

Pilot Study: Near Death and Exceptional Life Experiences

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Introduction

"There is one common element in all near-death experiences: they transform the people who have them. In my twenty years of intense exposure to NDEs, I have yet to find one who hasn't had a very deep and positive transformation as a result of his experience."

-- Raymond A. Moody, M.D.

Near-death experiences are profound and subjective experiences which people report after having been close to death or in situations of intense physical or emotional danger.¹ They are intense psychological events that often transform an individual's life and beliefs.

NDEs have reported over 15 common features of an NDE. These include: a sense of being outside one's physical body; intense emotions; encounters with deceased loved ones, spiritual beings and/or religious figures; a sense of oneness and interconnectedness; a profound sense of peace. The most commonly reported type is characterized by intense feelings of peace, joy and love, and an encounter with an unconditionally loving light.²

According to the 2008 Statewide Suicide Prevention Council, Alaska has been in the "top ten" states for suicides per capita since 1991. Alaskans are immersed in nature almost constantly, but many of the elements and animals are extremely dangerous. Given the kind of lifestyle that is a common aspect of Alaskan culture, I expect to find a high prevalence of persons who have had a near-death experience.

Objectives

The intent of this mixed-methods pilot study is to analyze qualitative and quantitative information gathered from members of the University of Alaska Fairbanks and affiliated community who have undergone a Near-Death Experience. The ultimate goal of this investigation is to catalogue the quantity and quality of NDEs in Alaska and to determine if there are common cognitive, behavioral, and/or affective changes found among this NDE population that is unique to Alaska. The goal of this pilot study is to determine the frequency in occurrence of NDEs among the UAF-affiliated community.

Hypothesis

The environment and lifestyle typical to Alaska contributes to a relatively large population of individuals who have undergone an NDE. There are common cognitive, behavioral, and/or affective changes unique to the Alaska population.

Methods and Materials

Analysis and Data Management

- When the participants responded, they were sent a 20 question screening survey via e-mail
- The interviews were held in a Psychology Department conference room in Gruening
- The survey content was composed of questions related to changes in beliefs and attitudes after the experience
- Research panel independently ranked interviews based on significance of changes, from most significant to least
- Data was stored in a secure location known only by the head researcher
- Participants were assigned identification numbers to protect confidentiality

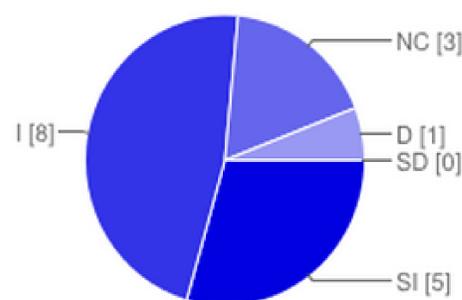
Participants

- Recruitment took place through fliers distributed around campus, announcements within the psychology and sociology departments, a segment on KSUA
- Candidates were UAF affiliated community members who had undergone an NDE or Exceptional Life Experience
- Informed consent was given before surveys and interviews were carried out

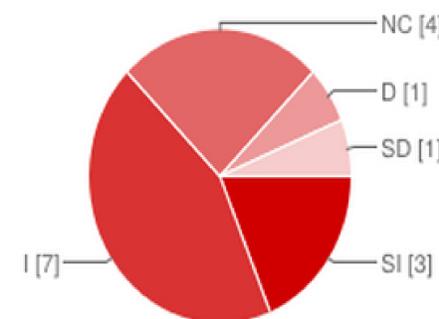
Results

Strongly Increased (SI), Increased (I), Not Changed (NC), Decreased (D), Strongly Decreased (SD)

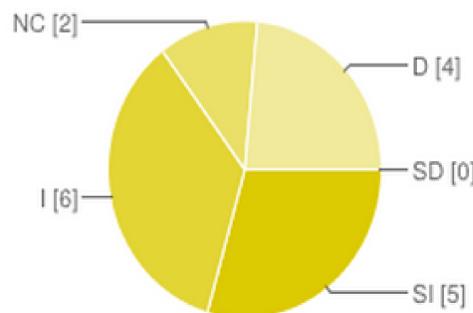
my desire to help others has



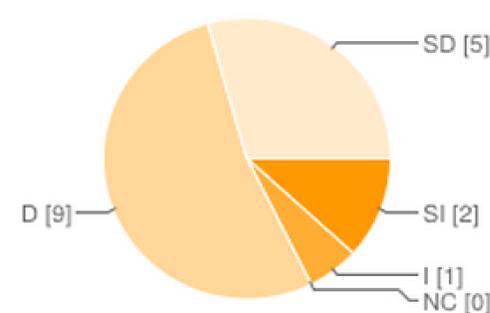
my understanding of "what life is all about" has



my personal sense of purpose in life has



my fear of death has



Interview Quotations:

- "One of the things that happened was I was looking down on myself. I was a blue, white color. I was amazed at how white I was."
- "It was a really inviting bright, totally quiet place. It was just incredibly different."
- "I feel like I've gotten a second chance."
- "I'm not afraid of dying because of [the event]. It was so peaceful. It was like I was going back to a place where everything that was alive at one point had gone."
- "It was like floating on a cloud and I knew everything was all right. And I knew there was a God."
- "I felt really happy, and really confident."
- "I feel my purpose in life is really to help others."
- "It sounded like whispering noise...it didn't really sound like anything. At the time I thought it was like when you hold a shell up to your ear. It was very calming, it felt like I was at the beach."
- "There's just a lot of the little stuff I don't worry about anymore."
- "I'm not religious, but this higher power, this collective idea of togetherness, or something out there that we can't measure...that I don't think anyone can actually identify."

Results Continued

Interview Quotations:

- "It was the St. Pauli girls. Dozens of St. Pauli girls in their little blue dress with white aprons and holding buckets. They're passing these buckets and building a fence with white bricks and red mortar. Somehow I knew that was blood."
- "I feel like as we go through life, task to task, caught up in trivial details, it's easy to overlook that things exist."
- "Through that I really gained a sense of familiarity with people, and more of a sense of unity."

Discussion

The results found during this study are consistent with the findings of previous research regarding changes following Near-Death Experiences. There is a strong correlation ($r=.63$) found between participants and the cognitive, behavioral, and affective changes that followed their experiences. Specifically, there is general agreement that their changes included a significant decrease in the fear of death, an increased sense of purpose in life, an increased concern for others, an increased appreciation for "the ordinary things" in life, an increase in reverence for all forms of life, and a strong increase in concern for spiritual matters.

Limitations

Some of the problems we ran into during the study included not having enough time to recruit the preferred amount of participants. The population size was limited, which made it difficult to gather data from a wider range of experiences. Most of the participants were college students, which may affect the responses found.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the participants for taking their time to contribute their stories and experiences to our research.

We would also like to thank Dr. Billings for his patience and guidance, as well as Teddy Martin for his transcription services.

References

1. Greyson, B. (2000). Near-Death Experiences. In E. Cardena, S. J. Lynn, & S. Krippner (Eds.), *Varieties of anomalous experiences* (p. 315-352). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association
2. Key Facts about Near-Death Experiences - History and Prevalence. (n.d.). *Key Facts about Near-Death Experiences - History and Prevalence*. Retrieved February 19, 2014, from <https://iands.org/about-ndes/key-nde-facts.html?start=1>