Letters to the Editor

Embellishment of Near-Death Experiences

To the Editor:

In reading the Summer 2007 issue of the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, I was especially taken with Keith Augustine's comments about embellishment of near-death experience (NDE) accounts (Augustine, 2007). He asked the same questions many of us in research do: Are narratives ever exaggerated, changed over time, or colored by the experiencer for any reason?

Bruce Greyson (2007) found no significant difference with 72 experiencers who recently filled out an extensive survey report that they had previously done 20 years ago. His conclusion after comparing the two: "Memories of near-death experiences appear to be more stable than memories of other traumatic events" (Greyson, 2007, p. 410). In other words, there were no significant differences in the accounts as a result of time's passing.

This agrees with what I have noticed in my research of near-death states, for the most part. Still, there are other reactions and responses experiencers exhibit that cause me to be careful in how I regard near-death accounts initially. A rendering of what I have found follows.

**No Initial Disclosure**

After having interviewed nearly 4,000 adult and child experiencers, I can state that it is typical for near-death experiencers to withhold an initial reporting of what happened to them. Many are afraid to be so open, either because they fear being labeled crazy and made to face a psychiatrist, or because they are unsure how others might respond, so they keep it secret. Most, though, are so overwhelmed by what happened that they simply "do not have words" and struggle silently with the issue of belief: Can they trust what they experienced? Was it really, really real? Are they kidding themselves? How can it best be described? What can they make of it?
Testing Period

A common reaction of experiencers once they decide to tell someone is to test first for trustworthiness. And they will do that in dribs and drabs by tossing out a morsel or two – words, phrases, maybe a drawing or a poem – that indicate something uniquely different happened during the time they nearly died or actually flatlined. This “dribbling” can be frustrating to families, friends, and researchers, stretching interview sessions overlong, or causing others to lose patience and maybe become suspicious about the sincerity of the experiencer. Lengthy testing periods, extending over months on end or even for years, can create tension between people and lead others to write off the NDEr. Most people in the research community understand how to handle the issue of trust, but not all of them. I know this because of comments I received from experiencers, especially those who had distressing, unpleasant, or hellish experiences. It helped me in my work that I, too, was an experiencer. Seldom did I admit this; really I did not have to. Experiencers “just knew.”

The Narrative

Once they start talking (either right away or later on), it may be a challenge to stop near-death experiencers. I call this outpouring “gushing.” Even while still on the operating table, experiencers once revived can engage in a nonstop flood of words describing what they saw on “the other side,” what they heard, what they felt, what was revealed to them. This can cause problems with the medical staff and any family members who might be waiting for word of outcome. That initial “gush” is usually spontaneous, spirited, sometimes loud and animated, with splashes of colorful descriptions and great emotion. If more time has passed, narratives tend to be more thorough, specific, detailed, and deeper. The experiencer, by then, may have already begun the process of searching for meaning and trying to interpret the scenario. Gaps and additions, which may appear as if they were narrative alterations or embellishments, can and do occur between early and later tellings. Rarely is this a lie or an exaggeration. Rather, what I recognize as happening here is that experiencers are giving themselves permission to tell their story in its entirety. That takes courage. To tell someone everything that occurred exposes the individual in ways that may be uncomfortable and a violation of privacy. There are two big issues at this juncture: first, trusting one’s
own self-belief; and second, weighing and balancing elements in a narration that are frankly no one else's business or are too bizarre for words. I have observed that once the various trust and privacy issues are settled (even if only within "self" and never admitted to anyone else), the end result, the individual's near-death story, will remain intact over time and not be changed to any significant or noticeable degree. That is what Greyson verified in his study.

The greatest tempter for embellishments is the prospect of writing a bestselling book and/or becoming a stage presence, whether in churches or in front of television cameras. And I have seen this happen again and again. Part of the problem is the media's demand for sensationalism: publishers cannot sell near-death books unless the newest one tops the others; television shows must jerk or shock or grab every five minutes or viewers get bored; audiences hunger for emotional release and have little patience for someone who simply "tells it like it is." The media provide an incredibly amazing source of vital information, news, education, and entertainment, but they also grind out copy and swallow the truth in an orgy of commercial demands that can defy reason. Near-death experiencers can get lost in this terrain and wind up saying or doing things they did not intend. This type of environment influences regular society as well, and some near-death experiencers are too protective of the copyright to their stories, to the point of withholding necessary information for research.

"Downloading" So what constitutes embellishment and how do we recognize it? To answer that question fairly we need to admit "downloading" occurs. Oftentimes during the experience, but especially afterwards, it is commonplace for a near-death experiencer to suddenly be "seized" with additional information, guidance, revelations, messages, knowings, wisdoms, feelings, vivid images, and thoughts not their own. This "extra" material can expand as years pass. Typical responses from people who experienced "downloading" are: "I felt as if I would burst if I didn't stop"; "There's so much to know that it comes in segments, pieces, so I can handle it"; "The revelations are unending, they just keep coming"; and "I feel as if I'm being fed from above, stuffed full of knowledge and insight."
I have yet to find that this additional downloading of extra material changes the original scenario. The near-death experience that occurred remains the near-death experience that was reported. Once the individual accepts what happened and arrives at some sense of meaning as to the various issues and implications involved for him or her personally, the narration tends to take on a structure that holds lifelong. This does not preclude the downloading process, nor remembering more later, especially if the individual is a child experiencer.

The Conundrum of the Child Experiencer

In my research with children who had experienced a near-death experience, more than half regretted that it ever happened to them, once they were older. They explained that the incident complicated their life in ways that made growing up a challenge. The majority spoke of being put down or ridiculed by parents, siblings, and friends when they tried to share their story, to the point that they “set it aside” or “tucked it away.” Because of this, many did not really deal with their experience or try to integrate it to any extent until they were in their 20s or 30s, some even later. Memory, then, tended to surface in tiers: what could be useful in childhood, what applied to relationships as they grew, what made a difference as an adult, and what spoke to their heart of hearts in quiet moments of reflection and longing. About a third of the child experiencers in my research were clear about what they experienced and immediately appeared wiser than their years, more mature. The other two-thirds delved into the depths of their memories in steps, especially if their episode happened during birth trauma. Once what was tucked away “burst forth,” they appeared to me as if awakened to a truth they had always known but had somehow forgotten.

This delay in remembering, whether it came in steps or in a sudden “burst,” can seem like an embellishment to someone not familiar with the near-death phenomenon and what is typical of experiencers. This fact concerns me, since some professionals jump to conclusions or do incomplete research. For example, a recent paper published in New England Journal of Medicine about electrical stimulation of the brain that induced the appearance of a person outside the body named this illusion an “out-of-body experience,” when all the scientists did was induce autoscopy or the doppelganger effect of projecting one’s image beyond one’s body, which is a feature of shamanistic training.
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worldwide and has been for thousands of years (De Ridder, Van Laere, Dupont, Menovsky, and Van de Heyning, 2007;357). Out-of-body experiences and autoscopy are not the same thing.

So we come back to the original question. What I have observed in my work is that the original story once told as believed by the experiencer holds over time, along with an array of additions and insights that reflect the integration process. These "extras," for the vast majority, are neither exaggeration nor imaginative invention or embellishments. They are simply an attempt at clarification, as much for the experiencer's benefit as for the others they inform.

References


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