

Near-Death Experiences and Attitude Change

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ABSTRACT

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are purported by many researchers and experiencers to produce positive changes in life attitudes, such as a sense of purpose, acceptance of death, concern for others, and an awareness of the value of life. This study explores the association between NDEs and subsequent attitude changes through the responses of 28 near-death experiencers on the Life Attitude Profile (LAP) questionnaire. The 20 women and 8 men who completed the LAP ranged in age from 31 to 75 years and lived all over the country, with no majority from any geographical region. Religious background was varied. Positive changes in life attitude were found to significant degrees in all of the respondents, strongly suggesting that a relationship exists with the NDE.

The more common elements comprising a near-death experience (NDE), as outlined by Raymond Moody (1975) and Kenneth Ring (1980), are well known and include the tunnel experience, the out-of-body experience (OBE), the meeting of an entity of light, the meeting of deceased friends and relatives, and the encountering of a barrier between this life and beyond. Moody's and Ring's descriptions of the event, independently formulated, are highly similar, but as both researchers state, their accounts are not meant to be representative of all NDEs. No two experiences are alike, no single component of the NDE is universal, and there is no single sequence of events within the NDE. The present study tests the hypothesis that those who undergo an NDE have their perception of reality transformed and appreciate their lives to a greater degree than before this experience.

Researchers have found that individuals outwardly show a measurable change in attitude and behavior towards life, which they attribute to the NDE. Ring (1980), in a very thorough and systematic study on the nature of the experience, offered empirical data on the feelings reportedly evoked by the NDE. The most common feelings,

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those of peace, the absence of pain, and no fear, were found in a large majority of Ring's respondents who had come close to death, though more frequently in those who experienced some elements of the "core" NDE (core experiencers, or CErS) than in those who did not (non-experiencers, or NErS). Ring reported less-than-comfortable emotions due to the NDE in less than 5 percent of his respondents, and those emotions consisted chiefly of transient feelings of fear either before or after the experience. Michael Sabom summarized his own findings regarding attitude change:

By far the most important implications of the NDE lie with the individual who has encountered the experience. Almost every subject interviewed in this study indicated, in his own way, that his NDE had been a truly remarkable and important event in his life. Some even described it as the "peak" event, which had done more to shape the depth and direction of life goals and attitudes than any previous single experience. The impact of the NDE on these persons was evident in many different and unique ways. (1982, pp. 124-125)

Charles Flynn (1982) examined and categorized beliefs reported to have originated with the NDE. His findings indicated an increased concern for others, a reduced fear of death, an increased belief in an afterlife, a reduction of materialistic concerns, and greater religious feeling in near-death experiencers (NDErS). Moody (1975) offered many reports of reduced feelings of fear of death from NDErS. Russell Noyes (1980) gathered 215 reports of attitude change from people who had undergone a life-threatening event. He found that people communicated a reduced fear of death, a feeling of invulnerability, feelings of special destiny and of being favored by God, and a strengthened belief in a continued postmortem existence. Stanislav Grof and Joan Halifax (1977) described a pattern of change including a reduced fear of death, improved well-being, and enhanced meaning of life. Sabom (1982) found that of the NDErS who were queried about fear of death, the majority of them reported a decrease in their fear, with a smaller number (20 percent) claiming no change; no one responding to these questions indicated an increased fear of death nor a decreased belief in an afterlife. Follow-up studies revealed the reduced fear of death still strongly in evidence among respondents; no follow-up studies were done on afterlife beliefs. Ring (1980) reported strong data that indicate that his respondents have both reduced fear of death and an increased amount of inner religious feeling.

METHODS

Subjects

Respondents to this study all had a self-defined near-death experience. They resided in all parts of the country, favoring no one section. Their religious background was as follows: 11.5% were Catholics, 50% belonged to other Christian sects, 9.5% were Jewish, 20.3% belonged to other religions, and 7.8% claimed no religious affiliation. There were 20 women and 8 men, with an age range of 31 to 75 years. The mean and median of the respondents' ages was 49.4 and 49.0 years, while their mean and median ages at the time of the NDE were 34.8 and 32.5 years. A mean of 14.5 years and a median of 8.0 years elapsed between the NDE and the present study.

Instrument

The Life Attitude Profile (LAP) by Gary Reker and Edward Peacock (1981) was used in this study to assess both pre- and post-NDE attitudes toward life and death. The LAP consists of 44 questions that fit into one of seven categories chosen to cover a wide range of attitudes: Life Purpose, Existential Vacuum, Life Control, Will to Meaning, Goal Seeking, Future Meaning to Fulfill, and Death Acceptance. The number of questions in each category of the LAP ranges from five (Goal Seeking) to nine (Life Purpose). The questions in the Life Purpose category are designed to determine if an individual is living as he or she desires, and whether he or she feels a reason for being here. The Existential Vacuum category asks questions to determine if people lack meaning in their lives. Goal Seeking questions measure the extent of a respondent's restlessness. The Will to Meaning category is based on Viktor Frankl's (1969) belief that the primary motive of people is to find meaning and purpose in life. Questions in the Future Meaning to Fulfill category seek to determine the strength of an individual's anticipation of a meaningful existence. The Death Acceptance category measures people's freedom from anxiety concerning death.

Procedure

LAPs were mailed from the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) Research Division office by Bruce Greyson to a pool of IANDS members who had had an NDE. A cover letter

sent with the questionnaire stated the purpose of the study to be a desire to know what people had felt as a result of having an NDE. Out of 65 distributed questionnaires, 56 were returned. The high rate of return (86%) is attributed to the respondents' familiarity with the IANDS organization and its goals. Of those returned, only 28 were usable; the remaining 28 were not adequately completed, presumably because of lack of clarity in the instructions as they were presented on the questionnaire. Subjects were instructed to answer questions in reference to what their attitudes were before and after each question. For each question, a "1" response indicated strong disagreement with the question, while a "7" response indicated strong agreement. Subjects were directed to indicate, for each question, their perception of their attitude toward that item before and after the NDE, using a square and a circle, respectively, to mark their responses. For example:

I am more afraid of death than of old age. 1 (2) 3 [4] 5 6 7

In the hypothetical example shown here, that statement was neither agreed with nor disagreed with before the NDE, since the respondent has placed a square around the "4." The respondent, by circling the "2," has indicated a reduced fear of death over old age since the NDE, marking a change in attitude from before to after the experience. Of the 56 respondents, half filled out the questionnaire marking only how they felt after the NDE and not before it; thus, only 28 LAPs were considered usable for this study.

RESULTS

The results of the LAP questionnaires are presented both qualitatively and quantitatively. For the qualitative analysis, it was noted for each individual whether his or her response to each question indicated a negative change, no change, or positive change in attitude from before the NDE to after the experience. The modal response (negative change, no change, or positive change) for all the questions in each of the seven LAP categories was then determined for each respondent, and the distribution of responses is presented in Table 1. With the exception of Goal Seeking, in which responses were randomly distributed, each category included a significantly greater number of respondents indicating positive changes since the NDE than indicating negative changes or no change at all.

For the quantitative analysis, the degree of change perceived by

Table 1
 Number of Respondents (N=28) Reporting Negative Change, No Change,
 and Positive Change in Attitude After NDE

| LAP Category | Negative Change | No Change | Positive Change | Chi-squared (df=2) |
|---------------------------|-----------------|-----------|-----------------|--------------------|
| Life Purpose | 6 | 1 | 21 | 12.00** |
| Existential Vacuum | 9 | 1 | 18 | 6.00* |
| Life Control | 9 | 1 | 18 | 6.00* |
| Will to Meaning | 3 | 3 | 22 | 15.33*** |
| Goal Seeking | 12 | 2 | 14 | 1.33 |
| Future Meaning to Fulfill | 6 | 2 | 20 | 9.33** |
| Death Acceptance | 1 | 3 | 24 | 22.23*** |

***p <.001

**p <.01

*p <.05

each individual was recorded, as well as the direction, and the responses summed for all questions in each of the seven categories. Table 2 presents the distribution of varying degrees of change for each LAP category. For example, for the nine questions in the first category, Life Purpose, 6 subjects marked a post-NDE response 1 or 2 spaces in a negative direction from their pre-NDE response; 1 subject marked the identical space for before and after the NDE; 11 subjects marked a post-NDE response 1 or 2 spaces in a positive direction from their pre-NDE response; 7 subjects marked a post-NDE response 3 or 4 spaces in a positive direction from their pre-NDE response; and 3 subjects marked a post-NDE response 5 or 6 spaces in a positive direction from their pre-NDE response. As can be seen in Table 2, responses were skewed significantly in the direction of positive attitude changes in all LAP categories except for Life Control and Goal Seeking, in which categories responses were randomly distributed.

Data regarding attitude change were not significantly correlated with age or sex. Ring (1980) found that NDEs caused by illness had more elements of a prototypical core experience than did

Table 2
 Number of Respondents (N=28) Reporting Differing Degrees of
 Attitude Change After NDE

| LAP Category | Negative Change | | | | Positive Change | | | Chi Squared (df=6) |
|---------------------------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|-----------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| | 5 or 6 spaces | 3 or 4 spaces | 1 or 2 spaces | No Change | 1 or 2 spaces | 3 or 4 spaces | 5 or 6 spaces | |
| Life Purpose | 0 | 0 | 6 | 1 | 11 | 7 | 3 | 14.72* |
| Existential Vacuum | 0 | 1 | 8 | 1 | 13 | 3 | 2 | 14.13* |
| Life Control | 0 | 2 | 7 | 1 | 12 | 5 | 1 | 10.77 |
| Will to Meaning | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 16 | 6 | 0 | 25.38** |
| Goal Seeking | 0 | 2 | 10 | 2 | 10 | 3 | 1 | 8.09 |
| Future Meaning to Fulfill | 0 | 0 | 6 | 2 | 12 | 7 | 1 | 14.45* |
| Death Acceptance | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 19 | 2 | 3 | 38.06** |

**p < .001

*p < .05

NDEs caused by other near-death events; in the present study, although there was a slight positive correlation between positive attitude change and illness as a cause of the NDE, this association was not significant.

DISCUSSION

These data strongly support the hypothesis that a more positive attitude toward life results from an NDE, and agrees with the findings of previous studies. Of the seven categories on the LAP, Goal Seeking was the only one that showed no significant positive change following the NDE.

Although significant results were obtained, certain methodological problems must be considered. One of the two weaknesses pointed out by Gertrude Schmeidler (1979) is that research on NDE phenomena is retrospective, leaving the data open to contamination in a variety of ways. While the "treatment" (the NDE) may be the cause of the reported attitude change, there are other plausible explanations. Confounding factors such as history, maturation,

selection, measurement, and demand characteristics could not be controlled for, as there was no control or comparison group, and no comparison of attitudes measured before the experience. The other weakness is that both researcher and respondent have knowledge of the "right" answers that support the hypothesis; there were no double blind conditions to prevent either person from biasing the results toward the desired response.

Although the sample for this study did appear to be heterogeneous, it was not random, since the respondents were all volunteers. There may be some NDErs who have no desire to talk about the experience for fear of being perceived as unstable (Moody, 1975). Furthermore, there may be NDEs that are perceived as unpleasant, and thereby do not motivate the experiencers to discuss them.

The research design of the present study was similar to a non-experimental, single-group, once-observed design, in which the "treatment" (the NDE) was introduced and the "performance" (the attitude change) was obtained. Reliability of the results could have been increased by measuring attitudes before the NDE, and by having independent observers corroborate evidence of attitude change in these people.

The LAP appears to be an effective and convenient instrument for measuring some attitude changes in NDErs. Follow-up studies using the LAP would be useful for noting effects over time. Further studies using the LAP would also determine the validity of the present study, as well as demonstrating the utility of the LAP in assessing NDEr attitudes. For example, the Death Acceptance category, as expected from previous findings (Noyes, 1980; Flynn, 1982; Sabom, 1982), showed significant change from before to after the NDE, while the category of Goal Seeking did not. It is possible that some NDErs have had their goals met by the experience, or that the NDE provided new goals that superceded the desire to seek other ones. Further attention to discrepancies among the LAP categories may provide insights into attitude changes following an NDE.

As noted, these data suggest that the NDE may be predictive of an ensuing positive attitude change. One rationale for this effect is that many people who have had an NDE feel that they have had an exceptional revelation about the reality they have known. I do not interpret these results to say that NDErs have more positive attitudes towards life than do other people. In a recent study, Greyson (1983) found that NDErs did not demonstrate a wide array of differences compared to non-NDErs. Rather, they felt that, as a result of the

NDE, their lives had been enhanced in some way where they had once been lacking.

It is also unclear how the changes instilled by the NDE compare with similar effects produced by other dramatic life experiences. Different psychological perspectives on the psychodynamics of attitude change might illuminate what changes, if any, are unique to the NDE. It should also be noted that not all people who experience a near-death event report the same degree of positive feeling. Degrees of attitude change in different people may reflect differences in amount of time clinically "dead," cause of the near-death event (illness, accident, or suicide), and other variables. Some who undergo a near-death event do not experience anything remotely similar to the "core experience" described by Moody (1975) and Ring (1980). While Ring made a useful distinction between CErS and NERs, his NER respondents did feel some degree of positive effect from the near-death event.

In conclusion, the validity of these results is open to interpretation due to the research design, and the positive results obtained may be due to other factors that influence self-report of subjective experiences. However, the consistency of the independent NDE responses is quite high, which implies a causal connection between the NDE and a positive change in attitude. The most adequate test of this hypothesis would be to assess the attitudes of large numbers of people who have not had NDEs, and then reassess attitudes after some have had NDEs. The logistical difficulty of such a design highlights the methodological problems in obtaining verifiable data about near-death phenomena. The present study suggests that the LAP may be a useful tool in the continued scientific analysis of NDEs.

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