

**Understanding
and Coping
with a
Frightening
Near-Death
Experience**



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for Near-Death Studies, Inc.*

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This brochure is the result of nearly thirty years of working towards understanding frightening near-death experiences. These are some of the questions I have had myself, and which other people often ask about terrifying experiences. The responses are almost ridiculously abbreviated and certainly don't offer a "quick fix" for a person struggling to comprehend an experience of such power; they are simply the beginnings of a dialogue about the depths of human experience.

The literal interpretation of frightening NDEs is so common and so well represented in generally available writings that I have made no effort to represent it here. Rather, my intent has been to suggest other perspectives which have proven to have both spiritual and practical value and which are not so readily accessible in the popular literature.

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What is a near-death experience?

A near-death experience (NDE) is perhaps the most powerful psychological and emotional event a human being can encounter. The experience may include feeling that one is out of the physical body; moving very fast through space or darkness, often described as a tunnel; encountering an indescribable light or a vast darkness; meeting the presences of people who have died, and sometimes sacred and/or fearful entities; a review and assessment of one's life and actions; being saturated with more-than-human knowledge or having a deep insight into the nature of the universe. Some experiences include the perception of a landscape or city; others, a featureless void. People may see colors they have never seen in the physical world, hear music with unfamiliar tones. Communication in an experience is "thought-to-thought," not verbal. The emotional quality of an NDE is indescribable and ranges from unutterable peace and joy to despair and terror.

After an NDE, people often feel disoriented in the "real world," as their sense of what *is* real may have been blown apart. Personal values and goals are likely to take new directions; human relationships change, religious or spiritual beliefs shift. Response to an NDE is usually profound and may reshape the course of a person's life.

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Were these people all dead?

A true NDE may occur when a person is close to death (in fact, they seem to be common shortly before actual physical death), but it is one of a family of virtually identical experiences which may happen without being close to death. Although approaching death is a reliable "trigger," an experience may be associated with severe stress, deep prayer or religious observance, meditation, a variety of non-life-threatening physiological situations, and other circumstances. Because these other experiences have no generic name—they may be called "mystical," "numinous," "spiritual" or "conversion" experiences or "spiritual emergences"—they are commonly lumped together under the term "near-death experience."

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Are near-death experiences real, or are they just the effects of drugs or lack of oxygen?

The answer to this question depends on whether one believes that "real" applies only to the physical world. One school of thought holds that the only things that can be "real" are material—observable, measurable, reproducible, quantifiable; they have verifiable causes with measurable effects; events take place in a definable geographical location and involve known elements. This is the materialist view, exemplified by scientific method. Strictly interpreted from this perspective, an NDE will seem an essentially meaningless byproduct of organic processes, the side effect of a recognizable biological event within the brain, which the individual mistakenly interprets as "real."

However, this confuses the *cause* of an experience with the experience itself. Every human experience can be reduced to a description of chemical reaction or neurological response, whether a person is hungry, in love, talking on the phone, facing an attacker, having an NDE—*any* experience. And in every case, the physical cause of our response is one thing, but the meaning we give to the experience is something else again. As Dr. Justine Owens of the University of Virginia has said, "Even a good model of what was going on in the brain during a near-death experience would not explain it away, or explain the powerful aftereffects commonly reported, the sense of purpose and meaning in life."

Physician Diane Komp notes that "sometimes science is quick to dismiss things when it doesn't have the tools for investigation." And as author Carol Zaleski comments about knowing the physiological, psychological and cultural conditions that trigger a near-death experience, "... to know what *triggers* an experience doesn't mean you've done the work of *evaluating* it."

Near-death experiences happen under so many different circumstances that no certain physiological cause has been identified. They can happen without drugs or medications, and when tissues show adequate oxygenation. Taken in isolation, virtually every aspect of an NDE can be explained in terms of some medically accepted, physiological condition; the differences are that no current medical theory accounts for all aspects of NDEs, and that reproducing the known conditions does not produce the life-changing effects of NDEs.

It is worth remembering that to experiencers, their responses can be so powerful and long-lasting that the physiological trigger seems unimportant. The experiences are emotionally and psychologically very real, and they have real effects.

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Does this mean that NDEs are only psychological?

Words are such a problem in talking about NDEs! As indicated by the question of whether the NDE is "real," our senses do not easily distinguish between "real and physical" and "real and non-physical." As a result, we tend to downplay psychological, emotional, and spiritual realities as though they were insignificant. To think of an NDE as being "only psychological" is like thinking of a tornado as "only air."

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How many people have negative experiences?

Calling an experience "negative" implies that it has no value and cannot be beneficial. Terrifying NDEs have as great a potential for transforming people's lives as blissful experiences, though it takes great courage to work them through. It is more appropriate to call them "frightening" rather than "negative."

No one knows what proportion of near-death experiences is frightening. Few people are willing to talk about them, often out of fear of what people will think, or because the experience is too intensely personal to share, too terrifying to talk about, or so powerful that hiding seems the only way to deal with it.

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Are all frightening experiences alike?

No. The details of frightening NDEs seem to be highly individual., although a study by Bruce Greyson, MD, and Nancy Evans Bush, MA, has found three overall types:

- a. An "inverse" NDE contains features common in the blissful, radiant experiences, but the individual is terrified by them, usually because things are moving too fast, seem too unfamiliar, and are beyond the person's control.
- b. In experiences of the Void, people perceive themselves to be totally alone, in a featureless emptiness that may feel like outer space. They may be terrified by the aloneness and absence of sensation, or receive a message that the world and what they have assumed as reality—including themselves—does not, in fact, exist and never did.
- c. In "hellish" experiences, the least often reported in this study, people perceive themselves in an ugly or threatening landscape, sometimes seeing groups of other people who seem to be in terrible distress. Most experiencers later report they were observers only; rarely, a person perceives himself as being actively tormented.

Don't these experiences prove that Heaven and Hell are real?

Back to the "real" issue. The question is whether we believe that Heaven and Hell are physically real—geographical places of reward or punishment to which we "go" after death. Neither the present level of scientific knowledge nor the evidence of NDEs is able to prove that Heaven and Hell are physically real, geographical places.

Because deep inner images are so vivid and hold so much power, they may seem solid and material. (This is the other side of the materialist view, the assumption that anything "real" must be physical.) It seems quite likely, in fact, that it is reports of NDEs and related experiences, happening throughout human history, which have led people to believe in Heaven and Hell as localized places. These beliefs are important in cultures all around the world and date back to the earliest written records.

Another perspective is that Heaven and Hell are a different kind of reality, very real psychologically and spiritually but existing beyond time and space; that rather than being literal *places*, they are beyond our ability to understand or adequately describe. In this view, they may be *conditions* which are real but non-material. The range of experiences does support the existence of such conditions.

The answer to the question depends on which level of belief we hold.

Have these people led immoral or unreligious lives? What have they done to deserve a frightening experience?

There is *no evidence whatsoever* that the type of experience is determined exclusively by whether a person is "good" or "bad" as we commonly think of these qualities. It is most important in thinking about this not to jump to conclusions, assumptions or judgments—even very sincere ones—about the level of a person's morality or behavior. Everyone has the capacity for experiencing radiance as well as terror—and *vice versa*. In all of the world's traditions, saints have reported terrifying experiences that did not, after all, keep them from being holy people.

Then why do some people have wonderful experiences and others have terrifying ones?

There is no quick answer to this. (Experiences of the sacred really *are* mysteries!) The type of NDE may be determined by profound issues and questions, deeply embedded in a person's life, which the NDE brings to the surface of consciousness. Once in consciousness, they can be dealt with, whether painfully or joyfully. One experiencer has said it's like driving into a city—the "direction" we come from will determine what "neighborhoods" we go through.

Many ancient stories tell of heroes descending into a dismal and terrifying underworld, facing monsters and unimaginable dangers in order to fulfill a god-inspired mission—Theseus finding his way through the Minotaur's labyrinth, Jonah swallowed by a great fish, Persephone spending half of each year in the awe-full domain of Pluto. Their mission may be survival and a return to the world to complete a service; often, though, the mission is to bring back a treasure, usually something which will serve humanity.

Read at the physical level, these stories strain our imagination and we believe them to be naive and incredible; however, read at the psychological and spiritual level, they are enormously rich accounts of inner experience.

A horrifying NDE typically presents images of deep psychological and spiritual meaning, sometimes images that have occurred in different cultures and religions throughout history. They are incredibly powerful. Adequately understood, the experience may be seen as a gift whose meaning is "the treasure brought back from the deep." It is ironic that Western culture in the past few centuries has tended to see the underworld journey as punishment and warning only, ignoring its sacred potential and the moral and spiritual gift contained within it.

What kind of gift could there be in a terrifying experience?

The "gift" is certainly not a treat, but something that has potential for moving the person toward genuine wisdom and maturity.

A frightening NDE brings a person face-to-face with life's deepest issues—"Who am I?" "What is real?" "What am I so afraid of that I can't even admit to myself what it is?" "Who's in control of my life?" "I am actually going to die."

a. "The experience frightened me so much, I had to turn things around in my life. It's like the person I was before really died in that experience. I wasn't a bad person before, just kind of shallow, looking to be a big success, make a lot of money—you know, the usual things. But in the NDE, everything was out of my control—I was completely helpless. It changed me. I'm still with the company, but everything feels different. I'm different. I like myself better now, somehow. But getting here was the most painful period of my whole life.

b. "My experience was of being x-ed out, just nothing. It took half my life—20 years—before I realized the experience wasn't something terrible coming from outside but a message from someplace real deep, maybe my soul. Maybe God talking through my soul. All those years, I was fighting back against that being x-ed out, refusing to be annihilated. Sometimes it may take that kind of resistance to get us to understand. It forced me to think at a whole new level about life's purpose and value, what is real in my life. I have a much deeper understanding of suffering."

c. "The experience was the most frightening thing that ever happened to me. But years afterwards, I realized that I could get through the fear, that there is light on the other side. It's been tough going, and I don't understand "why me," but there's something important in doing that. I'm still in therapy, still working on it."

Who can help a person understand a frightening experience?

A frightening experience indicates that you have touched aspects of yourself and creation that are difficult to deal with alone. No one approach is right for everyone, but some appear more beneficial than others. Unlikely to be helpful are approaches built exclusively on the medical model of pathology or the theological tradition of vengeance. Ask therapists how much they know about near-death experiences and if they feel able to approach talking about it as a legitimate experience. Work only with someone with whom you are comfortable.

Finding the right person to talk to is not easy. However, listed below are some resources which others have found helpful. IANDS does not endorse any particular referral or approach; these are simply avenues that experiencers have suggested. A person may be profoundly disturbed for reasons other than the NDE; in that case, a medical referral will be most appropriate.

1. A therapist experienced in *post-traumatic stress syndrome* (often someone who works with Vietnam vets) may be helpful, especially for crisis counseling.
2. The *Spiritual Emergence Network* in California is an international referral network of counseling professionals who have had training in dealing with spiritual experiences. Dialing 408-426-0902 will put you in touch with their voicemail service and, at certain hours, a volunteer.

3. A *Jungian therapist* (a professional psychotherapist trained in the techniques of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung) will almost certainly be familiar with working with the images and metaphors of the deep unconscious.
4. Related to this, some experiencers have found the techniques of dreamwork helpful in understanding an NDE. (It is important to explore the symbols and images for yourself. Avoid books—or well-meaning people—claiming to “know” what they mean.)
5. Some clergy are able to provide skillful pastoral counseling, while others have different gifts. A spiritual life center or retreat house may have resources. As with anyone with whom you will share such an important experience, check them out first. It is unhelpful if they leap to the conclusion that you have had a psychotic experience or are in the grip of something evil.
6. Through IANDS, some communities have *support groups* of near-death experiencers who are able to be both supportive and well informed. At the very least, IANDS can put you in touch with another experiencer. (Write to IANDS, PO Box 502, East Windsor Hill, CT 06028.)

Bibliography on Frightening Experiences

Suggesting readings is difficult, as there is, on the one hand, so much; on the other hand, there is so far almost nothing specifically about frightening NDEs. The titles here are general only and include

Campbell, Joseph. *The Power of Myth* (with Bill Moyers). New York: Doubleday, 1988; also widely available on videotapes. The book explores the universal functions of images, mythology, and beliefs. See also Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* or any of the volumes of *The Masks of God*.

Dossey, Larry, MD. *Recovering the Soul*. New York: New York: Bantam, 1989. Any Dossey title is highly recommended.

Grof, Christina and Stanislov Grof, MD. *The Stormy Search for the Self*. Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., 1990. Coping with transformative spiritual experiences. Any Grof title may be helpful, especially *Beyond Death or The Adventure of Self-Discovery*.

Huxley, Aldous. *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell*. One volume. New York: Harper and Row, Colophon Books, 1963. Originated in Huxley's experimentation with mescaline, but his observations apply to other types of experience as well.

James, William. *Varieties of Religious Experience*. One of the great 20th century classics, thoroughly readable. A basic.

Joy, W. Brugh, MD. *Avalanche: Heretical Reflections on the Dark and the Light*. New York: Ballantine, 1990. Joy's quirky, iconoclastic approach to psycho-spirituality here includes an abundance of commentary about the "other side" of the journey.

C.S. Lewis, *Chronicles of Narnia*. A series ostensibly for children, but a brilliant look at the spiritual journey, specifically the Christian. See

especially Chapter XIII, "How the Dwarfs Refused To Be Taken In," in *The Last Battle*, for the best- anywhere discussion of how attitudes color our religious faith and reading of events.

Zaleski, Carol. *Otherworld Journeys*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. Fascinating comparison of medieval and modern NDEs. Widely admired.

Zweig, Connie and Jeremiah Abrams, eds. *Meeting the Shadow*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Perigee, 1991. An excellent, wide-ranging collection of essays. About the best general introduction easily available.

General areas:

The psychological theory of Carl Jung, especially on Self and Shadow, and Eric Ericson, especially on the despair/integration stages of maturity.

Dreamwork techniques. See any basic work (for example, Louis Savary, John A. Sanford, Morton Kelsey, others). Avoid authors who claim to know what your dream symbols "should" mean.

An introduction to the "new physics" to recognize that we are more than lumps of physical "stuff": Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*; Lawrence LeShan, *The Medium, the Mystic, and the Physicist*; Gary Zukov, *The Dancing Wu-Li Masters*.

Michael Harner and Mircea Eliade on shamanic ordeals and the subsequent "rebirth" of individuals as healers and wisdom figures.

The Mystery schools of antiquity with their emphasis on death and rebirth of what we know as ego.

The *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a centuries-old tradition of rituals surrounding dying and describing the territories through which, in Tibetan belief, the soul will go.

The lives of the saints, particularly St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*.

Karl Rahner's ideas on heaven, hell, and purgatory. See Marie Murphy, *New Images of the Last Things* (Paulist Press, 1988)



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*We would appreciate
recommendations of other
pertinent titles.*