

Fact Sheet: Near-Death Experience (NDE)

In an NDE, usually during a close brush with death, a person has a vivid, emotionally intense experience of lucidly perceiving the material world from a position outside the physical body and/or perceiving and interacting with beings and environments not of the material world. Afterwards, experiencers are usually profoundly changed.

What forms do NDEs take?

NDEs typically include several features.

No two NDEs are identical, and the presence and intensity of each of the following features varies from one experiencer (NDEr) to another (adapted from <https://med.virginia.edu/perceptual-studies/our-research/near-death-experiences-ndes/>):

- feeling very comfortable and free of pain
- a sensation of leaving the physical body
- seeing the body and its surroundings from a position outside of the body—usually above it
- the mind functioning more clearly and more rapidly than usual
- rapid or instantaneous movement to other locations in the material world
- a sensation of being drawn into a tunnel or darkness
- a brilliant light, sometimes at the end of the tunnel
- a sense of overwhelming peace, well-being, or absolute, unconditional love
- a sense of having access to unlimited knowledge
- a “life review,” or recall of important events in the past—including actually being each person with whom the NDEr interacted in physical life, experiencing first-hand the effect their actions had on that person
- a preview of future events yet to come
- encounters with deceased loved ones, or with other beings that may be identified as spiritual or religious figures
- choosing to “return” to physical life or being told one must return
- a sensation of returning to the body

Although the majority of NDEs are dominated by pleasurable feelings such as peace, joy, and love, a minority are dominated by distressing feelings such as terror, horror, or guilt, and some NDEs include both pleasurable and distressing feelings.

Who has NDEs?

10-20% of people who survive a close brush with death report an NDE.

- An estimated 5% of the world population has had an NDE.
- NDEs are “equal opportunity experiences.” People of every demographic—age, sex, nationality, belief system, religious affiliation, etc.—have reported NDEs.
- NDE features do not vary based on the circumstances of the extreme situation or the demographics of the experiencer.
 - Even NDEs associated with suicide attempts contain similar features as those associated with natural illness or accidental injury—but because of certain aftereffects (see below), suicide survivors who had NDEs almost never attempt suicide again.

Are NDEs hallucinations?

Most factors indicate that NDEs are not hallucinations.

- Hallucinations tend to be distressing. Afterwards, experiencers consider them unreal, meaningless, and easily forgotten, and they have no wish to reflect on them and show no particular aftereffects from them. Hallucinations are almost never veridical; that is, their contents almost never correspond to objective reality.

- NDEs tend to be profoundly pleasurable. Afterwards, NDErs usually consider their NDEs to have been real and meaningful, and the memory of them tends to remain vivid and cherished for decades. NDErs usually have a strong desire to recall and reflect on their NDEs, and they typically show particular aftereffects from them. Many NDEs have been veridical (Rivas et al., 2023).

What are the effects on NDErs?

NDErs show certain characteristic aftereffects.

- In general, the deeper the NDE—the more features and more intense those features—the greater the aftereffects.
- In the short term, many NDErs feel instantly transformed by the experience and may feel challenged to integrate that transformation into their subsequent lives.
- In the long term, NDErs typically feel transformed in several ways, including but not limited to:
 - Psychological—loss of the fear of death and belief (“knowing”) in the survival of consciousness after physical death; increased appreciation for Earthly life and belief that it has purpose; reduced interest in material possessions, fame, and power; increased sense of connectedness to and concern for others; increased desire to be of service to others
 - Spiritual—increased interest in spirituality, tendency to leave organized religion—becoming more “spiritual but not religious”; having what, in some religious contexts, are termed “spiritual gifts,” such as precognition—knowing the future—and clairvoyance—seeing distant locations in “the mind’s eye”
 - Physical—changes in sleep and appetite, increased sensitivity to medication and to environmental factors such as pollution and electrical fields, electromagnetic effects whereby electronic devices in the NDEr’s vicinity malfunction

- Social—changes in relationships, organizational affiliations, and vocation—often shifting to more service-oriented work. NDErs married at the time of their NDEs may be more likely than average to divorce.

Long-term transformation may, in some cases, take years (Stout et al., 2006)

Suggestions:

Here are a few recommended resources.

- Reading about NDEs can be helpful.
- Greyson, B. (2021). *After: A doctor explores what near-death experiences reveal about life and beyond*. St. Martin’s Essentials.
- Ring, K., & Valarino, E. E. (1998). *Lessons from the light: What we can learn from the near-death experience*. Insight Books.
- Holden, J. M., Greyson, B., & James, D. (Eds.). (2009). *The handbook of near-death experiences: Thirty years of investigation*. Praeger/ABC-CLIO.
- Bush, N. E. (2021). *Reckoning: Discoveries after a traumatic near-death experience*. Author.
- Rivas, T., Dirven, A., & Smit, R. H. (2023). *The self does not die: Verified paranormal phenomena from near-death experiences* (2nd ed.). IANDS.

And these websites: www.iands.org www.nderf.org

- Watching NDErs describe their experiences and aftereffects can be especially impactful. Numerous accounts can be located online by entering the term “near-death experience” in your search engine. Another helpful resource: <https://www.youtube.com/user/IANDSvideos/>
- Although NDEs are usually remembered vividly, journaling them may, nevertheless, be beneficial—and consider adding yours to the collections at www.iands.org and www.nderf.org.

The information in this Fact Sheet is based primarily on the suggested readings listed above and numerous studies published in professional journals including the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* where articles about NDEs and related experiences from the past more-than-40 years are available for free online: <https://iands.org/research/publications/journal-of-near-death-studies/past-issues.html>

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