

Pediatric Near-Death Experiences

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ABSTRACT: A review of one previously reported and three new pediatric near-death experiences (NDEs), in which the experiencers were interviewed as children, suggests that the childhood core NDE as described by Melvin Morse and colleagues may be expanded to include feeling pain-free, seeing a light at the tunnel's end, entering the light, and time alteration. These cases also suggest that the life review may be a function of chronological age.

A paucity of pediatric near-death experience (NDE) cases, in which these experiences are reported by children and adolescents rather than retrospectively by adults, exists in the literature. At the time of the publication of my first pediatric case (Serdahely, 1989-1990), fewer than 20 pediatric cases in the above sense of the word had been published.

Besides the subject of my previous publication, who was 8 years old at the time he was interviewed about his NDE, three additional and previously unpublished cases have come to my attention. One is the NDE of a girl who was 12 years old when she was interviewed; another is that of an adolescent girl who was 17½ years old when she described her NDE to me; and the third is the NDE of a boy who was 9 years old when he recounted his NDE.

I describe below the pediatric NDEs of these youngsters. Realizing that I am dealing with a very small sample, I will then compare the tentative findings from this pediatric sample with those presented in the pediatric NDE literature.

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Case 1: Pat

When Pat was 7 years old, he fell from a fishing bridge into a lagoon below. He struck his head on a rock at the bottom of the pond and nearly drowned. Professional rescuers had difficulty finding a pulse; his heart had ceased beating, and he had stopped breathing.

A little while after his NDE, Pat told his mother that he had died after falling into the lagoon. When he was 8 years old, he described his NDE to me (1989-1990).

Pat's NDE reached Stage 3 according to Kenneth Ring's (1980) model. He floated out of his body and saw a police officer trying to save him by diving into the water to pull him out. He also saw himself first being transported to a local hospital by ambulance, and then to another hospital in a nearby city by helicopter.

Pat found himself in a dark, black tunnel in which his two deceased pets, a cat and a dog, appeared to him. The former family cat brushed against his leg, and his dog licked his face, sending Pat back to his body. He did not encounter any other spirits or presence while in the tunnel. All of Pat's close relatives were alive at the time of his NDE.

He did not see a light at the end of the tunnel, but did see white clouds up above the tunnel. When asked about a life review while in the tunnel, Pat said he did not have one. When asked about time during his NDE, he replied: "Time doesn't exist."

Case 2: Amber

Recovering from spinal surgery in an intensive care unit (ICU), this 10-year-old's heartbeat and respiration suddenly stopped; she was resuscitated by the ICU nurse. Two years later, Amber described her NDE to me.

Amber said she felt "peaceful," "relaxed," and pain-free during her NDE. She had what Ring called a Stage 4 experience, seeing a "whitish-blue light" at the tunnel's end that drew her to it.

Two animals also appeared to Amber while she was in this "dark place." She saw a shadow of what she believed was a dog and thought it might have been the family's pet, which had been put to sleep a few years earlier. She also saw a white lamb that came near her but did not touch her. The lamb was loving and gentle, and led Amber back to her body, whereupon she regained consciousness.

None of Amber's loved ones were deceased at the time of her NDE. She had always had a love for animals, but when she was young, she developed a fear of people, especially people dressed in white. During surgery at age 2, she was permanently injured when her surgeons, who wore white, accidentally severed nerves to her left leg; she has little mobility in that limb to this day.

When asked if there was "time" during her NDE, Amber said she was not sure whether or not time stood still. She spoke in terms of minutes to

describe how long she felt she was in her NDE, although her sister related that Amber had been clinically dead for approximately 30 seconds.

Case 3: Natalie

At age 17½, Natalie talked about her NDE of two years earlier. An acute asthma attack caused her to pass out in her pediatrician's clinic, after she had been driven there at the onset of her respiratory distress. Later she was told she had had a seizure while unconscious. Her physician diagnosed her condition as a life-threatening episode of status asthmaticus.

During her Stage 4 NDE she found herself in a tunnel, "thinking logically" about being in the tunnel and yet knowing she was having an asthma attack. Suddenly, two "light figures" (her words) came to her. These beings were of the same bright light she saw at the tunnel's end. The "friendly" light figures, one on either side of her, each took one of her hands, and together the three of them floated towards the light. Natalie recalled wanting to go to the light "badly" (her word), and reported that the light beings seemed to be going too slowly for her liking.

As they were traveling down the tunnel, images from her past floated over her head. The most memorable image was that of her father swinging her. Then Natalie saw her mother and how sad her mother and her other relatives would be if she died. She felt "worried" for her family should she die. At that point, the light figures set her down, and she walked out of the tunnel and back to her body.

Natalie saw "lots" of other light figures waiting for her in the light at the tunnel's end. She believed they would have welcomed her, but she did not recognize any of them. At the time of her NDE, all of the people close to Natalie were still alive. Her two paternal grandparents had passed away when she was quite young, but she had no recollection of them.

Natalie reported that it was difficult to judge time during her NDE. She mentioned that the NDE "happened fast," but that the light figures seemed to be going slowly.

Case 4: Mike

When Mike was 4 years old, he fell off a high diving board and landed on his head on the concrete below. His mother came to him and cradled him. Finding no vital signs, she closed his eyes, covered him with a towel, and said goodbye to him.

Floating out of his body, Mike saw his mother below, holding him. He next found himself in a cloudiness or a fog. Then a shaft of light that was bright, warm, and "yellow like the sun" penetrated the fog and surrounded him, making this a Stage 5 NDE according to Ring's model. His

out-of-body experience was at first scary, but then he felt he was with "friends" (his word), at which point he felt peaceful and pain-free.

A warm hand touched his shoulder as he looked at his body below, preventing him from turning around. A comforting, loving male voice, coming from the presence whose hand was on his shoulder, told him: "This is not your time. Do you want to go back or stay here?"

Mike reported that he believed he would miss his parents if he died. He told the presence, who he thought might have been Jesus (he equivocated here) that he would like to go back, and he was back in his body in an instant.

Discussion

Melvin Morse, Paul Castillo, David Venecia, Jerrold Milstein, and Donald Tyler (1986), after describing the experiences of their pediatric patients, concluded that the "childhood core NDE" includes (a) a feeling of being out of the body, (b) viewing one's body from above, (c) perceiving a darkness, (d) a tunnel experience, and (e) returning to one's body.

Ring included in his description of the adult core NDE, in addition to those five features described by Morse, Castillo, Venecia, Milstein, and Tyler as the childhood core NDE, a feeling of peacefulness (Stage 1) and a light experience (Stage 5). The four cases described in this paper provide some evidence that the childhood core NDE may have the same five stages as the adult core experience as defined by Ring.

Pat, Amber, and Mike all found their NDEs to be pain-free and/or peaceful, and Mike had a light experience like those reported by adult NDErs in Stage 5. In addition, Morse (1983) has reported a case of a 7-year-old girl who also had a Stage 5 light experience.

Morse, Castillo, Venecia, Milstein, and Tyler (1986) noted that the pediatric NDEs they studied lacked (a) transcendent feelings, (b) a life review, and (c) time alteration. It is not clear how they defined transcendent feelings; but if they used the term as Michael Sabom (1982) did, to include, in part, experiences of a brilliant light, sitting in a mist, and floating through clouds, then clearly Mike had a "transcendent" experience.

Furthermore, Natalie seems to have had a life review. She saw images of her past floating overhead as she and the two light figures were traveling down the tunnel, images Ring (1980) referred to as "flashbacks." Raymond Moody (1988) wrote that the life review is often conducted in the company of a loving presence, and that an element of empathy is common in which the NDEr feels how his or her actions

have affected others. While Natalie was in the presence of two friendly light figures, she did not seem to have been in the presence of the loving light often described accompanying the life review, and she did not report an experience of empathy described by Moody.

Perhaps the life review as described by Moody is absent from the pediatric NDE because young NDErs are simply not equipped psychologically to deal with feeling how their actions have impacted on others. My three youngest NDErs reported no life review. Natalie was 15½ at the time of her NDE and had images floating overhead, a life review with flashbacks. But she also saw images of how her relatives would respond in the future if she were to die. Ring (1984) wrote that "flashforwards" sometimes occur in the context of the life review. George Ritchie (1978), who had an NDE at age 20, reported a life review with a loving presence present and the accompanying empathy for others when viewing images of his life.

Again, realizing I am on speculative ground here and that drawing conclusions from such small numbers is highly risky, we may be looking at the development of the life review as a function of age. While the youngest NDErs report no life review, teenagers may report a life review with images of the past and possible "flashforwards," but no loving presence or accompanying feelings of empathy for others; and by age 20 the fullblown life review as described by Moody appears.

In further contrast to the findings of Morse, Castillo, Venecia, Milstein, and Tyler (1986), the respondents in my pediatric cases also reported time alteration. Pat was quite emphatic about time not existing; Amber reported a time distortion; and Natalie talked about the difficulty of judging time. All three seemed to suggest that time was altered during their NDEs. Based on the few pediatric cases described in the literature so far, therefore, it seems that the childhood core NDE is very similar to, if not identical with, the adult core NDE described by Ring.

Previous investigators have not discussed aftereffects of pediatric NDEs, though characteristic aftereffects have been described for adult NDErs (Ring, 1984). Amber's sister said Amber was unusually mature for her age after her NDE, and described her as calmer, more relaxed, able to stay out of family arguments, and exercising her "common sense."

Mike's mother reported a couple of things that she regards as aftereffects of his NDE. He exhibited great faith that his stolen puppy would be returned, and it was; and once when his father went on a trip to Australia, Mike began to make a cross on his mother's forehead when she was presumed by Mike to be asleep. Making such a cross was

something the grandmother had done to his father when Mike's father was a boy; his mother wondered how Mike could have known this when he had never seen his grandmother.

Pat also has had at least one known incident that may be an after-effect of his NDE, about two and a half years after his NDE. One evening his father and his brother went out into the woods in a truck to pick up two relatives whose vehicle had broken down. About 8:55 p.m., Pat urgently called his mother, demanding that that instant they say a prayer they had recently been learning. When Pat's father and brother returned later that night, his father related that they had nearly been killed. Their truck had apparently lost traction on a steep incline and rolled backwards out of control, when it suddenly stopped, according to Pat's father, "about five minutes to nine o'clock."

Morse, Castillo, Venecia, Milstein, and Tyler (1986) noted that their sample of childhood NDEs differed further from adult experiences in that "adults typically report meeting dead relatives and friends, while children report meeting teachers and living friends" (p. 1112). However, of the four cases described above, Pat encountered two deceased pets, a lamb and perhaps the deceased family dog came to Amber, two light figures floated to Natalie's side, and Mike felt the hand and heard the voice of a loving, friendly male whom he equivocally identified as Jesus. These encounters were more in keeping with those reported for adults, the main difference being the animals that accompanied two of these pediatric NDErs. None of the four reported meeting any living friends or teachers.

Morse, Castillo, Venecia, Milstein, and Tyler (1986) wrote that "religious figures, schoolmates, teachers, and relatives who may have died may all represent familiar symbols that the mind incorporates into the experience in an effort to make sense of it" (p. 1112). That explanation certainly can be applied to Amber, who had been comforted by a lamb music box at the time of her first surgery at age 2, and who played with lambs on her grandparents' ranch. The same argument could be applied to Pat and to Mike, although it is difficult to see how two light figures might be "familiar symbols . . . to make sense" of nearly dying.

Morse, Venecia, and Milstein (1989) argued that the explanation for an NDE may reside in the person's neuroanatomy and neurochemistry. The neurological explanation and the argument of familiarity above are couched in a paradigm that implies there is only one reality, that which is perceived and created by the brain. But if we shift paradigms and assume that there is at least one other reality, the timeless or time-altered reality of our pediatric NDErs, then we might hypothesize that NDErs get what they need to provide assistance, comfort, and assurance during the experience and to send them back to their bodies.

Comfort was provided for Pat by deceased pets, for Amber by the lamb, for Natalie by the two light figures, and for Mike by the friendly male presence. But these presences did more for these children than to help them make sense of their NDEs. In each case, the presence was a part of sending the NDEr back to his or her body: the family dog sent Pat back, the lamb led Amber back, the male presence told Mike to return, and the two light figures went slowly until Natalie began to worry about her relatives, whereupon they set her down and she walked out of the tunnel.

We know that for three of these children—Pat, Amber, and Natalie—all of their loved ones were alive at the time of their NDEs. This is consistent with my previously published hypothesis (1989–1990) that if those close to the child are still alive at the time of the NDE, then alternate spirits or beings will appear to assist them.

Finally, it goes without saying that many more pediatric NDE cases are needed to help refute or confirm the above hypotheses. Finding childhood NDErs has proven exceedingly difficult, and the appeal of Morse, Doug Conner, and Tyler (1985) for additional cases to advance our understanding of children's NDEs is as pertinent today as it was five years ago.

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