

# Distressing Near-Death Experiences



International Association for  
Near-Death Studies, Inc.

2741 Campus Walk Avenue  
Building 500  
Durham, NC 27705  
(919) 383-7940  
[www.iands.org](http://www.iands.org)  
[services@iands.org](mailto:services@iands.org)

*Written by Janice Holden, Ed.D., and the  
IANDS Board of Directors*

© 2003 IANDS

If you have had a distressing near-death experience, or know someone who has, or even have merely heard of the phenomenon, you're probably interested to know more about such experiences. This pamphlet will provide basic information and will direct you to additional resources on the subject.

## What is a Distressing Near-Death Experience?

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are often profound psychospiritual events. Most near-death experiencers (NDErs) report that their experience was dominated by pleasurable feelings such as peace, joy, and bliss. However, less commonly, some NDErs have reported that their experience was dominated by distressing, emotionally painful feelings such as fear, terror, horror, anger, loneliness, isolation, and/or guilt.

Greyson and Bush (1996) classified 50 reports of distressing NDEs into three types:

- ◆ The most common type included the same features as the pleasurable type—such as an out-of-body experience and rapid movement through a tunnel or void toward a light—but the NDEr, usually because of feeling out of control of what was happening, experienced the features as frightening.
- ◆ The second, less common type included an acute awareness of nonexistence or of being completely alone forever in an absolute void. Sometimes the person received a totally convincing message that the “real world”—including themselves—never really existed.
- ◆ The third and rarest type included hellish imagery such as an ugly or foreboding landscape; demonic beings; loud, annoying noises; frightening animals; and other beings in extreme distress. Only rarely have such NDErs themselves felt personally tormented.

Rommer (2000) speculated a fourth type, the rarest of all, in which the NDEr feels negatively judged by a Higher Power during their NDE life review—in which, typically, the experiencer re-views and re-experiences every moment of their life. This latter type of distressing NDE contrasts sharply with the life review that sometimes occurs in a pleasurable NDE. In the predominantly pleasurable experience, the NDEr feels absolutely loved even as they re-view and re-experience the most unloving actions they committed during their lives. During this process, the NDEr typically *is* simultaneously themselves *and* each person with whom they interacted. Thus, in the pleasurable NDE, the NDEr *experiences* what it was to have been on the receiving end of their actions and, typically, experiences profound regret and/or guilt, but within a larger context of being unconditionally loved. In the distressing NDE, by contrast, the NDEr only feels negatively judged.

## How Common Are Distressing NDEs?

The estimated incidence of distressing NDEs (dNDEs) has ranged from 1% to 15% of all NDEs (Bonenfant, 2001). The results of prospective studies—those in which the researchers interviewed everyone who experienced cardiac arrest in one or more hospitals during a period of at least several months—are noteworthy. In the four prospective studies conducted between 1984 and 2001<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> involving a total of 130 NDErs, none reported distressing experiences. This finding seems to confirm that the experience is relatively rare.

However, dNDEs may occur more frequently than they are reported. One possible reason for underreporting might be repression, in which traumatic experiences are relegated to the unconscious mind. However, a cardiologist who has been present at numerous resuscitations and has been open to hearing about dNDEs, disagreed that repression could be occurring: “These experiences are so profound...that repression is hardly an option” (Rommer, 2000, p. 25).

Other possible reasons that the dNDE may be underreported are that dNDErs avoid talking about the experience, perhaps because they:

- ◆ Hope the distressing experience will “just go away,”
- ◆ Want to avoid re-experiencing the distress that occurs when they talk about the experience,
- ◆ Feel ashamed for having had a distressing experience when so many other people have reported pleasurable experiences, and/or
- ◆ Are afraid that others will judge them as “bad” or “crazy.”

Although distressing NDEs appear to occur much less often than pleasurable NDEs, exactly how frequently the distressing types occur is not yet known. Hopefully, future research will produce a clearer answer to this question.

## Who Has Distressing NDEs?

As with the pleasurable NDE, distressing NDEs seem to occur about equally to people of both genders and of all ages, educational levels, socioeconomic levels, sexual orientations, spiritual beliefs, religious affiliations, and life experiences. Although people have sometimes wondered whether “good” people have pleasurable experiences and “bad” people have distressing ones, research has shown no such relationship between apparent life deeds and type of NDE (Rommer, 2000). In addition, some people’s NDEs have contained both pleasurable and distressing elements, and among people who have had multiple NDEs, some have had a pleasurable experience one time and a distressing experience another, in no definite order.

The way one dies may be a factor in the type of NDE one has. Rommer found that dNDErs who had self-induced their deaths made up 55% of people in her research who reported a Type II Eternal Void experience, 18% who reported a Type III Hellish experience, and most of those who reported a Type IV Negative Judgment experience. Although it may be tempting to conclude that people who attempt suicide are being “punished” for trying to induce their own deaths, *we must avoid this temptation*, as the following paragraph will explain.

People who are in a distressed frame of mind at the time of their near-death episode and those who were raised to expect distress during death may be more prone to distressing NDEs. People who attempt suicide are almost always in a distressed frame of mind. Usually they are attempting suicide because they feel themselves to be in unendurable and unending emotional or physical pain. In addition, they are almost certainly aware of the widely held belief that suicide is “cowardly” and/or the “wrong” way to escape the pain of life. Although they hope for relief from their pain, they may also consciously or unconsciously fear punishment. In a heightened state of pain, as well as of fear and/or guilt, they are highly distressed and, consequently, may be somewhat more prone to having a dNDE.

However, the facts remain that

- ◆ The overall majority of distressing NDEs did not occur in the context of attempted suicide,
- ◆ Many pleasurable NDEs were the result of attempted suicide, and
- ◆ Many people who were in a distressed frame of mind and/or who expected “judgement” and “punishment” during death had a pleasurable NDE.

Bush (2002) examined the mystical literature of major religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism; the research on other non-ordinary states of consciousness probably related to NDEs; and the data on distressing NDEs themselves. She came to the same conclusion as Rommer: *Everyone has the potential to have a distressing near-death experience*.

In summary, it is not known conclusively why most people report pleasurable NDEs and some report distressing ones. Whether this question can ever be answered, and what that answer might be, awaits further research.

## What Are the Aftereffects of Distressing NDEs?

Although NDEs have been categorized based on their predominant emotional tone—pleasurable or distressing—aftereffects of both categories of experience appear quite similar. For example, NDErs of both types often

feel challenged to integrate the experience into their subsequent lives. However, whereas virtually all pleasurable NDErs lose their fear of death, distressing NDErs sometimes express a fear of death and often ask, “Why me? Why did I have a distressing experience when most people have a pleasurable one?”

Rommer concluded along with other researchers that, in the long run, as with pleasurable NDErs, virtually all distressing NDErs ultimately found the experience extremely beneficial. For example,

- ◆ Someone who had a lifelong pattern of using emotional isolation to avoid being rejected by others, may have a distressing NDE of the eternal void, in which he realized that profound, endless isolation is *not* what he *really* wants. Afterwards, he may develop his ability to be emotionally vulnerable to others, to deal with the occasional disappointments that such vulnerability brings, and to enjoy the frequent rewards of connecting intimately with others.
- ◆ Another distressing NDEr may report that in her NDE, she engaged in a life-and-death struggle with a demonic being; for the first time in her life, she genuinely called out to God for help; and—for the first time—she experienced the genuine presence of, and communion with, God.

Both of these distressing NDErs would say that without the dNDE, they would not have furthered their personal and spiritual development. In this sense, Rommer concluded that although distressing NDErs frequently struggle through the emotional aftermath of their NDEs, they almost always eventually come to see their experiences as “blessings in disguise.”

Bush (2002) had a somewhat different view. She observed that the aftermath of a dNDE is not always so easy. She gave the example of a dNDEr who called out to God for help but received no response. Bush noted not one, but three patterns of response to distressing NDEs:

- ◆ The “turnaround” dNDErs, corresponding to those Rommer described, are those “who interpret their [d]NDE as a warning, who are able to connect it with previous behaviors they identify as unwise or downright wrong, and who then find avenues by which to modify their lives in satisfying ways” (p. 104). She noted that these type of dNDErs heal most quickly and thoroughly in the aftermath of the experience.
- ◆ The “reductionistic” (p. 106) dNDEr “argues away” the dNDE as somehow less valid or real than pleasurable NDEs. Bush speculated that people in this category might find psychological peace, but only temporarily.
- ◆ The “long haul” (p. 108) dNDErs undertake a long-term process—sometimes many years—of searching for a way to accommodate the dNDE into a much deeper view of reality.

Although Bush found more patterns of response than Rommer did, her conclusion, like Rommer's, is optimistic: A psychospiritual "descent into hell" has been the experience of saints and sages throughout history, and it is an inevitable episode in the pervasive, mythic theme of the hero's journey. Those who "insist on finding the gift, the blessing of" their experiences have the potential ultimately to realize a greater "maturity and wholeness" (p.129).

## Where Can I Learn More about Distressing NDEs?

### Print resources:

- Bonenfant, R. J. (2001). A child's encounter with the devil: An unusual near-death experience with both blissful and frightening elements. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 20(2), 87-100.
- Bush, N. E. (2002). Afterward: Making meaning after a frightening near-death experience. *Journal of Near-Death Studies* (21)2, 99-133.
- Ellwood, G. F. (2001). *The uttermost deep: The challenge of near-death experiences*. New York: Lantern. (primarily Chapter 4)
- Greyson, B., & Bush, N. E. (1996). Distressing near-death experiences. In L. W. Bailey & J. Yates (Eds.), *The near-death experience: A reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Rommer, B. R. (2000). *Blessing in disguise: Another side of the near-death experience*. St. Paul, MN: Lewellyn.
- Storm, H. (2000). *My descent into death, and the message of love which brought me back*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Clairview.

### Web resources:

Regularly check the IANDS website ([www.iands.org](http://www.iands.org)) to learn about recent research findings regarding NDEs in general and distressing NDEs in particular. The IANDS message board at that website also sometimes contains messages and dialogs about distressing NDEs, including an Experiencers Only board.

### Scholarly resources:

If you want to conduct a scholarly review of the professional literature on distressing NDEs, an excellent place to start is with the Near-Death Research Bibliography Part I. The Bibliography includes a listing of each article from the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* through 2001, along with its abstract, that addressed distressing NDEs. The Bibliography is available for purchase on the web and from the IANDS office; please use the

contact information listed on this brochure.

## Where Can I Find Support After a Distressing NDE?

### *Short term support:*

The IANDS office often can connect an NDEr seeking short term support with another NDEr willing to provide that support. Use the contact information on this brochure to contact the IANDS office. IANDS also has over 50 local “Friends of IANDS” (FOI) support and interest groups, most of which meet monthly. Contact the IANDS website or office to find out if there is an FOI near you.

### *Psychotherapeutic resources:*

If you would like to find a psychotherapist with whom to discuss a distressing NDE, contact the Center for Psychological & Spiritual Health (CPSH) at [www.cpsch.org/](http://www.cpsch.org/). CPSH offers a free referral service to the nearest mental health professionals who consider themselves qualified to address near-death experiences in the context of counseling and psychotherapy.

You may also find two IANDS documents helpful; both are available as a brochure from the IANDS office and as a web document:

*Caring for the Near-Death Experiencer: Considerations for Experiencers and The Experiencer’s Guide to Psychotherapy.*

<sup>1</sup> Parnia, S., Waller, D. G., Yeates, R., & Fenwick, P. (2001). A qualitative and quantitative study of the incidence, features and aetiology of near death experiences in cardiac arrest survivors. *Resuscitation*, 48, 149-156.

<sup>2</sup> Sabom, M. B. (1982). *Recollections of death: A medical investigation*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

<sup>3</sup> Schwaninger, J., Eisenberg, P. R., Schechtman, K. B., & Weiss, A. N. (2002). A prospective analysis of near-death experiences in cardiac arrest patients. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 20(4), 215-232.

<sup>4</sup> van Lommel, P., van Wees, R., Meyers, V., & Elfferich, I. (2001). Near-death experience in survivors of cardiac arrest: A prospective study in the Netherlands. *The Lancet*, 358, 2039-2045.

If you found this brochure helpful and would like to help others have access to such information, you can support IANDS through

- ❖ ongoing membership
- ❖ donations of money, and/or
- ❖ donations of your time and talents.

Please use the contact information that appears on this brochure



**For More Information, write . . .**

**IANDS**

**2741 Campus Walk Avenue**

**Building 500**

**Durham, NC 27705**

**telephone . . . (919) 383-7940;**

**or visit . . . our web site at**

**[www.iands.org](http://www.iands.org)**

Incorporated in Connecticut in 1981 as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization according to Internal Revenue Service regulations, the mission of the International Association for Near-Death Studies, Inc. is to respond to the needs for information and support concerning near-death and similar experiences. IANDS' goals are:

- ❖ To encourage thoughtful exploration of all facets of near-death and similar experiences;
- ❖ To provide reliable information about such experiences to, caregivers, researchers, and the public;
- ❖ To serve as a contact point and community for people with particular interest in near-death and similar experiences.

IANDS maintains no "party line" on the interpretation of near-death or similar experiences and is open to the presentation of varying responsible points of view. The Association is committed to scholarly investigation of the NDE and to providing accurate information based on those findings.

IANDS publishes two quarterly periodicals, the scholarly *Journal of Near-Death Studies* and the newsletter *Vital Signs*, in addition to other informational materials. It sponsors a national conference in North America annually and other conferences occasionally.