



The Aftereffects of Near-Death Experiences on the Lives of Near-Death Experiencers: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Introduction: One of the rare situations that occur at the consciousness level to those who are on the brink of death is a near-death experience (NDE). This experience that contains cognitive, emotional, and psychological elements is associated with profound and relatively present study aimed to investigate and explain the effects of NDEs on the lives of NDErs.

Methods: This qualitative study was conducted using a descriptive phenomenological approach. The participants were 18 people from different cities in Iran who had NDEs. They were selected through purposive sampling from 2017 to 2019. The data were collected via individual tape-recorded in-depth interviews and simultaneously analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step analysis method.

Results: The analysis of the data revealed 216 codes that were classified under 11 thematic codes. In the next step, the extracted codes were further subcategorized under 4 main themes including social aftereffects, religious-spiritual aftereffects, emotional and psychic aftereffects, and the acquisition of transcendental abilities.

Conclusion: NDEs have extensive and long-lasting aftereffects on the individual and social life of NDErs. These changes cause numerous problems for NDErs in their personal life or social relationships. Insight into these changes can positively affect NDErs and other people who interact with them.

Keywords: Near-Death Experience (NDE), Aftereffects, Life changes, Qualitative research

Introduction

Advances in resuscitation equipment have led many individuals to return to life after experiencing clinical death. These individuals speak of distinct cognitive, spiritual, emotional, and psychological experiences that bring about profound and lasting changes in their individual and social lives (1). These experiences are called near-death experiences (NDEs) in the literature. Greyson, a leading NDE psychiatrist, and researcher defined this experience as a profound psychological event with mystical, spiritual, and transcendent components that occur to people who are on the verge of death or in a state of severe physical injury (2). Conditions followed by NDE include cardiac arrest, shock due to heavy bleeding, drowning, suicide, and

coma (3). According to a survey conducted by Gallup Institute in 1980, 5% of the US population, equivalent to 13 million people, had an NDE (4). Perera et al estimated the prevalence of this phenomenon in Australia at 8.9% (5), and Klemenc-Ketis et al estimated the prevalence of NDEs in patients with cardiac arrest to be 11 to 23% (6).

Near-death experiencers (NDErs) described their experience with elements such as leaving the body, feeling calm, feeling dragged into a dark tunnel, meeting people such as known relatives, friends, and religious figures, and sometimes unknown immaterial beings, meeting illuminated creatures, encountering



an irreversible border, generally unwanted return to life, exposure to pervasive knowledge, and experiencing a different time and space (3-7). Research shows that an NDE does not necessarily include all of these elements, and these elements do not occur in a specific order (8). Furthermore, most of the reports released so far about NDEs contain pleasant and positive emotions, and only some of these experiences include scary components along with negative emotions (9).

NDErs mostly talk about the profound effects on their lives after leaving the NDE behind, and most of them think that facing death removed the fear of death in them in an unbelievable way and led to more meaning to their personal life (3,4,10). These changes include increased interest in acquiring knowledge, increased empathy (11), increased self-control and self-esteem (11,12), unwillingness to participate in competitions, changes in individual and social values, and feeling the need to participate more in social activities (11,13), caring for others, a great desire to help others and express love (3), changing attitudes towards life and death (3,13), having a deeper insight and gratitude to life and less interest in materialism and material property (4). Besides, NDErs undergo significant and positive changes in spiritual beliefs, values, and attitudes toward life and death (3,4,14). Studies have shown that many people who had NDE stated that they became more religious and gained a fuller understanding of spiritual or religious insights and their profound impact on life (15).

Some studies have shown the effects of NDEs become more intense and profound over time, and these aftereffects and consequences have been more profound and more lasting in people whose NDEs were deeper and more detailed (16). Furthermore, these changes, which may completely change the personality structure and belief system of NDErs, can induce traumatic stress and conflicts in experiencers and those around them (17).

Given the lack of qualitative studies on the aftereffects of NDEs in Iran and considering the profound effects of these experiences on the individual and social lives of NDErs, deep insights into different aspects of these experiences can help patients to face and accept these changes. Moreover, familiarity with these changes and aftereffects will help relatives and family members of such patients to support them and show more sympathy with them. To this end, using a qualitative research approach, the present study seeks to shed more light on these changes. Given that qualitative research aims to describe and increase the understanding of human experiences and is a way to gain insight through the exploration of meanings

which is otherwise impossible through exploring cause and effect relationships, but by improving the perception of the individual of a phenomenon as a whole, this type of research is inherently explanatory and uses words instead of numbers to describe the phenomenon. Therefore, qualitative research is founded on social realities and the description of human life experiences (18). This approach is used to identify a theory in cases where there is no theory or when existing theories fail to explain the issues (19). Accordingly, this study aimed to explain the aftereffects of NDEs in the individual and social lives of people undergoing such experiences.

Methods

This qualitative study was conducted using a phenomenological approach. The term phenomenology is derived from the Greek word meaning to show, to be seen, and to appear. Phenomenology is essentially the study of the lived experiences or the world of life, and seeks the answer to the question, "What is the structure and nature of the experience of a phenomenon by people?" (20). Phenomenology is used mainly to answer the question of whether the phenomenon in question needs to be clarified. As noted earlier, the aftereffects of NDEs have not been sufficiently elucidated in previous studies. Therefore, a qualitative method was used in the present study to shed light on such experiences. The research population included all people who had an NDE. The Near-Death Experience Scale by Greyson was used to identify NDEs (21). The cut-off point on this 16-item scale is seven and the respondents who score below seven will be excluded from the study. Therefore, 18 people who had near-death experience were selected via purposive sampling from all over Iran as the participants in this study. The inclusion criteria were having undergone NDE, obtaining a score above seven on the Near-Death Experience Scale, being at least 18 years old, having Iranian citizenship, being grown up in Iran, and having the willingness to take an hour interview about the NDE and its consequences and complete the Near-Death Experience Scale. The exclusion criteria based on clinical interviews and statements of caregivers and participants were scoring below seven on the Near-Death Experience Scale, having psychotic disorders, hallucinations, delusions, schizophrenia, not being an Iranian citizen, having substance abuse, and taking hallucinogenic drugs. The selection of the participants continued until no new data was observed in subsequent interviews. The data in this study were saturated with 18 people, but 3 more people were interviewed to ensure the enrichment of the data. Afterward, the interviews were transcribed and coded and the main themes and subthemes were

extracted.

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions. The interviews began with questions such as “What differences have you seen in your life compared to before your NDE?” and “What effects has the NDE had on your life?” The interviews continued with probing questions. The purpose of asking open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews was to encourage the participants to easily verbalize their concerns. The interviews were recorded with the participants’ permission. Immediately upon its completion, each interview was transcribed word for word and coded. Afterward, the next interview was conducted. Each interview lasted 45 to 75 minutes.

The collected data were analyzed based on the questions asked in the interviews. To this end, the transcripts were reviewed several times and the extracted data were analyzed using Colaizzi’s seven-step analysis method. The seven key steps taken in this study were: reviewing and familiarizing with the data, extracting significant statements, formulating meanings from the participants’ statements, organizing the meanings and putting the extracted meanings into clusters of themes, integrating the clusters into a thorough description, establishing the fundamental structure for the developed description, and having the data reviewed and validated by the participants (22). Table 1 displays an example of the main themes extracted through categorizing the subthemes.

The robustness of the data was checked using mixed methods such as semi-structured interviews, review of medical evidence and records (if any), constant involvement of the researcher in the process of data collection, and comparative and continuous analysis of the data. Besides, the credibility of the data was confirmed using repeated reviews, continuous comparison of the data, and summarizing and organizing the data without distorting them. The credibility of the data and the coding procedure was also established through member checking and peer checking. Furthermore, the confirmability of the data was ensured by keeping the evidence and documents used in the study, the researcher’s interest in the phenomenon, and long-term engagement in the data collection procedure, and revising the data by surveying subject-matter experts. In addition, a thorough description of the participants, their characteristics, the steps taken in the study for

data collection and analysis, and examples of the participants’ statements was provided to ensure the transferability of the findings. Moreover, informed written consent was obtained from the participants to conduct the interviews and record their voices. They were also told that they could leave the study at any time they wished and that their personal information would remain confidential.

Results

The participants in this study were 18 NDErs from different cities of Iran including 8 women and 10 men with a mean age of 42 years. Table 2 shows the participants’ demographic characteristics.

The collected data were analyzed using Colaizzi’s seven-step analysis method. All similar codes were categorized into clusters of themes and subsequently categorized into subthemes. Moreover, the thematic clusters were merged into larger categories. Finally, the main themes emerged from the data.

The qualitative analysis of the data revealed 4 main themes including social aftereffects, religious-spiritual aftereffects, emotional and psychic aftereffects, and the acquisition of transcendental abilities from the participants’ statements about their NDEs. Table 3 shows the thematic codes and themes extracted in this study.

Social aftereffects

One of the themes that emerged in data analysis was social aftereffects that were subdivided into two subthemes, i.e. “helping others and improving social relationships” and “avoiding people and seeking isolation”. Most of the participants stated that the NDE caused them to have a more positive attitude towards social relationships and to show more compassion, kindness, and love towards others. For instance, one of the participants stated, “*I was a very isolated person before the experience. But now I tend to be more sociable and outgoing and engage in social activities more frequently. I was very narrow-minded and bigoted, but now I’m not like that at all. Many of my relatives did not even dare to talk to me because we did not agree on ideological issues and I was constantly blaming them. But now we have friendly relationships, we have fun being together, and I don’t judge them anymore*” (Participant 1).

Table 1. An example of the main themes extracted through categorizing the subthemes

Participant code	Subtheme	Main theme
Participant 2	Foresight	The acquisition of transcendental abilities
Participant 6	Transcendental perceptions	

Table 2. The participants' demographic characteristics

Variables	Categories	Number
Gender	Male	10
	Female	8
Age group	18-34	7
	35-64	11
	+65	0
	Highschool diploma	6
Education	Bachelor's degree	9
	Master's degree	1
	Ph.D.	2

Table 3. The main themes and subthemes extracted in this study

Thematic codes	Main themes
Helping others and improving social relationships	Social aftereffects
Avoiding people and seeking isolation	
Declined fear of death	
Strengthening the belief in the Hereafter	Religious-spiritual aftereffects
Participating in religious and spiritual activities	
Gaining insight into the philosophy of creation and life	
Negative emotions after coming back to life	Emotional and psychic aftereffects
Describing the experience and receiving negative feedback from others	
Positive emotions and feelings	
Foresight	The acquisition of transcendental abilities
Transcendental perceptions	

Some of the participants stated that they became more sociable after undergoing the NDE and wanted to help others as much as possible. In contrast, two of the experiencers emphasized that, unlike before, they tended to be away from other people and reduce their social relations. One of the participants stated, “I do not like to greet anyone. I’ve become very reserved. I help my mother a lot. I don’t want to have close relationships with others. Just to be a hello away person. I feel I’m scared of myself so I don’t make friends with anyone. I mean, I’m afraid to say something, well; the other party can’t read my mind and may misunderstand me. I’m afraid that I may say something that is not understood by others and thus hurting their feelings” (Participant 5).

Religious-spiritual aftereffects

The second theme extracted from the participants' statements was the religious-spiritual aftereffects, which was categorized into a couple of subthemes including “declined fear of death”, “strengthening the belief in the Hereafter”, “participating in religious and spiritual activities”, and “gaining insight into the philosophy of creation and life”. The analysis of the statements of almost all participants suggested that an important and effective consequence of their experience was a decline in the fear of death or the discard of this fear: “Before this event, I had a black and horrible view at death, and I believed death leads to nothingness, silence, and emptiness. But after

experiencing this event, my attitude changed completely and I look at it in a beautiful, relaxing, and positive way. I also feel closer to God” (Participant 12).

The participants also stated that they had a stronger belief in the Hereafter after undergoing the NDE. Accordingly, one of the participants said, “After this experience, I also changed ideologically and religiously. My beliefs changed and I became convinced that there was another world to which we would enter after death. Maybe I was praying because I was afraid of it, but my beliefs changed completely and I made sure that the things that are said about the Hereafter must be true” (Participant 13).

Another theme that emerged in this study was the participants' greater interest in attending religious and spiritual activities. As an example, a participant stated, “I was a religious person before the experience, but the experience strengthened my religious character. For example, I used to read Quran less frequently, but now I read the whole Quran. I also say my prayers on time. I have stronger religious beliefs. I feel more like praying. I feel that God calls us during the call to prayer and it’s very bad that we don’t answer this call or give it a cold shoulder” (Participant 16).

The last theme extracted in this study related to religious-spiritual aftereffects was “gaining insight into the philosophy of creation and life”. One of the

participants stated, *"After the experience, I felt I had been brought about here in the world to do something. I mean, I came back to the world to do something important. I even had a very serious accident once. About a minute after the accident, tears welled up in my eyes and I felt this was the last time I could see the things around me. But then I quickly got the sense I had to reach that light. It was like a spark of hope. I was convinced that I should survive as there is still something to be done by me"* (Participant 15).

Emotional and psychic aftereffects

The third theme identified in this study addressed emotional and psychic aftereffects of NDEs from the participants' perspective. These aftereffects included "negative emotions after coming back to life", "describing the experience and receiving negative feedback from others", and "positive emotions and feelings". One of the participants stated, *"I remember being very upset when I came back to life. Then I put my head on the pillow and prostrated and started crying. So much so that my wife woke up and looked at me in astonishment and I was crying and I wanted to be returned and I regretted that I came back but it was my wish to come back. I cried for many days and nights and regretted why I came back to life"* (Participant 14).

Most of the participants stated that one of the challenges faced by them was their decision to share their experience with others or the medical staff. They stated they received negative feedback when sharing their experiences with others. One of the participants stated, *"The worst thing was when I shared my experience with others they ridiculed me and said that they had not heard about these things and they were all nonsense, and this bothered me a lot. I preferred not to say anything to anyone anymore and keep this in my heart"* (Participant 15).

The third subtheme related to the emotional and psychic aftereffects of NDEs addressed positive emotions and feelings. One of the interviewees said, *"I have a good feeling after going through this experience. Now I really like living in the world. I fell in love with living in this world. I even like its misfortunes and calamities. Because I feel that I am a traveler who should live well and enjoy this journey in the best way because there is no return to this world so I'm leading a lovely life"* (Participant 4).

The acquisition of transcendental abilities

The last theme that was revealed from the participants' statements was the acquisition of transcendental

abilities that was subdivided into "foresight" and "transcendental perceptions". Some of the participants stated that they gained mental and emotional abilities after the NDE. These abilities enabled them to do things that did not fall within the material time and space. For example, a participant stated, *"I have a special feeling about the things that will happen in the future, which usually come true but I do not take it too seriously"* (Participant 2).

Concerning transcendental perceptions, only one of the participants stated, *"The most interesting thing was that the day after the experience when I stepped out to take my daughter to the Quran class I heard the sound of prayers from the door and the wall, the ground under my feet and even the small leaves on the trees and emitted light from them that was very beautiful. I understood and saw that the whole universe has consciousness. The entire universe glorifies God Almighty. More interestingly, each element and part of the world was saying glorifying God in their special manner. The trees were repeating Sobhan Allah (Glory be to Allah), the earth was praying La Illah Ila Allah (No God except Allah) and walls were saying Allahu Akbar (Allah is the greatest). In that spiritual and luminous morning, I saw people passing by with the halos of light around them: One with a brighter halo, one with a darker one, a smaller one, another with a wider halo, and others with a gray halo. These sensations lasted for about two months"* (Participant 6).

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the aftereffects of NDEs in the lives of Iranian people. The NDE first scientifically introduced to the world by Moody, is considered a non-physical and purely mental phenomenon that includes components and elements such as the experience of the soul leaving the body, crossing the tunnel, observing bright light, meeting the dead, foreseeing the future, meeting religious people and enlightened beings, facing obstacles and returning voluntarily or compulsorily (13,21-23). The results of numerous studies addressing NDEs have highlighted the lasting and profound effects of this experience on their individual and social lives. The changes that occur through such experiences have been reported to be stable and culture-independent (3,24,25-28). The findings of the present study suggested the aftereffects of the NDE are multidimensional, with different aspects overlapping.

One of the themes identified in this study was related to the social aftereffects of NDEs. Research has shown that one of the most important and

lasting changes in the social life of NDErs is the perception of positive or stressful changes in their social activities and interactions with others (25,26). Corazza and Schifano argued that some NDErs find it very difficult to commit to relationships and jobs before the NDE, and this is annoying for them (11). Christian, for example, found that divorce rates are rising after an NDE. She stated that one of the reasons for this can be the change in life priorities, the type of worldview, and social relations of NDErs, which makes their spouses unable to understand these changes and separate from them (27). Two of the experiencers in the present study stated that after an NDE, they were no longer interested in attending gatherings and establishing intimate and close relationships, and tried to limit their relationships to relatives and close people as much as possible.

However, most of the participants pointed out positive changes in their social lives after undergoing the experience. They said that following the NDE, it became easier for them to interact with others, with a higher ability to love, help and empathize with others. Previous studies have highlighted positive social consequences of NDEs inducing unwillingness to participate in competitions (28), change in individual and social values and feeling the need to participate more in social activities (3,25), increased empathy and concern for others (3,16), a greater desire to help others and express love (29), changing attitudes to life and death (17), insight and a deeper appreciation of life, and less interest in materialism and material property (3,17,25).

The second theme identified in this study was related to religious-spiritual aftereffects that was categorized into a couple of subthemes including “declined fear of death”, “strengthening the belief in the Hereafter”, “participating in religious and spiritual activities”, and “gaining insight into the philosophy of creation and life”. The results of previous studies indicated that most people who experience NDE undergo profound changes in religious and spiritual beliefs (30).

The results of two seminal studies by Lange et al and van Lommel showed that one of the common changes and consequences of NDE is reducing or shedding the fear of death, as found in the present study (30,31). Most participants stated that although they were terrified of death and its remembrance before NDE, they were not afraid of death after undergoing the NDE. Although some experiencers may be afraid of facing the negative and disturbing consequences of their post-mortem behaviors due to the specific

observations they made during the NDE, they are not typically concerned about the phenomenon of death and its process. Another aftereffect of NDEs was having a stronger belief in the Hereafter or life after death. According to Long and Perry, most experiencers, no matter what their religious beliefs were before the NDE, believe after death they will live in space or another dimension that is very different from the terrestrial world (3). The results of the present study indicated that the NDEs were more interested in attending religious and spiritual activities. Previous studies have shown that people who undergo NDEs report some changes in their religious beliefs in two ways. Some turn away from outward rituals and worships and turn to spiritual activities, while others show more interest in performing religious ceremonies and worships. Nevertheless, an important thing is the occurrence of changes that completely alter the religious belief system of experiencers or make their previous religious beliefs stronger and more intense (3,7,10).

The third and final theme related to religious-spiritual aftereffects of NDEs was gaining insight into the philosophy of creation and life. In most of the reports, NDErs stated that they have come up with answers to important ontological questions such as why did we come here? or what is our mission for this life? (32). According to the present study, this discovery was either directly received during the NDE or the experiencer, after returning to worldly life, found these answers in the process of analyzing events during the NDE and thinking about them.

The third main theme found in this study was related to emotional and psychic aftereffects, which fell under three subthemes, i.e. “negative emotions after coming back to life”, “describing the experience and receiving negative feedback from others”, and “positive emotions and feelings”. Immediate and common emotional reactions of NDErs after successful resuscitation operations include feelings of regret, remorse, anger, rage, and aggression toward the medical staff (3,32). Some experiencers become very angry after realizing that they have left the pleasant, enjoyable, and spiritual atmosphere in NDE. Some also regret that they have chosen to return to material life (33). Some of the participants in this study stated that in the early hours and days of resuscitation and coming back to life, they experienced emotions such as regret and remorse, and they were sad and upset that they had returned to this world. Experiencers may also decide to share a description of their

observations and perceptions during NDE with nurses, resuscitation staff, and later with others. However, most experiencers reported that listeners reacted negatively by inattention, judgment, and labeling (25,34). Because of this, and due to the fear of negative reactions, experiencers may keep their experience a secret for a long time and not talk to anyone about it. This makes it difficult to merge the elements and aftereffects of NDEs in the individual and social life of the experiencers (3,11). Over time, however, for many experiencers, the initial negative emotions give way to peace, love, compassion, a sense of oneness with the creatures, and inner joy (34). According to the experiencers, they have perceived the true and pure form of these positive and pleasant feelings in their experience with all their being, and the only thing they can do now is to share them with others (9,25).

The last main theme identified in this study was the acquisition of transcendental abilities. These abilities were subcategorized into foresight and transcendental perceptions. One of the rare consequences of NDEs is the acquisition of spiritual and transcendental capabilities (3,33). Research shows that these capabilities can include the ability to predict, foresight, transcendental perceptions, clairvoyance, occultism, healing, lucid dreaming, and communication with immaterial worlds (35). A small number of participants in the present study stated that after leaving the NDE, they could predict some future events and be informed of events that are not normally possible to be seen with the five senses and only one of the participants in the study pointed to transcendental perceptions. Communicating with spirits and observing the hidden aspects of phenomena and objects are some of the transcendental perceptions reported by NDErs. Researchers have suggested that these phenomena represent one of the most challenging aspects of NDE-induced changes. Researchers have some controversies over the reasons for these phenomena. Besides, experiencers themselves sometimes consider these perceptions as disturbing factors (25,36,37).

One of the limitations of the present study was the possibility of the involvement of some personality traits and past events in causing psychological and personality changes that were difficult or impossible to assess in most cases. Another important limitation that should be taken into account in future studies is the effect of intervening variables such as death anxiety and death consciousness of people who have not had NDE but go through

profound changes and thus their priorities in life change.

Conclusion

The present study showed the NDE leads to special changes and transformations in the individual and interpersonal relationships of experiencers. NDEs can be considered as a kind of spiritual awakening for experiencers changing their life priorities and values. Many of these people have pointed to re-evaluating priorities and adopting a kinder and more humanistic character. Accordingly, in most cases, material things and values are at the lowest level of importance in their life and the experiencer pays less attention to trivial and insignificant issues. Following this experience, the person develops a stronger belief in the mortality and shortness of life in the world and considers their main home to be a more magnificent place. As a result, the person is less concerned with fame, power, and the acquisition of wealth. Of course, for the analysis and etiology of these changes and consequences, the statements and reports of the NDErs must be explored. NDErs believe that this phenomenon is an experience of real death, however brief, that changed their view of the world and revealed a transcendent reality to them. They speak of a deep sense of special significance or destiny, stating that they have a special grace from God along with a deep belief in the afterlife. NDErs believe that the Creator of the world has given them the precious gift of life again for a specific mission and purpose. Perception and understanding of rebirth, which is one of the most important consequences of this experience, plays an essential role in creating changes and transformations in the life and cognitive organization of the experiencer. NDErs strive to know the value of this life and to be grateful for every moment of this divine gift. From an existential perspective, the experience of facing death is in fact a kind of perception and confrontation with one of the most important ends of existence, namely death. Following this event, a subject is experienced that a person tries to suppress, deny and hide in the innermost layers of the mind during his/her life, and then, instead of suppressing and using various defense mechanisms against death anxiety, he/she leads a genuine life and tries to make the best use of the short life opportunity. However, integrating these fundamental changes in the mind and coping with them in daily life is not easy for the experiencers and especially those around them. Awareness and insight into the common consequences of NDE for the person experiencing it and their family members will

facilitate the process of returning to normal life for both groups and will prevent psychological problems and possible damage to their interpersonal relationships. Thus, since NDErs generally avoid sharing their experiences with others especially members of the medical staff and others to evade their judgment, some training programs must be developed and implemented to inform hospital staff about NDE and its elements and consequences. Complementary care methods should also be developed for cardiac arrest survivors, and occupational and trained health care providers who can identify

people with depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and emotional and cognitive problems offer this complementary care to cardiac arrest survivors.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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