great Spirit that really has no name” (187); or “beings who don’t exist on this earthly plane” (144).

**6. Light.** The sixth-most-commonly-mentioned phenomenological feature was a preternaturally brilliant light. Researchers typically described the light in terms of “perception of, or engulfment in, a bright and loving light” (84); “encounter with a living being of light” (76); “encounter with a Radiant Light or Presence, a profound, benevolent entity emitting feelings of love, peace, or guidance” (62); “movement into the bright light, which has a mystical feel” (60); or “visual and auditory hallucinations, including seeing bright lights” (53).

Experiencers typically described the light in terms of “seeing, or feeling surrounded by, a brilliant light entity and beings made of that unearthly light” (111); “a complete Oneness with the Light and the infinite other pieces of the Light that compose the Oneness” (146); “a non-corporeal transition through (and toward) an increasingly intense illumination of bright and extraordinarily loving white light” (152); “a tunnel of light, with relatives emanating from the light” (200); or “the light is indescribable; words don’t suffice” (137).

**7. Panoramic Life Review.** The seventh-most-commonly-mentioned phenomenological feature was a panoramic life review. Researchers typically described the life review in terms of “undergoing a comprehensive life review” (8); “seeing or reliving events from the past” (93); “reliving a recording of life that is purposeful, meaningful, and educational” (78); or “not just re-experiencing one’s deeds, but reflecting on them from the standpoint of others involved” (76).

Experiencers typically described the life review in terms of “scenes from your past come back to you” (155); “panoramic life review” (109); or “very fast life review, without judgment” (145).

One subcategory of life review bears separate mention:

*7a. Future Visions.* A rare extension of the life review is a life preview, or vision of future events. The single researcher who mentioned future vision described them as “gaining insightful knowledge about the future” (93).

Experiencers typically described future vision as “scenes from the future” (181) or “memories of my future” (155).

**8. Return to the Body.** The eight-most-commonly-mentioned phenomenological feature was a return to the physical body. Researchers typically described the return in terms of “a return to physical life” (86); “a conscious return into the body” (95); “being returned to the normal body-encapsulated point of view in consensus reality” (98); or “a return to the physical state of being in order to be able to recount the experience” (26).

Experiencers typically described returning to the body in terms of “returning to life on Earth on the material plane” (130); “hard work to descend to the body, what with gravity and being pulled back up at the same time, but very determined to return, entering into your body quietly and peacefully” (170); or “one’s essence then teeters and returns to reinhabit the shell” (161).

**9. Tunnel or Dark Passageway.** The ninth-most-commonly-mentioned phenomenological feature was a tunnel or dark passageway. Researchers typically described the tunnel in terms of “moving through a tunnel toward a bright light” (20); “passing through a dark or enclosed place, or through a tunnel” (65); “entering darkness” (91); or “a sense of rushing down a dark tunnel toward a warm, bright, and welcoming light” (15).

Experiencers typically described the tunnel in terms of “riding a rocket sled through a tunnel” (125); “a tunnel of light” (200); “going through a tunnel super-fast” (150); or “the feeling of a tunnel” (172).

**10. Border or Point of No Return.** The tenth-most-commonly-mentioned phenomenological feature was a border or point of no return. Researchers typically described the border in terms of “coming to a border or point of no return, and making the decision, or being forced, to come back from the experience” (93); or “being guided toward a realm protected by some sort of barrier” (31).

Experiencers typically described the border in terms of “being asked a question such as, ‘Do you want to go on, or go back?’” (145); “recognizing that if you went through that light you wouldn’t return, and deciding you must return to your body” (170); “being told by some being that you had to go back, that your job wasn’t finished” (137); “realizing you weren’t finished with what you wanted to do on this earth and coming back” (187); or “being sent back, either because it’s not your time or because you want to or have to go back” (102).

**11. Ineffability.** The eleventh-most-commonly-mentioned phenomenological feature was a sense of ineffability. Researchers typi-

cally described ineffability in terms of “a unique, ineffable event” (5); or “ineffable peace and joy” (80).

Experiencers typically described ineffability in terms of “the words have not been forged yet” (157); “an unexpected and ineffable, deep, unforgettable experience” (110); “there are no words to describe the experience adequately” (112); “the experience lacks verbal description; no way to truly describe it” (131); or “a realm one cannot describe with words limited by our conventional language” (110).

**12. Absence of Pain.** The twelfth-most-commonly-mentioned phenomenological feature was the absence of pain. The single researcher who mentioned absence of pain described it as “the sudden absence of pain that was felt right before entering the NDE” (7).

Experiencers typically described absence of pain in terms of “doesn’t hurt; actually death doesn’t hurt” (141); “no more physical pain” (146); “without pain” (161); “eradication of pain/disease” (181); or “a total lack of pain” (199).

**13. Desire to Remain in the Realm of the NDE.** The thirteenth-most-commonly-mentioned phenomenological feature was a desire to remain in the realm of the NDE. None of the researchers mentioned this feature, but experiencers typically described it in terms of “desire to stay in the light” (146); “you wonder why you can’t stay; are you not good enough?” (102); or “you don’t want to go back to earth; in an NDE there is all one wants: peace, safety, and a pleasant security that does not exist in the physical world” (186).

**14. Loss of Control.** The fourteenth-most-commonly-mentioned phenomenological feature was a loss of voluntary control over the experience. None of the researchers mentioned loss of control, but experiencers described it in terms of “a feeling of being swept along, out of your control” (199); or “the final step was to surrender to it, a sense of letting go” (187).

**15. Void or Dark Nothingness.** The least-commonly-mentioned phenomenological feature was a void or dark nothingness. The single researcher who mentioned a void described it as “encountering a dark void or a darkness, or a hellish region” (65). The single experiencer who mentioned a void described it as “a complete absence of sensory stimulation” (154).

**Vague or Nonspecific Description.** Researchers who did not offer a specific phenomenological description of the NDE, but described it rather in vague or nonspecific language, used terms such as “a striking, unusual experience, not to be expected from loss of consciousness” (86); “a vivid and life-changing experience that may be colored by personal memories and socio-cultural contexts” (22); “a distinct subjective

experience with aspects that cannot be explained by conventional science" (34); "the psychological expression of the complex process of dying (and surviving death) complete with spiritual, biological, and social factors that make up all of our human experiences" (51); or "a special type of visionary experience which seems to gain rhetorical importance through its connection to death" (46).

Experiencers who did not include a specific phenomenological description of the NDE, but described it in vague or nonspecific terms, used descriptions such as "a collection of memories that occur at a time when our bodies are at or close to cardiac arrest" (183); "an unexpected and ineffable, deep, unforgettable life affirming and life transforming experience" (110); "an NDE defies definition; what happens in that space is very specific to the experiencer" (198); or "an NDE is entering the meaning of life; being the whole you without the features of living" (134).

## Physical Circumstances or Precipitants

Following are typical descriptions of the physical circumstances associated with the NDE that respondents mentioned, in order of frequency:

**1. Unspecified Proximity to Death.** The physical circumstance most commonly mentioned was unspecified proximity to death. Researchers typically described unspecified nearness to death in terms of being "triggered by the onset or threat of imminent death" (84); "on the verge of death" (12); "when the conditions of this existence are threatened" (42); "in moments of peril" (74); or "in a critical state" (25).

Experiencers typically described unspecified proximity to death in terms of "being close to death, or actually pronounced dead, only to be revived" (149); "being near-death, dead, or in a situation of physical or emotional crisis" (115); "after the body dies or is in dire straits" (161); "when the body is at or close to cardiac arrest" (183); or "bodily harm or perceived physical danger" (106).

**2. Psychological Proximity to Death.** The second-most-commonly-mentioned physical circumstance was *psychological* proximity to death. Researchers typically described psychological closeness to death in terms of "a justifiable belief that they are in a near-death situation" (31); "during an expected imminent death" (96); "when a person consciously perceives him- or herself near death or dying" (63); "associated with a consciously or unconsciously interpreted life-threatening circumstance" (49); or "danger, real, perceived, or implied" (74).

Experiencers described psychological proximity to death in terms of

“a traumatic event and the surrendering of life as we know it” (184); “an event that is so painful, so uncontrollable, so savage, or life threatening that the person consciously knows that they will die, so they quit, give up, accept death” (125); or “bodily harm or perceived physical danger” (106).

**3. Clinical Death, as in Cardiac Arrest or Cessation of Brain Activity.** The third-most-commonly-mentioned physical circumstance was documented clinical death, as in cardiac arrest or cessation of brain activity. Researchers typically described these features in terms of “the presence of physiological indicators of bodily death including absence of respiration and heartbeat” (90); “within the context of death when the brain is inoperative or offline” (17); “during the time that doctors have declared the person dead (e.g., no measurable cerebral activity)” (34); “when vital signs, notably respiratory and cardiac function, cease and their reversal seems unlikely without extraordinary intervention” (98); or “a condition that would ordinarily lead to death without timely life-saving critical care interventions” (78).

Experiencers typically described clinical death in terms of “when the body dies” (156); “when the heart stops” (108); “the moment breathing stops” (179); “when the physical body is unable to function on the material plane, and is no longer alive” (130); or “associated specifically with a physical death that is clinically verifiable, such as flatlining or being coded” (181).

**4. Physiological Proximity to Death, Without Clinical Death.** The fourth-most-commonly-mentioned physical circumstance was physiological proximity to death, without documented clinical death. Researchers typically described physiological nearness to death in terms of “when a person is *in extremis*, when brain activity seems incompatible with any form of experience” (83); “during neurophysiological conditions such as brain trauma, general anesthesia, and hypoxia of the brain” (37); “after a profound physiological assault upon the human body or within in human body (e.g., catastrophic accident or illness) leaving its survivability in question” (87); “in a moribund context, when outwardly unconscious, unresponsive, and clinically near death” (24); or “when a person is deemed to have died or almost died” (91).

Experiencers described physiological proximity to death as “backed by medical records to ensure a person is not imagining imminent death or fearing death, but is actually experiencing the cessation or near cessation of organ functions, a state possible when your organs or systems are shutting down” (198); or “a person must be considered physically

dead or very near physical death; that is, had a triggering event that leads to physical death” (171).

**5. Unconsciousness Near Death.** The least-commonly-mentioned physical circumstance was unconsciousness near death. Researchers typically described unconsciousness near death in terms of “during a phase of apparent unconsciousness in a life-threatening situation” (73); “during unconsciousness on the first stages of the normal dying process” (3); or “during a period of loss of consciousness in relation to a life-threatening event, including cardiac arrest” (79).

Experiencers described unconsciousness near death as “has to be a life-threatening situation and have to have lost consciousness” (168); or “completely unconscious and ready to die” (187).

## Aftereffects

Following are typical descriptions of the aftereffects that respondents mentioned, in order of frequency:

**Unspecified but Life-Transforming and Long-Lasting Effects.** The largest group of respondents did not offer a specific description of aftereffects but, rather, described them in vague or nonspecific terms. Researchers typically described these unspecified effects in terms of “significant emotional and perceptual transformations” (11); “positive transformation typically observed over the long term” (79); or “profound changes psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, and in a lot of cases physically” (33).

Experiencers typically described such unspecified effects in terms of “effects which are incredibly powerful and long lasting” (119); “a revelation of enormous proportions, an epiphany, that changes one’s perceptions and values forever” (144); “long lasting effects many decades later” (110); “permanently changed by the event” (139); or “return a changed person who can never again experience life the same way as before” (140).

Following are the *specific* aftereffects that respondents mentioned, in order of frequency, along with typical descriptions they offered:

**1. Loss of Fear of Death.** A specific aftereffect that respondents most commonly mentioned was loss of the fear of death. Researchers typically described this loss of fear in terms of “stopping being afraid of dying afterwards” (38); “loss of fear of death because the knowing that the next plane of existence both exists and has highly positive features” (89); “insight into life after death” (12); or “become messengers that life goes on” (25).

Experiencers typically described loss of the fear of death in terms of “death is not to be feared, knowing that death is a segue and that consciousness lingers after the body dies” (161); “granted the boon of immortality” (177); “a full realization that human existence is neither created nor destroyed” (139); or “it’s the body that’s afraid of death, and when we are able to leave the body and step away from it we’re no longer afraid” (187).

**2. Enhanced Spirituality.** An equally-commonly-mentioned aftereffect was enhanced spirituality. Researchers typically described enhanced spirituality in terms of “greater spirituality and concern for others” (31); “profound transformation of their attitudes towards spirituality” (50); “transformed in the direction of becoming less materialistic, more loving” (20); “awakening to the knowing that they have specific purpose” (47); or “more loving, kind, compassionate, empathetic, and altruistic” (8).

Experiences typically described enhanced spirituality in terms of “greater appreciation for the mystery of all that exists” (173); “realization that one has a higher purpose in helping others to achieve their potential” (196); “doing good to other living creatures defines your whole existence” (134); “heightened awareness, greater knowing, and Divine connection to Spirit that continues many years after returning to the body” (181); or “intense feelings of awe, being at one with the natural world, being moved by art or music in new ways, seeking spiritual enlightenment, feeling deeper connections with others, experiencing a new sense of mission or purpose, and simply slowing down to appreciate the present” (135).

**3. Shift in Worldview.** The third-most-commonly mentioned aftereffect was a shift in worldview. This shift in worldview bears some similarity to enhanced spirituality, but does not imply that the shift be toward a more spiritual worldview. Researchers typically described this shift in worldview in terms of “awakening to realities or dimensions that lie beyond our current earthly life experience” (89); “profound transformation of attitudes towards life, death, and humanity” (50); “values and worldview come to reflect another reality” (82); or “changes regarding attitudes toward oneself, others, and life in general” (7).

Experiencers typically described this shift in worldview in terms of “one’s worldview is expanded or blown completely out of the water” (133); “a certainty that the Cosmos is conscious, and that everything material and living is not only part of it but also, actively, contributes to its evolution” (144); “permanently shifts the framework of the old programs into a new way of being” (181); “when people come back they

are not the same person anymore but are the eternal version of themselves that remains" (155); or "leads to intense self-reflection and a reworking of personal priorities, and becoming aware of the fact that our consciousness is vastly greater than the one we draw upon and employ in our daily lives" (118).

**4. Positive Emotional Effects.** The fourth-most-mentioned aftereffect was positive emotional change. Researchers described positive emotional aftereffects as "emotional aspects such as tranquility and peace are often the lasting remnants" (40); or "personality transformation involving positive emotional changes" (85).

Experiencers typically described positive emotional effects in terms of "love begins to pour out as if from the air itself" (102); "the memory of that moment continually brings one peace and comfort and will do so forever" (191); or "unconditional love, joy, peace within continue post return to the body" (181).

**5. Unique Memory That May Help One Get Through Difficulties.** The fifth-most-commonly-mentioned aftereffect was a unique memory that may help the experiencer get through difficulties. The single researcher who mentioned a unique memory described it as "an indelible and unforgettable experience that has nothing to do with any other type of memory, in level of details, intensity of recall, stability in time" (3).

Experiencers typically described the memory of the NDE in terms of "never to be forgotten, an 'oozer' that seeps out of you for the rest of your life" (116); "unfailingly precise and constant, always recalled in the present tense rather than being a past memory, with a quality entirely different from other memories" (171); "the memory of the NDE can get you through the most painful and difficult times of your life" (180); or "the memory of the NDE can be tapped into at any moment for truth in vitality" (193).

**6. Physiological Effects.** The sixth-most-commonly-mentioned aftereffect was physiological change. Researchers typically described physiological aftereffects in terms of "profoundly changed physically, for some, with newly acquired abilities such as healing" (8); and "light and chemical sensitivity, electromagnetic aftereffects, etc." (33).

Experiencers described physiological effects as "feeling electricity flowing (energy), and getting a tingling in your hands and feeling energy coming from them" (151); "sustained energetic impression on the physical aspects of the person" (176); and "a return to wholeness and an eradication of pain and disease, complete healing from the original illness and no recurrence" (181).

**7. Paranormal Phenomena.** Tied for the sixth-most-commonly-mentioned aftereffect was paranormal or psychic phenomena. Researchers described paranormal aftereffects as “newly acquired abilities, such as healing and psychic talents” (8) and as “enhanced intuitive sensitivity, with the feeling of being connected with others and with nature” (95).

Experiencers described paranormal aftereffects as “if you weren’t psychic before, you become psychic after; if you were psychic before, you become very psychic after” (102); “people’s loved ones come to and through you all the time” (169); and “hypersensitivity to energies, and heightened awareness and greater knowing, for instance ability to understand others’ thoughts and emotions, that continues many years after returning into the body” (181).

**Rarely-Mentioned Aftereffects.** Some rarely-mentioned aftereffects were indicated by none of the researchers and by only one or two of the experiencers. They included:

- A desire to share knowledge of the experience with others, described by the two experiencers who mentioned it as “a compulsion to share the experience and to record it for posterity” (121) and “to inform the rest of humanity about who we really are and why we are” (132).
- Negative emotional change, described by the single experiencer who mentioned it as “disorientation, sometimes grief, almost always confusion” (102).
- Interpersonal difficulty, described by the single experiencer who mentioned it as “you are not believed; divorces often follow, walking out of the family, quitting one’s job” (102).

## **Interpretation or Understanding of the Meaning of NDEs**

Following are typical descriptions of the interpretations of NDEs mentioned by respondents, in order of frequency:

**1. Encounter with a Different (Universal or Ultimate) Reality.** The interpretation most commonly mentioned was that an NDE is an experience of a spiritual or ultimate reality, one that is different from everyday human reality. Researchers typically described this experience of a different reality in terms of “the non-physical Mother Universe from which we come and to which we return many times in the cycle of life” (10); “a reality that transcends the constraints of time

and space, a connection with a unitive consciousness, the life force, divinity, and love” (18); “a different realm or dimension that is hyper-real, not available to us at the egoistic level” (13); “reality distinct from the physical/psychological conditions that the person was in before the experience” (80); or “another realm of existence or mode of being, beyond the usual limitations of the ordinary physical one” (48).

Experiencers typically described this experience of a different reality as “beyond what is seen and understood in one state of consciousness to reveal another perceived as even more real” (185); “a place where I knew I had been before and will return to once my lesson on this planet is over: Home, where I belong” (188); “plucked from this world and thrust into a new reality, our state of origin with different timelines” (140); “a previously unknown dimension that exists outside of ordinary reality, separate and apart from your physical body” (147); or “your soul ascends to and is allowed to enter its next plane or level of existence, a purely spiritual state of being, outside of material reality” (128).

**2. Separation From the Body.** The second-most-commonly-mentioned interpretation was that an NDE is a separation from the physical body. Researchers typically described separation from the body in terms of “the person’s consciousness or mind entity separating from their physical body” (65); “the separation of an energetic aspect of an individual from their physical body” (16); or “a serene perception of being separate from one’s body” (5).

Experiencers typically described separation from the body in terms of “Consciousness has to leave the body” (142); “our Spirit transitions from our Earthly body to our Heavenly body or form” (197); “a separation of the duality of an eternal soul inhabiting a body” (114); “one’s consciousness (the soul) is leaving the dying physical body” (195); or “your soul pulls free of your body” (128).

**3. Transition Between Life and Death.** The third-most-commonly-mentioned interpretation was that an NDE is a transition or intermediate state between life and death. Researchers described this transition as “a continuation of consciousness in the transition from one state of being to the next” (26); and “the experience of transition beyond earthly life to another plane of existence” (89).

Experiencers typically described the transition in terms of “one enters the continuum between this life and the next, gains a full realization that human essence is neither created nor destroyed” (139); “a between-lives event, leaving body and Earth” (145); “the mode of transportation transporting you from life to the afterlife” (150); “a pause

between life and death, being in the space between God's fingers and Adam's fingers in Michelangelo's painting of Creation in the Sistine Chapel" (198); or "a transition to a purely spiritual state of being" (137).

**4. Experience of Death.** The fourth-most-commonly-mentioned interpretation was that an NDE is an experience of death. Researchers typically described the experience of death in terms of "the subjective experience of apparently surviving death" (84); or "the psychological expression of the complex process of dying (and surviving death)" (51).

Experiencers typically described the experience of death in terms of "a preview of your soul's post-mortal existence" (128); "the dress rehearsal for the last act of your play" (148); "the possible look at an afterlife" (184); "still existing while knowing without a doubt that the body you lived in is dead, so you are still alive although your body isn't" (155); or "an afterlife experience in which one's consciousness lingers after the body dies; there is no body, yet one's essence is objectively aware of being you" (161).

**5. Realization of the True Nature of All Reality.** The fifth-most-commonly-mentioned interpretation was that an NDE is an experience of the true nature of all reality. This interpretation differs from an encounter with a different reality in that it is not an experience of a reality *different* from the physical one but, rather, a realization that what we think of as the physical reality is actually one aspect of a reality far beyond ordinary human perception. The experience of the true nature of all reality was not mentioned by any of the researchers; experiencers typically described the realization of the true nature of reality in terms of "*Truth*: what you experience is the truth of everything" (103); "it shows you our true nature" (112); "understanding the Spiritual Perfection that is the hidden tapestry of our lives, sewn thread by thread, moment by precious moment in everyday life, and a realization of the ethereal, the growth of our spiritual life that is God working through us for the glory of God, transcending all earthly ego" (120); or "realization that 'Reality' is completely redefined from thinking that we are physical beings to knowing that we are multidimensional and parts of a vast, infinitely loving, peaceful, blissful, ever-morphing vast Consciousness of energy and light, not our brains, bodies, or anything physical, but part of this blissful, vibrant, heightened sensory Consciousness" (129).

**6. Natural Biological Process.** An infrequently-mentioned interpretation was that an NDE is a natural biological process, described by researchers as "a physiologically unexplainable event that reflects ongoing subconscious processes unique to all of our individual signifi-

cant life engagements” (54); “first stages of natural dying process” (3); and “unique conscious, self-related emotional, spiritual, and mystical unexplained experiences known from all parts of the world, various times, and numerous cultural backgrounds, implying a universality that indicates a biological origin and purpose” (53).

None of the experiencers mentioned natural biological processes as an interpretation of NDEs.

**Vague Interpretation.** Three researchers did not offer a specific interpretation of NDEs but described them rather in vague or non-specific terms, as “a spiritual experience of variable depth” (39); “a unique, ineffable event” (5); and “an experience that challenges existing neuroscientific models” (41). None of the experiencers offered vague or nonspecific interpretations of NDEs.

## Discussion

The earliest modern NDE researchers noted that most experiencers report their NDEs to be ineffable (e.g., Moody, 1975; Ring, 1980). Despite that hurdle, researchers generally seek measurable precision. Consequently, as noted above, researchers’ descriptions tended to be short and couched in observable terms, whereas experiencers’ descriptions were generally longer, more lyrical, and often expressed as metaphors, such as “joy to your toenails” (156); “a dress rehearsal for the last act” (148); or “the hidden tapestry of our lives” (120). Furthermore, whereas the researchers tended to include features that had been mentioned prominently in their research or in the scholarly NDE literature, experiencers, who tended to be less familiar with the research literature, tended to include features that were prominent in their own personal experiences. It is not surprising, therefore, that researchers included significantly more physical circumstances and phenomenological features in their descriptions, whereas experiencers included significantly more interpretations or statements of the NDE’s existential meaning.

Despite these differences, however, experiencers and researchers of diverse disciplines and philosophical stances agreed on the primary physical circumstances, phenomenological features, and aftereffects of the experience. Their disagreement was largely in their interpretation of, and assumptions regarding the ultimate meaning of, the experience.

## Comments by Respondents

This dilemma of trying to describe an ineffable experience in observable terms was succinctly epitomized by photographer Ansel Adams (1972): “There’s nothing worse than a clear, sharp image of a fuzzy concept” (p. 59). This dilemma was echoed in some of the comments of both researchers and experiencers. Some respondents argued that most descriptions of NDEs are too limited and should be more inclusive of viewpoints from other cultures and perspectives. Other respondents argued that most descriptions are *too inclusive* and should be limited to one particular viewpoint—although their preferred perspective varied from the neurophysiological to the transcendental.

One researcher objected to the idea of a search for a concise conceptual description of NDEs, suggesting that NDEs can best be described in term of a score on a quantitative measure: “It’s hard to say that any one element is essential to an NDE. I think a better and more sensible approach is to define an NDE based on the NDE Scale or the original WCEI measure” (84). Another researcher agreed, thinking it unwise to seek a consensus among researchers or experiencers rather than an objective measure: “Polling people as you are doing, you will end up with a bunch of subjective opinions, which is what ultimately leads to a lot of the problem the subject has faced” (78).

On the other hand, three researchers wrote that a description of NDEs should be left vague and nonspecific: “the less the description is detailed, the higher the hope of its survival; in fact, a detailed description is at higher risk to be dismantled by contrary facts” (30); “a narrow definition will probably exclude experiences valuable to the field” (77); and “as a sociologist, I would expect that a ‘core feature’ list would gradually change over time, as cultures change over time” (66).

One experiencer agreed that the description of NDEs should not be specific: “we all have separate dictionaries; your words for something are going to be different from mine, which is not wrong” (156).

And three researchers counseled describing NDEs not only by their phenomenology but also by their underlying process: “the static elements of a phenomenon (e.g. symptoms & signs) must be accompanied by parallel characteristics of process (changes to symptoms and signs over time); robust descriptions have two axes: character and process, both of which are essential; the problem to date for descriptions of NDEs is that they have been over-reliant on one axis – characteristics” (47); and “a phenomenon cannot be described in terms of phenomenal elements or features, but only in terms of the phenomenon’s underly-

ing framework, the conceptual architecture that describes what lies behind the phenomenal features” (65).

Two experiencers agreed, echoing the concern that focusing on phenomena misses the core of NDE: “you are looking for ‘things’; if you put all your eggs into that basket, you will miss the mark almost entirely; you must look further than that” (102); and “a model of the experience itself has limited value; the proof of the pudding is in the impact and aftereffects” (133).

### Suggestion for Future Efforts

These reservations from researchers and experiencers address primarily the *definition* of NDEs, particularly for research purposes, and may be less applicable to a *conceptual description* of them. Epistemological challenges like these should not be deterrents from trying to bring clarity and consistency to how NDEs are presented to a general audience. Nevertheless, they sound a word of caution worth heeding. Some researchers have suggested that it is important to distinguish between experiences associated with a documented cardiac arrest and those associated with less clearly documented threats to life, even though current instruments to measure NDEs do not distinguish between NDEs occurring in near-death situations and comparable experiences (“NDE-like experiences”) occurring in other situations (Charland-Verville et al., 2014; Facco & Agrillo, 2012). Indeed, Parnia and colleagues have gone so far as to recommend forgoing the name “near-death experience (NDE)” because it is too inclusive, and speak rather of “recalled experience of death (RED),” reserving that term for those experiences associated with cardiac arrest (Parnia et al., 2022).

Given the diversity of opinion among both researchers and experiencers regarding the core features of NDEs, it may be presumptuous to recommend one terse description for universal use. As noted above, in practical terms, how one would describe NDEs to neuroscientists would differ from how one would describe NDEs to theologians. Nevertheless, for the purpose of explaining to a lay audience, at the urging of a reporter or interviewer, what is meant by the term *near-death experience*, I would suggest that the consensus of people familiar with NDEs might be something like this:

*Near-death experiences are events that occur when people are close to death, typically characterized by transcendent or mystical features, out-of-body experiences, exceptional lucidity, and unusually strong emotions. They generally have profound aftereffects, such as decreas-*

*ing one's fear of death, enhancing one's spirituality, and radically shifting one's worldview.*

I do not think we know enough about NDEs at this point for an authoritative prescription of what NDEs are. But a statement not too different from the one above may be as clear an image as can be drawn of Adams's "fuzzy concept."

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