

Evidence of the Afterlife

The Science of Near-Death Experiences

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Contents

[Introduction](#)

- [1.](#) First Encounters
- [2.](#) Journey Toward Understanding
- [3.](#) Proof #1: Lucid Death
- [4.](#) Proof #2: Out of Body
- [5.](#) Proof #3: Blind Sight
- [6.](#) Proof #4: Impossibly Conscious
- [7.](#) Proof #5: Perfect Playback
- [8.](#) Proof #6: Family Reunion
- [9.](#) Proof #7: From The Mouths of Babes
- [10.](#) Proof #8: Worldwide Consistency
- [11.](#) Proof #9: Changed Lives

[Conclusion](#)

[Notes](#)

[About the Author](#)

Introduction

*A bit beyond perception's reach
I sometimes believe I see
that Life is two locked boxes, each
containing the other's key.*

—Piet Hein

It was 1984 when I first stumbled upon the phrase *near-death experience* (NDE) in the pages of a medical journal. It was several years later that I heard a friend's wife tell of her own NDE when she nearly died of an allergic reaction while under general anesthetic. More than ten years later, in 1998, I started the Near Death Experience Research Foundation and its corresponding website, NDERF.org.

One of my goals for the site was to collect as many NDEs as I could and to collect them through a questionnaire that would make it easy to separate and study their elements. With such a questionnaire, I could examine the individual elements in NDEs or an entire NDE itself. I expected to be successful in an endeavor, but as it has turned out, I have been *wildly* successful. Over the course of the first ten years, more than 1,300 people who had a near-death experience spent many hours of their precious time answering over one hundred questions in NDERF's detailed questionnaire. These people are of every race, creed, and color and

are from virtually every corner of the world.

That so many people are willing to share their NDEs with others speaks volumes about the power of these experiences in a person's life. Respondents describe their experiences in a variety of ways, calling them "unspeakable," "ineffable," "unforgettable," "beautiful beyond words," and so on. More than 95 percent of the respondents feel their NDE was "definitely real," while virtually all of the remaining respondents feel it was "probably real." Not one respondent has said it was "definitely not real." Some say it was not only the most real thing to ever happen to them but also the best event of their lives. As one respondent who nearly died in a suicide attempt wrote:

I was at peace with myself. Nothing hurt. I could only see my life and self through that Being's Love. There was no negative in myself or from that Being for anything I had done, including killing myself. It [my deed] was changed by the power of the Truth of Love, with which it was seen. That Loving Grace, total acceptance, complete love and truth created a joy in me. I saw that love was in me too, not just from the Being shining down on me; it was in me as part of myself. I was full of love and peace. I felt the joy in that truth. I have no right words for it.

I have seen this type of response from many people with near-death experiences. Imagine that—an experience that begins with the sheer terror of a life-threatening event and evolves into an event of wonder and mystery!

I am a man of science, and as a result I have examined the data from the NDERF study in a

scientific way. At NDERF we explored *all* of the elements in the NDEs of more than one thousand people, examining consistency among the accounts. In reaching conclusions about these accounts, we followed a basic scientific principle: *What is real is consistently seen among many different observations.*

The results of the NDERF study clearly indicate remarkable consistency among NDE case studies. This study finds that what people discovered during their near-death experience about God, love, afterlife, reason for our earthly existence, earthly hardships, forgiveness, and many other concepts is strikingly consistent across cultures, races, and creeds. Also, these discoveries are generally not what would have been expected from preexisting societal beliefs, religious teachings, or any other source of earthly knowledge.

In a world that is plagued by afflictions of the soul, this is very good news. Many of the personal and social problems that face humanity—drug and alcohol abuse, depression, anxiety, gang violence, religious strife, racism, and so on—could be greatly affected by such a powerful common experience. Because NDEs happen to people all over the world, they are a spiritual thread that binds us together, a common experience that reminds us of our mutual spiritual nature. At its very least, the NDERF study contributes information that strengthens our understanding of that spiritual thread.

But the NDERF study is also exceptionally valuable in the way that it brings us closer to understanding what happens when we die. I long ago quit believing that death is the cessation of our

existence. It took me a long time to reach this point. I was born into a scientific family. My father was the chair of the Department of Pharmacology at the University of Iowa and a onetime contender for the Nobel Prize. Through him and others in our family I developed great respect for science.

By scientifically studying the more than 1,300 cases shared with NDERF, I believe that the nine lines of evidence presented in this book all converge on one central point: *There is life after death.*

The convergence of several lines of evidence—like the nine presented in this book—builds a much stronger case than only a single line of evidence.

For example, suppose we had only two lines of NDE evidence. We may not be 100 percent convinced that these two lines of evidence prove an afterlife, but perhaps each line of evidence by itself is 90 percent convincing. Combined, these two lines of evidence by mathematical calculation are 99 percent convincing that the afterlife exists.¹

Given how complex it is to mathematically analyze only *two* lines of evidence, imagine how mind-boggling it would be to mathematically analyze all *nine* lines of NDE evidence. Fortunately, that won't be necessary. The NDERF website includes a custom-designed form that automatically performs these mathematical calculations. This website wizardry allows *you* to calculate for yourself how strongly *you* believe the nine lines of evidence prove the existence of an afterlife. You can also see the results obtained from every other person who has completed this form. This form, and other material supplementing this book, is available on the NDERF website at our page that explores evidence of the afterlife (<http://www.nderf.org/afterlife>).

The form addresses concepts presented throughout this book. Thus I would encourage you to finish reading this book before you complete the form.

WHAT HAPPENS DURING A NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE

Before continuing, I should provide a detailed explanation of what a near-death experience is.

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are events that take place as a person is dying or, indeed, is already clinically dead. People who have NDEs are called near-death experiencers (NDERs). From the time near-death experiences were first medically researched and described by Dr. Raymond Moody in his pioneering book, *Life After Life*, in 1975, medical doctors and other researchers have examined this phenomenon in depth.²

There is no widely accepted definition of near-death experience. The NDERF study took a straightforward approach by defining both the *near-death* and *experience* components of near-death experience. I considered individuals to be “near death” if they were so physically compromised that they would die if their condition did not improve. The NDERs studied were generally unconscious and often apparently clinically dead, with absence of heartbeat and breathing. The “experience” had to occur at the time they were near death. Also, the experience had to be lucid, to exclude descriptions of only fragmentary and disorganized memories.

Throughout this book we will present the results of the NDERF survey. Unless otherwise indicated, these

will be the results from surveying 613 sequential NDErs who completed the most recent version of the NDERF survey.³ This version of the survey included the NDE Scale questions.⁴ The NDE Scale asks sixteen questions about the content of the experience and is the most validated research method to help distinguish experiences that are near-death experiences from those that are not. The 613 NDErs whose survey results we are presenting here all had NDE Scale scores of 7 or above, further validating these experiences as actual NDEs. The original version of the NDERF survey studied responses from 413 NDErs. The NDE Scale questions were not used in the original NDERF survey.

No two near-death experiences are identical. However, when many near-death experiences are studied, a pattern of elements that commonly occurs in NDEs is easily seen. These elements usually occur in consistent order.

Researchers have concluded that NDEs may include some or all of the following twelve⁵ elements:⁶

- **1.** Out-of-body experience (OBE): Separation of consciousness from the physical body
- **2.** Heightened senses
- **3.** Intense and generally positive emotions or feelings
- **4.** Passing into or through a tunnel
- **5.** Encountering a mystical or brilliant light
- **6.** Encountering other beings, either mystical beings or deceased relatives or friends
- **7.** A sense of alteration of time or space
- **8.** Life review
- **9.** Encountering unworldly (“heavenly”) realms

- **10.** Encountering or learning special knowledge
- **11.** Encountering a boundary or barrier
- **12.** A return to the body, either voluntary or involuntary

Below are descriptions of each of these elements from the case studies I have amassed over more than ten years of research, as well as the percentage of NDErs from our study group who experienced each of the elements.

1. Out-of-Body Experience (OBE)

I could feel my spirit actually leaving my body. I saw and heard the conversations between my husband and the doctors taking place outside my room, about forty feet away down a hallway. I was later able to verify this conversation to my shocked husband.

One NDEr observed in the out-of-body state the reaction of the doctor to nearly losing this patient:

Why were you so upset, screaming and swearing in the operating room? Didn't you know that I could hear every word you said?

This NDEr then shared what the doctor responded:

You are right. I was so frustrated and tired and angry in that operating room that I just started screaming when we were losing you. It was either scream or cry. You were dying, and there was not a damned thing that I could do to stop it. I will have to rethink what I say to an unconscious patient from now on, won't I?

Out-of-body experiences are often the first NDE element. The NDERF survey asked 613 NDErs, “Did you experience a separation of your consciousness from your body?”

In response, 75.4 percent answered “Yes.”

2. Heightened Senses

There isn't a way to explain it, as there is no feeling like it here on earth. It was crystal clear. It was like going home at last, at last. A feeling of belonging, of meaning, of completeness.

It just seemed so much more real than anything I had ever experienced in my entire life.

The NDERF survey asked, “How did your highest level of consciousness and alertness during the experience compare to your normal, everyday consciousness and alertness?” Of the NDErs surveyed, 74.4 percent indicated they had “More consciousness and alertness than normal.”

3. Intense and Generally Positive Emotions or Feelings

This is the hardest thing to try and explain... Words will not come close to capturing the feelings, but I'll try: total, unconditional, all-encompassing love, compassion, peace, warmth, safety, belonging, understanding, overwhelming sense of being home,

and joy.

All I felt was love, joy, happiness, and every wonderful emotion you could feel all at once.

Total peace, total calm. I was not in the least bit afraid or anxious.

When we got to the light, the totality of life was love and happiness. There was nothing else. And it was intense. Very intense and endless in scope.

[I felt an e]xtreme sense of love and peace and beauty that I cannot describe in words.

The NDERF survey asked, “Did you have a feeling of peace or pleasantness?” To this question, 76.2 percent selected “Incredible peace or pleasantness.” The NDERF survey asked another question about a specific emotion during the NDE: “Did you have a feeling of joy?” NDErs responded to this question with 52.5 percent selecting “Incredible joy.”

A small percentage of NDEs are frightening to the NDEr. This topic is addressed in detail on the NDERF website.⁷

4. Passing Into or Through a Tunnel

My next awareness was of being submerged and cradled in a warm, wavy, wafting motion at the opening of a tunnel. The tunnel had billowy soft sides and was well lit, with the tunnel dimensions

decreasing and brightness increasing as it got closer to a single bright light.

We traveled very fast into a tunnel. The tunnel was all different colors: blue, yellow, white, green, and red.

The NDERF survey asked, “Did you pass into or through a tunnel or enclosure?” Of NDErs responding to this survey question, 33.8 percent answered “Yes.”

5. Encountering a Mystical or Brilliant Light

A brilliant white light at the end of the tunnel, and when the wings enveloped me I became part of the white light.

A beautiful light drew me to itself; the light still touches me with awe, and tears come immediately.

At first the light was blue. Then it transitioned to white. It was an opalescent white; it almost glowed, but did not shine. It was bright, but not intense bright, like glowing bright—pure bright. Pure but not in the usual sense of the word. Pure as in something you’ve never seen before or could ever describe or put into words.

It was as if we passed through a wall into my light pod directly. There was a large majestic center light and then the individual yet connected pod lights exactly like the center light only smaller. I think now the pod lights, like mine, were other souls connected to the center light, God.

The light may be described as brilliant, “like a million suns,” but virtually never hurts the NDER to look at it. NDERs may dramatically describe their strong attraction to the light and their emphatic desire to approach or merge with the light. The NDERF survey asked, “Did you see a light?” NDERs responded with 64.6 percent answering “Yes.”

6. Encountering Other Beings, Either Mystical Beings or Deceased Relatives or Friends

I was surrounded by other beings, or people, who I felt as though I recognized. These beings were like family, old friends, who'd been with me for an eternity. I can best describe them as my spiritual or soul family. Meeting these beings was like reuniting with the most important people in one's life, after a long separation. There was an explosion of love and joy on seeing each other again between us all.

My dad was right next to me, but I couldn't see him visually. My sister was very close; I felt she was to my left. I felt other family members close by, but I did not see them. My sister and other family members seemed to be more to the left. The only person besides my sister and my dad that I knew was there was my grandmother. There were others there but none I can say for certain besides the ones I mentioned.

I heard my mother's and daughter's voices, but my daughter, who was only approximately two at the time,

well, it was the sound of her voice grown up, but I knew it was her voice. They called my name, and my body moved like through an air current very quickly. It was like the wind carried me so fast, and I saw a bright, bright light very quickly and then a beach, and then I saw my mom and daughter standing on the beach; my daughter was grown up.

The NDERF survey asked, "Did you meet or see any other beings?" In response, 57.3 percent answered "Yes." When NDErs encounter deceased beings, most are deceased relatives as opposed to friends or loved ones. Some NDErs encounter seemingly familiar beings, but they cannot recall having previously met them. Later in their lives some NDErs recognize a picture of a deceased relative as the being they encountered in their NDE. The relative may have died years or even decades before the NDEr was born.

7. A Sense of Alteration of Time or Space

When I first left my body I had my diving watch on. I took some very unscientific measurements of the distance I traveled by watching for features and measuring them by the second hand on my watch. Totally unscientific. But my conclusion was and has always been: I was measuring time in an altered time. The ground never moved in a linear fashion; the distances were erratic at best. The distances were always changing, sometime[s] repeating and then instantly becom[ing] longer or short[er] than the previous distance. Yet my watch was always ticking

without change. My intuition and impression were that I was in a different time zone, one where my earth[ly] watch was of no use or inept at making any measurement or reflecting time. Also without mistake I would say this whole thing took an hour or more. It seemed to me that I was in the NDE for a very long time. But when I asked my diving partners how long had I been unconscious, they estimated five to ten minutes. Thus I had another reason to support why my diving watch didn't seem to measure the time in my NDE.

It seemed as though I experienced so much in such a small length of earthly time. Where my soul had traveled to know nothing of time as we know [of] time passing on earth.

Both time and space in earth stopped completely. Simultaneously, "the time and the space" on the other side was completely alive, evident[ial], and real.

Yes, while I was in the light, I had...[no] sense of time as I know it here on Earth. In other words, no sense of the serial nature of time...past, present, or future. All times (past, present, and future) were experienced at every moment in time while I was in the light.

The NDERF survey asked, "Did you have any sense of altered space or time?" To this question the majority, 60.5 percent, answered "Yes." Another NDERF survey question focused only on an altered sense of time, asking, "Did time seem to speed up?" NDErs responded to this question with 33.9 percent

selecting “Everything seemed to be happening all at once.”

8. Life Review

I saw my life flash before me shortly after I left my body and was still in the hospital room. I was told that I was going to help educate and teach many people, and that is exactly what I am doing now.

I saw every important event that had ever happened in my life, from my first birthday to my first kiss to fights with my parents. I saw how selfish I was and how I would give anything to go back and change.

Next he showed me my life review Every second from birth until death you will see and feel, and [you will] experience your emotions and others that you hurt, and feel their pain and emotions. What this is for is so you can see what kind of person you were and how you treated others from another vantage point, and you will be harder on yourself than anyone to judge you.

I will not see what others have done to you. I will see what you have done to others.

Life reviews involve a review of prior events of the NDER's life. Fragments of one's earthly life may be seen, or the review may be panoramic, covering all of one's earthly life. The NDERF survey asked, “Did you experience a review of past events in your life?” To that question, 22.2 percent of NDERs answered “Yes.”

9. Encountering Unworldly (“Heavenly”) Realms

Well, the end of that tunnel was the most peaceful place; it was beyond my imaginings, pure, serene, and loving.

The landscape was beautiful, blue skies, rolling hills, flowers. All was full of light, as if lit from within itself and emitting light, not reflecting it.

There was such beauty, beautiful beyond expression. There was also a bright city or something like a city in the distance. The colors and structures of everything [were] beautiful...awesome.

All around me I could see and feel a beautiful peace and tranquillity with love and peace.... As far as the eye could see to my left was a beautiful landscape of tulips of every color imaginable. To my right was a wall of a beautiful blue that matched the sky.

The sound of that music I cannot possibly describe with words because it simply cannot be heard with that clarity in this world! The colors were out of this world—so deep, so luminous, so beautiful!

The NDERF survey asked, “Did you see or visit any beautiful or otherwise distinctive locations, levels, or dimensions?” To this question 40.6 percent of NDErs chose “Yes.”

Asking this question in a more general way, the

NDERF survey asked, “Did you seem to enter some other, unearthly world?” To this question 52.2 percent of NDERs responded that they encountered an unearthly realm.

10. Encountering or Learning Special Knowledge

When I looked into his eyes all the secrets of the universe were revealed to me. I know how everything works because I looked into his eyes for a moment. All the secrets of the universe, all knowledge of all time, everything.

I understood (I use this term because I did not actually hear) the colored drops were the experiences of all who had lived. The experiences existed as separate items yet belonged to the whole. The whole was the collective knowledge of all.

The NDERF survey asked, “Did you have a sense of knowing special knowledge, universal order, and/or purpose?” To this question 56.0 percent of NDERs answered “Yes.” Another question asked, “Did you suddenly seem to understand everything?” To this question, 31.5 percent responded that they seemed to understand everything “About the universe,” and 31.3 percent responded that they seemed to understand everything “About myself or others.”

11. Encountering a Boundary or Barrier

On my side of the boundary, time seemed to go slow

On the other side, time went by faster.

There was this door in front of me with this music coming out and people celebrating with utter joy that I knew and recognize[d] as home. Once [I] crossed, I couldn't come back.

I reached the point where I felt I had to make the choice whether to go back to life or onward into death. My best friend was there (who had died of cancer two years before), and she told me that this was as far as I could go or I would not be able to turn back. "You have come to the edge. This is as far as you can go," she said. "Now go back and live your life fully and fearlessly."

I wasn't allowed to cross that boundary. There was no choice.

The NDERF survey asked, "Did you reach a boundary or limiting physical structure?" To this question 31.0 percent of NDErs answered "Yes."

12. A Return to the Body, Either Voluntary or Involuntary

I remember as I looked down at them, I said to the angel, "Why don't they just let her die?" I did not realize, at that time, the body that I was looking at was mine. Then in a commanding voice, she [the angel] said, "You must go back now"..."She must live," she said in a soft calming voice. "She has a son to raise."

I was really hurt that I couldn't stay because there wasn't anything that I wanted more than to stay. Pure love is the best way to describe the being and place that I would be leaving. Under protest, I was sent back.

I found out that my purpose now would be to live "heaven on earth" using this new understanding, and also to share this knowledge with other people. However, I had the choice of whether to come back into life or go toward death. I was made to understand that it was not my time, but I always had the choice, and if I chose death, I would not be experiencing a lot of the gifts that the rest of my life still held in store. One of the things I wanted to know was that if I chose life, would I have to come back to this sick body, because my body was very, very sick and the organs had stopped functioning. I was then made to understand that if I chose life, my body would heal very quickly. I would see a difference in not months or weeks, but days!

The NDERF survey asked, "Were you involved in or aware of a decision regarding your return to the body?" To this question, 58.5 percent answered "Yes."

EXPERIENCE PROVIDES THE BEST EVIDENCE

As far as I'm concerned, it makes perfect sense that the best evidence for understanding what happens when we die would come from those who actually *did* nearly die or even experienced clinical death. This

common sense perspective is certainly validated in the NDERF study. The substantial majority of people who had a near-death experience believe their NDEs are real and are evidence of an afterlife. For NDErs, having a near-death experience is their personal proof of both the reality of the NDE *and* an afterlife.

In science, confirming the reality of a concept generally comes not from a single observation or study but from many independent studies with different methodologies. This cross-checking among scientific studies has always been the foundation for validating scientific discoveries. Thus it is vitally important to note that the NDERF study findings are corroborated by hundreds of prior NDE studies conducted by scores of NDE researchers. Throughout this book we cite many major NDE studies by other researchers. These other studies almost always make the same observations and come to the same conclusions as the NDERF study. This adds to the converging lines of evidence that lead me to conclude: *There is life after death.*

I know this belief takes me out on a limb. Despite a recent poll by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life that shows 74 percent of Americans believe in life after death, I also know that this belief is often attributed to people with deep religious conviction.⁸ I want to make it clear that I am both a scientist *and* a believer in life after death.

I have reconsidered much of what I was taught in medical school. This reconsideration began many years ago, when NDERF had just started. I was in the medical library searching fruitlessly for information about near-death experiences. It was unusually quiet that day, and as I sat amid tens of thousands of books and journals, I easily became lost in my thoughts. At my

fingertips were the greatest medical and scientific studies and concepts in the world. Yet as I searched them, I found that the answer to the mystery of near-death experiences was not here. In the collective knowledge around me from the world's greatest doctors and medical scientists, I could find precious little to help me fully understand the near-death experience.

I left the medical library with the question I had come in with: *What's the key to understanding near-death experiences?*

Later the answer came to me. It was so simple, yet it required a mind-set different from the one cultivated in my academic training. The answer: listen, and listen *carefully*, to the people who have gone through a near-death experience. They surely are one of the best sources for understanding what awaits us at the brink of death and beyond. Since realizing that fact, I have never looked back. Near-death studies focus on stories and the people who tell them. It is through these people and their stories that answers to many important questions about mortality may be found.