



Dying to know

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Near-death experiences may offer spiritual lessons or they could just be psychological and physical phenomena. Either way, they're a window into unknown worlds.
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THE answer to life's biggest quandary may be revealed through Near Death Experiences (NDEs). Even before psychiatrist Raymond Moody coined this term in his 1975 classic "Life After Life", people were fascinated with glimpses of the other side. It's considered an NDE when someone is unconscious or clinically dead, without a pulse or breathing, and they recall events. References to NDEs are abundant in ancient texts. Tibetan Buddhist tradition recognises people who die and return as Deloks, who are expert guides on death, limbo, and the afterlife. Clinical research and anecdotal evidence documents NDEs occurring across all ages, cultures and religions. Many are detailed in "The Handbook of Near-Death Experiences: Thirty Years of Investigation". Common factors identified by co-editor and psychiatrist Bruce Greyson led him to develop a scale that quantified an individual's near-death experience, and showed there were many similarities in NDEs.

The comeback club

Though details vary, the majority of people experiencing NDEs share the following: the realisation they are dead; a floating feeling and seeing their body from a distance; entering a dark tunnel, staircase or bright, loving light; and experiencing pleasant sensations, music, colours, and beings of light. Up to 20% see terrifying, nightmarish visions and feel fear, guilt and regret; meet a form connected with spiritual beliefs such as Christ; connect with deceased loved ones; receive teachings; have a life review where they may feel the pain and pleasure they gave to others; have feelings of unity, unconditional love and acceptance; are reluctant to return to their body but are drawn back; and recall events, but not always immediately. Some people are reluctant to talk about these events, while others find it transforms their life so significantly that it becomes their mission to share the message of love, faith, and hope.

The debate on how to interpret NDEs lives on. Spiritualists see NDEs as proof of heaven. Scientists point to psychological explanations offering a rational reason for the phenomenon, including the depersonalisation (coping hallucinations), birth (rewinding to our birth experience), expectancy (wishful thinking) and dissociation (detaching to sublimate suffering) models. Physiological theories include brain changes due to altered oxygen, carbon dioxide, endorphins, neurotransmitters and abnormal activity in the temporal lobes. Brain damage may account for NDEs as certain states are consistent with symptoms of left and right brain hemisphere damage. Others speculate that resuscitation drugs like ketamine can induce an NDE.

Eastern interpretation

On the Dalai Lama's 58th birthday, he was asked what he was going to do with the rest of his life. When he replied, "I plan to prepare for death", the reporter said, "Are you sick?" The Dalai Lama chuckled, "No - but physical dissolution is inevitable." Tibetan Buddhists spend their lives studying for the final exam of death. The Tibetan Book of the Dead describes the bardos (phases of transition) one undertakes from life to liberation or rebirth. First, there's the physical dissolution of earth, water, fire, air and ether. As earth crumbles, we lose our sense of stability. Water dissolving creates dryness and rigidity. When fire diminishes, our energy dissipates. Air reduction causes breathlessness. By the last phase of ether depletion, we are generally unconscious; however, the last sense to remain is hearing, hence the emphasis on chanting and prayer at the last moment to elevate consciousness. Finally, the mind and spirit separate from the body with

The take-away message from Eastern traditions is that death is a unique opportunity to elevate our awareness.

very similar elements to NDEs. The Tibetan Book of the Dead explains the experience can be blissful or terrifying, according to our awareness. If we unite with the light, all suffering ceases and we're liberated - but if we feel separate from the light, we are bound to return. The book is to be read aloud to the deceased to guide them to enlightenment. The movie 'Ghost' drew from Hindu literature, depicting the dark and light forces escorting souls to hellish or heavenly places. The Vedas describe the Yamadutas who take souls to suffering planets and the Vishnudutas who elevate them to higher planes. There may also be a hearing with Yamaraja, the lord of death, to decide one's destination. This sequence has happened to people who haven't even heard of such things. Assisting the dying or dead person through this crossroads is achieved through prayer, visualisation and rituals. ✨

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✨ Born again

Jeffrey Long, M.D studied hundreds of NDEs and found the most common lesson was unconditional love.

Jennine Wolff, who had an NDE in 1987, says, "I am now more compassionate and considerate." People often shift their perspective, personality, approaches and priorities; NDEs tend to inspire personal growth, empathy, psychic sensitivity, less materialism, and more appreciation of life.

Psychology professor Kenneth Ring noted common changes in people after an NDE: increased intuition, self-esteem, spirituality, compassion, desire to learn, planetary concern, and sensitivity to others or stimulation, like sounds.

Near death experiencers often lose their fear of death and gain a zest for life. Geraldine Berkheimer says, "Although my near-death experience was 34 years ago, not a day that goes by that I am not aware of making decisions based on that experience." The death deadline can be a driving force, a muse inspiring us; as Michelangelo confessed, "No thought exists in me which death has not carried with his chisel." For those who believe in karma or an afterlife, death is a moral watchguard, holding us accountable for our actions.

If we've lived a satisfying life, we'll enjoy the meaningful memories. If we die dissatisfied, we may be left with emotional indigestion. Perhaps the message of NDEs is not about death, but about relishing life. As author Norman Cousins said, "Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live."