ABSTRACT: This study investigates the effect of a near-death experience (NDE) on an experiencer’s ability to cope with stress. The intent of the study is to determine whether changes reported by experiencers have a practical, psychological application in their day-to-day lives. The test group included 18 participants of support groups sponsored by the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), all of whom reported having experienced an NDE. The control group consisted of 25 participants of the same support groups, none of whom reported having experienced an NDE. Questionnaires were distributed to all individuals. Results showed that 94 percent of experiencers felt their NDE positively affected how they responded to stress, and 86 percent of the control group felt that exposure to NDEs had the same positive effect on their response to stress. One hundred percent of experiencers and 91 percent of nonexperiencers felt that significant life events, whether positive or negative, were imbued with meaning. The findings suggest that a philosophical framework that imparts meaning to life events, and not necessarily a NDE, has a positive effect on a person’s ability to cope with stress.

KEY WORDS: near-death experience; coping; attitude to death; meaning in life.
Western society, this journey is described most often through the narrative of the near-death experience (NDE). Best-selling books and talk show circuits are replete with accounts of near-death visions, and survivors tell of traveling through a dark tunnel, encountering deceased loved ones, being bathed in love, and deciding reluctantly to return to the body.

According to Michael Sabom (1982), 40 percent of near-death survivors report having these deathbed visions. A great deal of research has been done on NDEs in an effort to gain an understanding of the experience. At first, scholarly research focused primarily on trying to determine the authenticity of the experience, but trying to gain an objective understanding of a subjective experience proved problematic. As Carol Zaleski suggested (1987, p. 112), "we can only study the literary and oral retelling, not the direct experience." Today, the majority of research concerns the aftereffects of NDEs. These studies indicate that people who have had such an experience consistently report attitudinal changes, often dramatic, following their NDE.

This study attempts to explore how these changes might manifest in practical life experience, such as dealing with trauma and stress. It explores the relationship between NDEs and coping behavior through analysis of the experience and its effects as described by the survivor. The changes in attitude and behavior I am measuring are perceived changes, since it is not possible to measure a person's responses to stress accurately prior to a NDE. Since my focus is on the NDE narrative, I present experiences and attitudes as they were described by respondents, without repeated qualifications such as "alleged" and "purported." This study does not attempt to establish the validity of NDEs or analyze causal theories, but looks only at the effects NDEs are perceived to have on survivors' ability to cope with subsequent life stressors.

After analyzing responses from the study, it became clear that both experiencers and nonexperiencers felt that either having had a NDE or having been exposed to NDE narratives helped them to better cope with stress. The philosophy popularly associated with NDE phenomena, such as a belief in life after death and in a benevolent god, provided an interpretive framework for these individuals that served to infuse life events with meaning and thus positively impact their coping behavior.

Presented below are a synopsis of previous NDE research, the method used in carrying out the present study, the results of this study, and a discussion of possible conclusions which can be drawn from these results.
Literature Review

Raymond Moody is often credited with being the “father of near-death studies.” His landmark book, *Life After Life* (1975), was the first to present a systematic study of the phenomenon. From interviews with various individuals who claimed to have had an NDE, he culled what he felt to be the common elements of the experience: a feeling of peace, travel through a dark tunnel, meeting others, encountering a Being of Light, reviewing one’s life, and deciding to return. His findings have played a significant role in subsequent studies, as most researchers adopted his model as the starting point from which to begin their work. Enthusiastic fans, as well as the popular press, often touted his work as “proof” of life after death, much to Moody’s dismay. When asked whether he had any concerns about the way his work has been interpreted, he answered:

One of the central misgivings I have is that as much as I have emphasized to the contrary, occasionally you still find people who want to look at this as though it gives what they think of as “scientific evidence” of life after death. Words like “evidence” and “proof” have precise meanings to me, as a person who comes from a background and methodology (and I taught symbolic logic for a while), it’s still upsetting to me to see that kind of thinking bandied about. (Kastenbaum, 1995, p. 94)

Sabom was intrigued by Moody’s work, but initially highly skeptical. He attempted a systematic study of NDEs in an effort to test the validity of Moody’s findings scientifically. His findings did indeed coincide with Moody’s. He was also surprised to find that patients who had reportedly looked down upon the scene while in surgery could provide an accurate and detailed account of the procedure, including readings on machines that were out of their line of vision.

Bruce Greyson did a study of NDEs among survivors of suicide attempts. He went on to do studies on death anxiety and psychic sensitivities of experiencers. His findings largely corroborated those of Melvin Morse and Kenneth Ring, as outlined below.

Zaleski has written a scholarly book, *Otherworld Journeys* (1987), in which she compared modern NDEs with those from medieval times. In that book, she discussed the impact of the researcher on his or her research. She believes that the NDE narrative reflects collaboration between the researcher and the subject, and that the expectations and biases of both can affect the findings.

Morse, a pediatrician, first became interested in NDEs after hearing children tell of their otherworld experiences. He wanted to discover
whether or not there were transformative effects of NDEs that could be documented. His subjects were all adults who had experienced NDEs as children. He concluded from his study that there is a “core” NDE, and added to this are secondary cultural embellishments. He referred to these embellishments as “emotional archetypes incorporated into the experience by the beholder to help make sense of it” (Morse and Perry, 1992, p. 120). He found that experiencers reported the following aftereffects: (1) decreased death anxiety; (2) increased psychic abilities; (3) a higher zest for living, and (4) a feeling of having evolved spiritually (Morse and Perry, 1992).

Another researcher who has studied the effects of NDEs is Kenneth Ring. In his first study, the Connecticut Study, he concluded that “the key to the meaning of NDEs lies in the study of their aftereffects” (Ring, 1984, p. 27). This search for a more profound understanding of the NDE led him to conduct the Omega Study. In contrast to the first study, most of the subjects in the Omega Study sought out Ring after reading his book in order to tell him their stories. As such, he admitted that the selection of subjects was neither random nor representative, and that some interviews were done on a more informal level than in his previous study. Ring found the same aftereffects as Morse, as well as additional ones, such as a desire for a universal religion embracing all humanity, and openness to the doctrine of reincarnation. He went on to propose the controversial hypothesis that NDEs are deep spiritual experiences that tend to accelerate one’s personal development. He believed their purpose was to facilitate a current global movement toward spiritual enlightenment (Ring, 1984, pp. 258–259).

When analyzing the results of studies that seek to explore a subjective religious experience such as the NDE, one must not overlook the researcher’s impact on the research. A researcher generally approaches a study with certain expectations in mind. Ring, for instance, specifically tried to see if he could duplicate Moody’s findings. As a result, the questions he asked were designed to determine the presence or absence of elements Moody had identified as being part of the core NDE. Such an approach may overlook other elements that have not been identified by previous researchers. In addition, asking questions designed to elicit specific information may cue the subject to what the researcher is expecting to find, and the subject may then answer accordingly.

Bias can also affect test results. Once an interpretive framework such as Moody’s is accepted by researchers, information received is constantly filtered through this paradigm as the researcher looks for
"matches." If it is not accepted, the researcher may emphasize differences. The researcher's bias is reflected not only by what is included in the study and how it is interpreted, but also by how it is presented. Language plays an important role in how the information is received by the reader. Morse, for instance, lent credibility to his subjects and their experiences when he described how "these stories are told with such beauty and simplicity by children and adults alike who have nothing to gain by making them up" (Morse and Perry, 1992, p. 50).

Finally, research can also be affected by how the subjects are chosen and whether or not they constitute a representative mix of experiencers. Researchers who advertise in supermarket tabloids are likely to attract subjects who are not averse to sensationalism. Subjects in Ring's Omega Study consisted mainly of people who had read his first book, Life at Death (1980), and approached him to share their stories. These subjects, having been exposed to Ring's interpretive framework on NDEs, may have communicated their stories in a fashion that reflected his earlier findings.

An understanding of previous research and its potential problems is important, as many of these findings have become popularized and affect how the public, including experiencers, interpret these experiences. Moody's model has become so well-known that many experiencers no doubt couch their narratives in his language. Whether or not subjects have been previously exposed to contemporary data on NDEs, they will have tried to make sense of their experiences in some way. Most likely, they will have tried to reconcile it with their current beliefs. As a result, their narratives will also reflect the cultural context in which the NDE occurred.

**Methods**

To examine the effects of NDEs on coping behavior, I distributed a questionnaire to individuals who felt they had had an NDE. It consisted of a combination of yes/no, multiple choice, and open-ended questions designed to elicit from respondents information on perceived changes since their NDEs. I attended a local meeting of the International Association of Near-Death Studies (IANDS) in Seattle, WA, where I introduced my study before the group, stated research objectives, and distributed the questionnaires. Surveys were also handed out at IANDS meetings in Austin, TX, and Overland Park, KS. Since study participants were garnered, for the most part, from
IANDS gatherings, they cannot necessarily be considered representative of the NDE population in general. Experiencers whose NDEs do not resemble the now popular model of the experience, including such elements as a tunnel, a light, and feeling of peace, who have had negative experiences, or who do not wish to share their experiences may not be attracted to such meetings.

I was concerned that responses might reflect changes resulting from exposure to popular philosophies on NDEs as presented at meetings, and not from the NDE itself. Therefore, I distributed a second questionnaire to individuals at IANDS meetings who had not had a NDE, but attended the meetings because of an interest in the phenomenon. They formed the control group. This second questionnaire also served the purpose of determining whether studying or listening to accounts of NDEs might result in changed attitudes similar to those reported by experiencers. I hoped that by comparing these two groups I could determine to what degree changed beliefs and behavior resulted from actually having a NDE.

Participants were asked to rate any changes in attitude in several areas, including self-esteem, fear of death, sense of life purpose, and ability to cope with day-to-day stress. They were also asked to list major life stressors, such as divorce, job loss, illness, or death of a loved one, that they had undergone since their NDE, or, in the case of the control group, since learning about NDEs, and to relate whether or not they felt their NDE or knowledge of NDEs had affected the ways in which they dealt with such stress.

The study group consisted of 18 respondents: 10 women and 8 men. Sixteen were IANDS participants, and two were individuals who had heard about my study, but were not involved with IANDS. They ranged in age from 26 to 78 years, with a mean age of 47. The ages at which their NDEs occurred ranged from 3 to 40, with a mean age of 28. The control group consisted of 25 respondents: 15 women and 10 men. They ranged in age from 29 to 78 years, with a mean age of 50. I present below their tabulated and analyzed responses.

Results and Discussion

In the study group, 100 percent of respondents reported both a decreased fear of death and an increased sense of life purpose. The majority also reported an increase in the following areas: sense of control over life, contentment with lifestyle, self-esteem, ability to cope
Table 1
Changes in Attitudes Among Near-Death Experiencers and Nonexperiencers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Near-Death Experiencers (N = 18)</th>
<th>Nonexperiencers (N = 25)*</th>
<th>( \chi^2 ) (df = 2)</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear of death</td>
<td>0  18  0</td>
<td>0  23  2</td>
<td>(not calculable)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of control over life</td>
<td>9  6  3</td>
<td>17  3  5</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>.235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contentment with lifestyle</td>
<td>13  3  2</td>
<td>17  2  5</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>.553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>15  0  3</td>
<td>20  1  3</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>.646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of life purpose</td>
<td>18  0  0</td>
<td>21  1  3</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>.204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to cope with crisis</td>
<td>15  1  2</td>
<td>20  0  3</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>.516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to cope with daily stress</td>
<td>14  2  2</td>
<td>20  1  4</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>.624</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Not all 25 respondents answered all questions.

with crisis, and ability to cope with day-to-day stress. Similarly, respondents in the control group also reported increases in all of the above areas, with no significant differences from the experiencer group, as shown in Table 1.

When asked to measure their level of anxiety in stressful situations, 61 percent of respondents in the study group rated it as significantly less than others. The majority of respondents in the control group ranged between “the same as others” and “significantly less than others,” as shown in Table 2. The difference between the experiencer and control groups was not statistically significant.

Ninety-four percent of the study group felt that their NDE affected the way in which they responded to stress, while 86 percent of the control group were similarly affected after learning about NDEs. Seventy-five percent of the study group felt that major life crises were predetermined, whereas only 50 percent of the control group agreed. When asked whether these crises had purpose or meaning for them, 100 percent of the study group and 91 percent of the control group answered in the affirmative. None of those differences between the experiencer
Table 2
Respondents' Ratings of Level of Anxiety in Stressful Situations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Near-Death Experiencers (N = 18)*</th>
<th>Nonexperiencers (N = 25)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Significantly greater than others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat greater than others</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the same as others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat less than others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significantly less than others</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Sum of responses is 20 because two experiencers marked two answers each.

\[ \chi^2 (df = 4) = 6.30, p = .178. \]

and control groups was statistically significant. When asked whether exposure to information on NDEs changed how they viewed life, 100 percent of the control group answered yes, as shown in Table 3.

An overwhelming majority of the study group (94 percent) felt that having had a NDE affected the way they responded to stress. Based on their answers, they perceived most of these effects as positive. Additionally, 86 percent of nonexperiencers in the control group felt that exposure to NDEs had had a similar positive impact on them. I discuss below some of the areas in which these changes occurred and their impact on respondents' lives.

**Decreased Fear of Death**

100 percent of the study group reported a decrease in fear of death after their NDEs. Below are some of the answers to a question asking respondents to describe how their feelings on death have changed:

Knowing without a doubt that the spirit can separate from the body assures me that my spirit will live beyond the body.

Zero fear.

I now feel as though our life here is precious, but I now also realize, when I didn’t before, that death is most likely not (the) horrible experience many believe it to be. I feel it is in the least just a different existence and likely a much more pleasant one.

It is nothing to be feared. It is the greatest opportunity to change into a glorious new way of being.
Table 3
Respondents' Ratings of Role of NDEs in Coping with Stress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Near-Death Experiencers (N = 18)*</th>
<th>Nonexperiencers (N = 25)</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>( \chi^2 (df = 1) )</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did having an NDE/exposure to NDE information affect the way you responded to stress?</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>.371</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were these stressful events predetermined?</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>.134</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did these stressful events have a particular purpose or meaning for your life?</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>.202</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has exposure to information on NDEs changed how you view life? (not asked)</td>
<td>(not asked)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Not all 18 respondents answered all questions.

Studies on post-NDE attitudinal changes have corroborated this finding. Sabom compared experiencers’ attitudes on death with those of a control group of survivors of near-death crises who had not had a NDE. The vast majority of experiencers reported a decrease in fear of death, but in the latter group of 45 respondents, only one reported a decrease, and the majority (87 percent) reported no change. He concluded: “This indicates that the decrease in the fear of death following a NDE is due to the NDE per se, and is not a result of merely having survived a near-death crisis event” (Sabom, 1982, pp. 60–61).

In his Connecticut Study, Ring also used a control group of nonexperiencers who had come close to death, and his findings mirrored those of Sabom. He drew the same conclusion, explaining, “it is not ‘merely’ coming close to death that tends to convince one that there is life after death; it is, apparently, the core experience itself that proves decisive” (Ring, 1980, p. 169).

Most of the nonexperiencers I polled did report a decreased fear of death. These were not people who had had a close brush with death,
however, but rather ones who showed an interest in studying near-death phenomena. Here are some of their comments:

I no longer think of death as an end. I see it as a transformation, a next step, an exciting opportunity after shedding a broken, useless, confining body.

The combination of being a hospice volunteer and my interest in the NDE have strengthened my religious beliefs. There is no fear in the mystery of death. My involvement with these groups has also influenced my family's attitude. This became very evident upon the death of my husband. My children and grandchildren were able to accept the loss with minimum stress because of our discussing the NDE stories and experiences.

Of the 25 respondents in the control group, 23 reported decreased fear of death, and the other 2 reported no change. Perhaps the decreased fear results not necessarily from the NDE itself, as Sabom and Ring suggested, but from a belief in a peaceful, loving afterlife, something shared by experiencers and nonexperiencers alike at IANDS gatherings.

Nevertheless, decreased fear of death appears to have a positive effect on coping behavior. Belief in an afterlife mitigates some of the grief and loss felt at the death of a loved one. In one study, 121 people who were recently bereaved were interviewed, and it was found that the feeling of recovery following bereavement was enhanced by belief in afterlife (Smith, Range, and Ulmer, 1991–1992). People surveyed in my study seemed to view death as a transition, not an end in itself. Many reported seeing previously departed loved ones during their NDE. With a belief system that includes a peace-filled afterlife, death does not spell the end to relationships with loved ones, but merely creates a temporary separation.

A few respondents who had lost loved ones since their NDEs reported that their changed attitudes toward death helped them to deal with the loss. After his NDE, one 53-year-old man experienced a succession of deaths in his family. In less than four years he lost two brothers, a brother-in-law, a sister, and a sister-in-law. He said of these losses:

I was much more at peace within myself, and was outwardly much calmer than most or many of the other family members. I have absolutely no fear of death. I see the thing called death as being an event much like birth or marriage — a significant ... starting or transition point between different phases of existence. Does that mean that I believe in life after death? Life is not a good word because it is tied to biological functioning. But I feel there is an infinite existence both prior to birth and after biological death here on this earth.
Similarly, a 37-year-old woman who had a 1991 NDE had since lost two close friends, an uncle, and a cousin. She, too, drew comfort from her experience. She said:

I still mourn very much for all of them. However, because of my own death experiences, I know that they are continuing elsewhere, which brings some comfort to both myself and their loved ones.

Respondents in both the study group and the control group reported a decreased fear of death since either having a NDE or learning about the phenomena. Apparently the belief in life beyond death and the pleasant nature of death itself as portrayed in near-death narratives have a positive affect on coping behavior.

**Sense of Control Over Life**

Fifty percent of respondents from the study group felt an increased sense of control over their lives since their NDE. For many, this seemed to take the form of a more accepting attitude toward life, in which the negative aspects of problems are minimized and there is not as strong a need as before to control outcomes. While outside circumstances in their life may not always be going as well as they’d like, they seemed to have a general acceptance of these adversities, which helped to minimize stress. Here are some representative statements:

I lost my job six months ago [during the NDE, God told me I’d get laid off]. I’m dirt broke now, but I’m coping. I know that my life has a purpose. If I lose all I have, my soul still survives, so who cares?

I realized that the worst that could happen in any situation was that I’d die, and that wasn’t too bad. That renewed my courage and my sense of invulnerability to life.

Financially speaking, my life is more difficult now. Physically, I suffer greatly. Mentally, I do well most of the time. Spiritually, I can feel the existence of my soul, which sometimes soars.

Thirty-three percent of respondents in the study group reported a decrease in their sense of control over life. However, 75 percent also felt that major life events were predetermined. There could be a correlation between the two attitudes: if events are predetermined, one necessarily has less control over them.

A greater percentage of the control group (68 percent) reported feeling an increased sense of control over their lives since learning about NDEs. However, only 50 percent of this group felt events were predetermined, which, again, would fit with the inverse relationship
between the two beliefs. Following are some of the comments from the control group that reflect the same relaxed and accepting outlook expressed by many experiencers:

In losing my job, I had more faith and confidence in obtaining a new one. That happened within a month, and I have been much better off since. Things work out.

I have experienced several major life changes in the past year, and rather than catastrophize them or get caught up in the melodrama, I can see all of the events as opportunities or openings for my own personal and spiritual growth.

**Self-Esteem**

Eighty-three percent of both experiencers and nonexperiencers reported an increase in self-esteem. For experiencers, this often seemed to be a result of a sense of total acceptance and forgiveness they felt directed toward them during their NDE:

I was experiencing so much love and forgiveness from God, and I could see that God wasn't judging me at all.

[Christ] could see everything about me, more than I could see or know about myself. He even knew my thoughts before I did. It was scary to be so totally known and exposed, and yet so totally loved and accepted. I became aware that I was being harder on myself than He was.

It was peaceful and calm and warm. And that feeling of love, just unconditional love!

Feeling this sense of unconditional acceptance apparently helps experiencers to accept themselves better, thus raising self-esteem. Since an equal percentage of the control group also experienced an increase in self-esteem since learning of NDEs, it is implied, again, that this change is not necessarily a product of the NDE itself, but perhaps of the philosophy associated with them.

It should not be overlooked, however, that increased self-esteem has been found to be a natural by-product of the maturing process (Aldwin, 1994). An average of 19 years had elapsed between the occurrence of subjects' NDEs and the time of this study, so it is plausible that some increase in self-esteem would have occurred, with or without a NDE.

**Contentment with Lifestyle**

Seventy-two percent of experiencers and 71 percent of nonexperiencers reported an increase in contentment with their lifestyle. As some of the above quotes indicate, though respondents may have been
experiencing difficult setbacks, such as job losses and financial problems, most seemed to possess a generally accepting attitude toward these difficulties, and thus a sense of contentment with their lives.

In some instances, however, the changed perspective resulting from the NDE caused the survivor to see problems that had not been recognized as such before. This new sense of discontent spurred them to make changes. One man said that after his NDE, he felt and disliked the negativity in his marriage, and had since divorced. A 37-year-old woman who had a NDE after experiencing organ failure and cardiac arrest in 1991 said her NDE was the catalyst for her decision to seek treatment for alcoholism. So while after the NDE there was sometimes an immediate discontent with aspects of one’s lifestyle, the experiencer was often moved to make the necessary changes to create a situation which was more tolerable.

Sense of Life Purpose

Another way in which NDEs appear to enhance meaning is by instilling a renewed sense of life purpose. All 18 of the experiencers surveyed reported an increase in life purpose since their NDE. The woman mentioned above credited a sense of purpose garnered from her visionary experience with helping her to overcome alcoholism:

Strangely, dying has increased my will to live. After getting out of the hospital after my most serious bouts with death, I joined Alcoholics Anonymous, got a sponsor, and continue my activities with this great organization. The meaning or purpose I get is that I was to continue with my life, in a sober manner, helping people, writing about my experiences, doing meaningful volunteer work, appreciating life, and trying to live life in a positive, thankful manner.

She went on to say that she felt that everybody has a purpose in life, regardless of whether or not they have experienced a NDE.

A 35-year-old woman suffered a concussion in 1990 after being hit by a car. She was unconscious for six hours, and during that time felt herself floating through space. Though she remembered thinking, “I am dead,” she felt peaceful and unafraid. When interviewed four years later, she said:

I feel my life has a purpose. My purpose is to love and to share love and to teach. I love to teach and to help others learn. I love to learn, too. In the big picture, I hope that my life will have made a difference on its own little, small scale. [I want] to try to make the world, in this little, tiny corner where I am, a little bit better.
A 49-year-old woman was a passenger on a boat that capsized during a thunderstorm. While almost drowning, she had a NDE and came back with a renewed sense of purpose:

The boat turned on its side and we were forced to hold onto a railing as the waves beat over the boat and down upon us. Though I was wearing a life jacket, I was repeatedly pushed under the water. Each time I would think, “I’ll bounce back up and be able to breathe.” Until one time when it was as if I went down ... in a black void. All was darkness. I did have a conversation with some higher power about my will to keep living.

She said she learned from this experience that the purpose of difficulties in life was “to teach me the preciousness of life and what we can learn when we love each other and show each other we do.”

Previous studies have also found an increased sense of life purpose to be a common aftereffect of NDEs. In his Connecticut Study, Ring did not specifically ask respondents to comment on life purpose, but when asked whether their NDE had changed them in any way, 24 percent mentioned a renewed sense of life purpose (Ring, 1980). He concluded that

Persons who survive a near-death episode sometimes assert that afterward they felt a sense of rebirth ... .

Almost always, however, there is an implied or explicit sense that one has been spared for a reason – that one has been given a renewal of life for a purpose. This sense that one’s life is meant to fulfill some objective is fairly common. (Ring, 1980, p. 147)

Zaleski noted that this sense of life purpose was generally connected to a “commission” the visionaries were given or a message they had to bring back: “Just as in the medieval narratives, these messages condense the overall didactic intent of the narrative and provide the rationale for the otherworld journey itself” (Zaleski, 1987, p. 133).

Some of the “commissions” reported by study participants are as follows:

[He said,] “You have to learn and teach more about loving and forgiving.”

He hesitated, as though deciding about whether to say something. With that he impressed in my mind a picture, a memory of my original agreement for coming to earth to begin with. It was like a contract. And with that I remembered and I went, “Oh, right. Right!”

I started toward them, then realized I had some task to finish on earth.

Studies on coping suggest that high life purpose helps individuals to better deal with life crises. For instance, a survey of 119 recently
bereaved adults found that a sense of life purpose had a moderating effect on their reaction to the loss. A high sense of purpose was found to be associated with a more favorable response to bereavement, regardless of the cause of death (Ulmer, Range, and Smith, 1991).

The woman mentioned above who credited the NDE she had during a boating accident with giving her a renewed sense of life purpose felt that the experience helped her to better deal with subsequent life crises. Since the accident she had dealt with a divorce, job loss, major illness, and the illness and death of a loved one. She said:

I believe I was given a strength to persevere I may not have had before the experience. This is not to say I can handle the stress with ease, but I feel I have an underlying sort of support inside me now and somehow, through stressful times, I keep on dealing with the situation and am more able to accept things as they are.

Near-death researchers have found that even those who had a NDE during a suicide attempt afterward reported a renewed appreciation for life and a sense of life purpose (Greyson, 1981). Though none of the respondents in my study reported trying to commit suicide, one 33-year-old woman acknowledged that, prior to her NDE, she had contemplated suicide as an escape from constant pain resulting from a medical condition. Then, while undergoing surgery in 1990, a nurse accidentally gave her an overdose of morphine, and she had to be resuscitated with paddles. She described an NDE during this time wherein she encountered God. He showed her a review of her life and pointed out the qualities she needed to work on developing. She said:

Every time He spoke to me He radiated a total, unconditional love that filled my energy, that is the most intense thing I have ever experienced. It filled me with not only the sensation of, but a "knowing" of love, forgiveness and understanding that I really can't explain. Then He started showing me my life. It just kind of appeared. I experienced the feelings of everybody I'd come into contact with, and remembered every little thing I had ever done, most of which were sad things to do. I remembered fights with little friends, or when I was older, talking behind peoples' backs, or when I was older still, being directly in peoples' faces, screaming. I experienced my life and I felt terrible. I couldn't cry, but I had the sick feeling that goes with that. He told me, though, that I could work on learning to love, and on forgiving, because I never forgave. The angry lines I drew were forever. Then I totally forgave everybody of everything. I think I did this because I was
experiencing so much love and forgiveness from God, and I could see that God wasn't judging me at all. (Chenaur, 1995, p. 1)

She described how this experience changed her attitudes toward suicide and death:

I used to want to die when I was in constant pain from endometriosis. I contemplated suicide after a hysterectomy. Driving in traffic, I would cry and be swearing and flipping off people. I was terrified of death. I was distraught at a possible job loss. Now I don't fear death. I would never commit suicide now. When horrible things happen to me, I just look at it as a learning experience. (Chenaur, 1995, p. 1)

This increase in life purpose was not expressed solely by those who had experienced an NDE. When asked whether they felt an increase in life purpose since learning of NDEs, 84 percent of the control group also answered in the affirmative. Their responses were very similar to those of the study group:

I used to believe you lived, you died, and that was it. I couldn't figure out the meaning of life, so I didn't think there was one. Now I believe life is to learn to love unconditionally.

All things or events have the potential for growth opportunity in them. My sense is that we're all here to learn and grow and love, and that every life event presents a unique opportunity to do so.

**Ability to Cope**

The vast majority of respondents in both groups reported an increase in their ability to cope with both day-to-day stress and larger crises. Problems did not seem to carry the same weight or importance as they had before. Here are some responses from the study group:

I don't worry so much about money. If you're healthy, none of that really matters. My NDE definitely changed my priorities.

People say I come up with answers to problems no one else thinks of. I regard most all things as part of a larger scheme of things that have good outcomes.

I think I now deal with life much better and I look at things much differently.

Having seen life from the other side, I realize that the traumas and dramas of life are quite simply opportunities to learn and grow.

These findings are not surprising, as studies show that after undergoing an extreme stressor, such as combat trauma or nearly dying, everyday hassles often seem less important (Aldwin, 1994).
A slightly greater percentage of nonexperiencers than experiencers reported an increase in their ability to cope. Some responses from the control group were:

I am able to be stronger for myself and others.
I am much more inclined to seek comfort and guidance through prayer. I believe in putting myself or others in God's hands when troubles seem overwhelming.
When my father was sick and died, and the father of a friend died, I wasn't afraid for them. I know we are never alone, but always surrounded by love.

The sense of an order to life and the belief in a benevolent divine power seemed to provide a resource of strength that helped these individuals better cope with stressors. Again, the results could in part have stemmed from the natural maturing process. Individuals who have previously encountered and successfully dealt with life stressors could draw from these past experiences and better gauge how to deal with subsequent crises and stress.

Some experiencers felt, however, that their experience complicated their ability to cope by adding additional stress to their lives. One woman said that since her NDE, she felt the repressed emotions of others "as if a current is running through me." She added, however, that she did not tend to resist life as much as she did before, and this helped to minimize stress. Another woman said, "It's as if a NDE makes the tough things in life tougher, and the good things better." One man says that since his NDE, his psychic sensitivities had increased and he was much more bothered by crowds. He said, "It is like a psychic roar engulfs me in these situations."

A couple of experiencers said they felt both an increase and a decrease, simultaneously, in their ability to cope with stressors. So while diminishing the importance of problems and lending emotional strength to survivors, the experience can also create complications that add to the stress already in their lives.

Religion and NDEs

Though participants were not asked specifically about their religious affiliations or beliefs, there is relationship between religion and coping behavior. The studies on coping cited above all drew a positive correlation between the ability to successfully cope with life stressors and the ability to infuse those same events with meaning, whether it be a belief in an afterlife, a sense of life purpose, or a feeling that
all things happen for a reason. Religion provides a framework for assessing how meaning should be assigned to various life events. One study that interviewed parents who had lost a child to sudden infant death syndrome found that the importance of religion in the parents’ lives was positively related to cognitive processing and finding meaning in the death. Additionally, active religious participation was also related to greater well-being and less distress among the parents (McIntosh, Silver, and Wortman, 1993).

It is common among experiencers to reject affiliation with organized religion, even though most have well-articulated beliefs on God, life meaning, and life beyond death. Most prefer the term “spiritual,” which they feel has less rigid and dogmatic connotations. Cherie Sutherland interviewed experiencers in Australia and found that prior to the experience, 24 percent described themselves as religious, and 16 percent as spiritual. After their NDEs, 6 percent described themselves as religious, and 76 percent as spiritual (Sutherland, 1990). Responses from this study group appear to support these findings:

I am [now] more spiritual than I would be otherwise.

My values in life have changed from tangible and material items to a desire for spiritual serenity.

Not every respondent, however, shied away from religious affiliation. One woman said that she had always had a deep religious faith, and it was only strengthened by her NDE. In fact, the distinction between religion and spirituality seemed to be most markedly made by respondents in the control group:

Knowledge of NDEs has allowed me to feel more spiritual and to validate a view of spirituality that is not tied to fundamentalist, judgmental religions.

I no longer fear death. I’ve become much more spiritual [not religious].

[Since learning of NDEs] I’ve lost all interest in religious dogma.

[Exposure to NDEs] has helped me to deal with the adverse effects of organized religion.

This may be due to the fact that people who already hold non-traditional or nondogmatic beliefs would more likely be attracted to phenomena such as NDEs, which appear to support their beliefs. Nevertheless, whether preferring the label “religious” or “spiritual,” respondents overwhelmingly espoused well-defined belief systems which infused meaning into their lives. In regards to religious participation, though many chose not to attend traditional church ceremonies or other religious gatherings, they all (with the exception of...
two respondents) attended IANDS meetings. Though IANDS is not a religious organization, these meetings appeared to share many similarities with organized religious gatherings: people with similar beliefs and experiences congregated together to share their thoughts and interpretations of their experiences. Having a supportive network such as this likely provides the same benefits as standard religious participation when it comes to coping with life stressors.

Conclusion

The thread that ties all of the above categories of change together is their relationship to meaning. The changes outlined in this study, such as increased life purpose and reduced fear of death, resulted from a philosophical framework that imparted meaning to both positive and negative life events. This worldview embraced by most participants in this study included a benevolent and personally-involved divinity, a view of life problems as opportunities for spiritual growth, a personal mission for each individual, and a peace-filled afterlife.

An unexpected finding from this study was the almost identical pattern of responses given by experiencers and nonexperiencers alike. All participants in the control group reported that they viewed life differently since being exposed to NDE narratives. They seemed to embrace these visionary experiences with the same enthusiasm as the visionaries themselves. Below are some of the descriptions given about their changed attitudes and beliefs:

If anything, my already held beliefs and attitudes were enhanced. I more fully believe we are here to love and to learn to love one another. To forgive and be forgiven. Yes, I have been affected!

[I am now] more open to others' beliefs – not so judgmental as before.

[Previously] I was agnostic. Now I believe there is a higher power and that we will live on after we die.

It is reassuring to hear about various points of understanding about death. One loses the strong fear of death and takes an interest. This reduces fear.

Information on NDEs, particularly personal accounts of NDEs, has been of vital significance to me in my healing of past traumas and pain.

Knowing about NDEs is helping me to heal from the pain and bitterness I feel because of my infant daughter's death 24 years ago.

Nonexperiencers appeared to embrace the same general philosophy on life as experiencers, and to reap from it the same beneficial coping
responses. This finding echoes prior reports that learning about NDEs may confer some of the beneficial attitudinal aftereffects of having an NDE oneself (Flynn, 1986; Ring and Valarino, 1998).

Before drawing any definitive conclusions from this study, it is important to reiterate a few points. First, as Zaleski asserted, any study of an experience such as the NDE represents a collaborative effort between the researcher and the subject. Because respondents were aware of research objectives—namely, studying the connection between NDEs and coping behavior—they may have presented their experiences in a way that suggested a positive relationship between the two. Answers were subjective and reflected respondents' personal perceptions. Secondly, because the majority of participants were drawn from IANDS gatherings, the findings of this study can not be generalized to represent the NDE population at large. And lastly, because the populations of both the study group and the control group were small, it could be argued that the study lacked sufficient statistical power to show differences between the two groups.

Despite those cautions, it is clear that the majority of experiencers and nonexperiencers alike in this study felt that NDEs significantly affected the way in which they dealt with stress. Coping behavior was enhanced by a decreased fear of death and an increase in the following areas: sense of control over life, contentment with lifestyle, self-esteem, sense of life purpose, and ability to cope with both day-to-day stress and major crises. NDE narratives were instrumental in forming or affirming belief systems and worldviews that served to infuse life events with meaning, thus allowing respondents to deal with stress more effectively. Actually having a NDE did not prove necessary for achieving the above-mentioned benefits, as nonexperiencers in the study expressed an equal level of life satisfaction as experiencers.

These findings are relevant for people in the helping profession, such as doctors, nurses, social workers, and clergy, who may encounter patients who have had a NDE. Many experiencers have reported that sharing their experience with caretakers often engendered skeptical or dismissive responses, and added to their physical recovery the burden of trying to deal with a personally significant, but externally unwelcome experience. If caretakers can view an NDE as significant and ultimately beneficial for the patient, regardless of their own personal feelings about its validity, they can perhaps ease the patient's awkwardness at relating such an experience, and help him or her in the healing process.
References


