

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

More Comments on the New NDE-C Scale

To the Editor:

I have been poring over the review by Robert G. Mays and Suzanne B. Mays (2020) of the developing scale of NDE content, the NDE-C from the University of Liege (Martial et al., 2020). Although I believe the NDE-C makes welcome improvements, as an experiencer and long-time author in the field (Bush, 2012, 2016, 2021; Bush & Greyson, 2017; Greyson & Bush, 1992), I find myself with some strong resistance. Here are a few of my non-statistical thoughts.

First, the original scale has had some clear gaps, and the five proposed additions will be useful. Note, however, my expanded comments in the section beginning “Third . . .” below.

Second, my overall observation is that although the NDE-C draws on the structure and reputation of the original NDE Scale (Greyson, 1983; Lange et al., 2004), it shows a major shift in emphasis. The NDE Scale was developed specifically from and for experiencers: *from* what early reporters had felt and observed during their NDEs and *for* later individuals filling out the scale. Because it was designed around real people, the NDE Scale reflects a narrative style comfortable for most ordinary participants in terms they are likely to recognize.

By contrast, the NDE-C has a more distanced relationship with experiencer input. Much specificity has been scrubbed from its language, for reasons that are no doubt psychometrically convincing but that damage the very accuracy the scale purports to capture. Overall, I wonder how well the majority of experiencers are likely to respond to the high abstraction and intellectualization of NDE-C.

Third, my principal concern is the degree to which the scale’s wording feels off-kilter. I am wondering if English as a second language might be an issue: Although the new wording is grammatically correct, it often shows a lack of precise comprehension and nuance, as Mays and Mays’s (2020) comments indicate. Almost every one of the reworded items had me itching to clean it up, either for diction or clarity. For instance:

- The original “Senses more vivid” (NDE Scale item #9 [N9]) is a precise and economical description of one of the most frequently attested features of NDEs and related experiences. By contrast, “Unusual

sensations (sight, etc.)” (NDE-C scale item #8 [C8]) is confusingly unclear to me. At best ambiguous, the phrase misses the vividness experiencers have historically reported, and sight is not an unusual sensation.

- “Joy” is in no way redundant of “peace,” and I consider its removal to be a significant mistake, obliterating a specific dimension of emotional intensity central to many NDEs. My own NDE included flashes of joy—but not a moment of peace; no amount of intensity rating can make them synonymous.
- Mays and Mays (2020) have documented the impossibility of “heard voices” (C3) as replacement for “Encounter mystical presence.” That “mystical” is imprecise is exactly why the word is necessary as description. NDEs do not exist in a geometric universe of clean lines and sharp borders, and to attempt engineering responses in that direction is a distortion of NDE reality.
- The original “Aware of things elsewhere” (N10) is idiomatic semi-code for a phenomenon important in many NDEs: the admission of a psychic experience in a physical world. To those who resonate to the phrase, it translates as “knew what was happening with *things* (physical objects and people) *elsewhere* (in other physical places).” That essential physical context and psychic meaning are lost when (C9) misses the idiom and shifts to: “Aware beyond usual perceptions.” The change implies a generalized spiritual awareness (no ‘things’ and goes ‘beyond’). The wording change is not *per se* a bad thing to ask, but it is a totally *different* thing, thus losing another dimension of content people actually report.
- Similarly, “See deceased, religious spirits” (N15) is a semi-coded assurance that the responder is safe to mention reunions with dead family members, friends, and any beloved saints. It is a far cry from the impersonality of “Encountered a presence or entity” (C14), which is appropriate for some experiences but not for these reunions. Again, the underlying issue is acknowledging what it is that people say is important in their NDEs but which they find difficult to talk about.
- N11 reads, “See scenes from future.” C10 reads, “Knowledge about future.” Intentional or not, the C10 wording implies *fact*—that the content of their vision is what will actually happen. Not all envisioned scenes come to fruition, so any such “knowledge” would be false. Further, many NDErs struggle with questions about the legitimacy of their vision and have no sense of “knowing” what they can believe. Claiming global “knowledge” is an unwarranted and misleading interpretation.
- Gratified as I am to see the difficult NDEs included at last, I am puzzled by (C15): “Non-existence, void, fear”—containing a condition, a context, and an emotion. Both the underlying concept behind, and the purpose of, this wording are unclear to me. As a scale item for distressing NDEs,

“Felt extreme fear, horror, revulsion, or grief” would do, with non-existence and Void as subsets needing their own responses. I have seen no evidence that non-existence is a primary constituent of distressing NDEs, and in any case it is a possible object of fear, not its equivalent. The same object of fear is true for the Void, though for many people it is not fearsome. I find (C15), as it stands, to be simply illogical and unanswerable.

On a related note, among the nuances emerging from recent research (Jahromi & Long, 2020, p. 185, 193) but still missing from the NDE-C are those regarding the mixed emotional nature of many NDEs that include both pleasurable and distressing elements. What we apparently should have been asking is (a) the *predominant emotional tone* of the NDE—pleasurable or distressing—AND (b) the *possible presence of the opposite tone*—such as distressing regret during the life review of a predominantly pleasurable NDE or awareness of joy at time(s) during a predominantly distressing NDE. I would hope that a new scale would address these nuances.

In short, I find almost every one of the NDE-C rewordings not only unclarifying but in some way distorting of the contents of actual NDEs as I have encountered them both personally and in research over the past 40 years. The linguistic shifts may seem individually slight but are troublesome in the aggregate, whereby they indicate an absence of sensitivity to content that both matters to experiencers and constitutes primary data in the field.

Finally, it seems an ultimate irony that the body of an NDE scale is so emotionally flattened that it lacks any visible hint of emotion or the intensity that is the experience’s essence. It is good to have a scoring column for degrees of intensity, but that addition alone does not compensate for the cool sterility of the felt context.

As an experiencer, I recognize the difficulty of NDE research with an approach as statistically grounded as psychometrics. All the more reason to pay attention to nuances.

The immense value of the original NDE Scale and the potential for the new NDE-C to represent its next generation emboldens me to make these public remarks, which I submit with respect.

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