

Negative Near-Death Experiences¹

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I. Absence of negative NDE reports: 1975–2003 [DW, pp. 65–66, 70–71, DN, p. 210]

A. Early phenomenological reports of NDEs did not include negative-type near death experiences: Raymond Moody, *Life After Life* (1975); Bruce Greyson and Ian Stevenson, “The Phenomenology of Near-Death Experiences,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* (1980); Kenneth Ring, *Life at Death* (1980); Michael Sabom, *Recollections of Death* (1982).

B. Moody, *Reflections on Life After Life* (1977): Moody claimed he never heard an NDE account that featured an archetypal hell.

C. Ring, *Life at Death* (1980) provided the first quantitative study of NDEs. 49 participants. No one described a *mainly* unpleasant experience. Ring distinguished between infrequent negative hallucinatory visions, which might accompany an NDE, and the core NDE. In *Heading Toward Omega* (1984) Ring claimed that he had never found a full-blown negative NDE.

D. Cherie Sutherland, *Transformed by the Light* (1992): None of Sutherland’s 50 interviewed cases involved distressing NDEs.

II. Prior reports of distressing NDEs [DW, pp. 66–70, DN pp. 210–214]

A. Religious Literature and NDEs: Literature in the western and eastern religious traditions provides many accounts of negative afterlife encounters, e.g., *Arda Viraf* (Zoroastrianism), *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Buddhism). For accounts in medieval Christian literature, see C. Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys* (1987).

B. Maurice Rawlings, *Beyond Death’s Door* (1978) provided detailed accounts of negative, even hellish, NDEs. Rawlings’s work was largely ignored because of his fundamentalist Christian background.

C. Michael Sabom 1982 reported that 18% of NDE subjects claimed *temporary* fright or bewilderment but subsequent tranquility. So these cases were not classified as NDEs of a negative *type*.

¹ Except where otherwise noted, outline is based on Bruce Greyson and Nancy Evans Bush, “Distressing Near-Death Experiences” in *The Near Death Experience: A Reader*, ed. Lee W. Bailey and Jenny Yates (N.Y.: Routledge, 1996), originally published in *Psychiatry* (1992), 55:95–110 [DN in outline, page numbers correspond to 1996 republication] and Nancy Evans Bush, “Distressing Western Near-Death Experiences: Finding a Way Through the Abyss,” in *The Handbook of Near-Death Experiences* (Praeger, 2009) [DW in outline].

D. Some studies prior to 1982 indicate roughly 20% of NDE subjects interviewed had at least a partially negative experience. Garfield study: 36 subjects, 8 with nightmarish experiences, 4 with mixed experiences. Lindley, Bryan, and Conley (Evergreen Study): 55 NDE subjects, 11 experiences that were partially negative, and only 1 was hellish.

1. C. Garfield, "More Grist for the Mill: Additional Near-Death Research Findings and Discussion," *Anabiosis* [East Peoria] 1 (1) (1979), pp. 5–7.

2. J.H. Lindley, S. Bryan, and B. Conley, "Near Death Experiences in Pacific Northwest American Population: the Evergreen Study," *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 1 (1981), pp. 104–124.

E. G. Gallup and W. Proctor published *Adventures in Immortality* (1982) based on a 1980–81 poll conducted by the Gallup Organization. According to their study 15% of their participants reported NDEs, but only 1% of NDErs reported a sense of hell or torment.

F. M. Grey studied 41 NDErs. 5 (12%) reported negative NDEs, including feelings of extreme fear or panic, emotional or mental anguish, and desolation, with a dark or gloomy environment, and in some cases a "hell-like" experience involving a sense of an evil presence and demonic creatures. So there is clearly a *range* of negative NDEs, and Grey also discovered that negative NDEs followed a particular *sequence*: (1) fear and panic, (2) out-of-body experience, (3) entering darkness, (4) sensing an evil force, and (5) entering a hellish environment. The sequence resembles positive NDEs. See M. Grey, *Return from Death* (1985).

G. According to W. Serdahely, 33% of 12 examined NDErs reported "frightening, scary, and unpleasant" NDEs. See Serdahely, "Variations from the Prototypic Near-Death Experience," *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 13 (1995), pp. 185–96.

H. 2001 German Study: 82 respondents, 4% reported NDEs. West German NDErs 60% positive, 29% negative; East German NDErs, 40% positive, 60% negative. See H. Knoblauch, I. Schmied, and B. Schnettler, "Different Kinds of Near-Death Experiences," *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 20 (2001), pp. 15–30.

III. Summary of reports of negative NDEs [DW, pp. 70–71]

A. Comparisons: 9 studies with 459 experiencers: no accounts of distressing NDEs. 12 studies with 1,369 experiencers: 315 people (23%) reported negative NDEs (disturbing, terrifying, or despairing)

B. N.E. Bush: "Distressing NDEs are more common than has been thought, with a percentage possibly in the mid- to high teens" (DW, p. 81)

C. Reasons for the non-reporting of negative NDEs

1. Potential Bias against negative NDEs perhaps perpetuated by early criteria of NDEs. NDE scales developed by Kenneth Ring and Bruce Greyson in the 1980s involved criteria such as feelings of joy and cosmic unity.

2. Subjects may be reluctant to report negative NDEs.
3. Negative NDEs may in fact be rare.

IV. Phenomenological types of distressing NDEs [DN, pp. 214–23, DW, pp. 71–4]

Based on 50 accounts of negative NDEs, Greyson and Bush distinguish three kinds of negative NDEs (Greyson, Evans, 1992, 1996)

- A. Prototypical NDEs Interpreted as Terrifying: subjects experience features of generic NDEs (e.g., brilliant light, tunnel, encounter with persons) but the subject interprets the experience as a negative one. Largest subgroup. (DN, pp. 214–218, DW, p. 71).
- B. Experience of Nonexistence or Eternal Void: subjects experience a sensation of cessation of existence, or are confronted with the unreality of their lives and the world. These experiences involve fewer prototypical NDE elements. (DN, pp. 218–223, DW, 71–2).
- C. Experience with Hellish Imagery: subjects experience a hellish environment involving a dark pit or cave, demonic entities, and souls suffering various torments. (DN, pp. 223–225, DW, p. 72)

V. Other salient points

- A. There is no evidence that NDE subjects are mentally unstable, even those who experience negative NDEs.
 1. Gabbard and Twemlow, *With the Eyes of the Mind: An Empirical Analysis of Out-of-Body States* (Praeger, 1984).
 2. Locke and Shontz, "Personality Correlates of the Near-Death Experience: A Preliminary Study." *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 77 (1983), pp. 311–318.
- B. The religious belief system of the subject does not seem to influence the content of NDEs (positive or negative), though the subject's belief system is influenced by the experience.

Greyson, "Near-Death Experiences Precipitated by Suicide Attempts: Lack of Influence of psychopathology, religion, or expectations." *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 9 (1991), pp. 183-188.
- C. Cultural conditioning: The *content* of NDEs is culturally conditioned to an extent, but the *interpretations* are clearly culturally conditioned. (DW, p. 81)
- D. NDEs (negative or positive) are not directly linked to medications or medical procedures.
- E. Psychological and physiological explanations of NDE phenomena are limited and presently fail to adequately account for all features of the experience.

VI. The afterlife as a projection of the mind²

A. Oxford philosopher H.H Price argued that the afterlife could be considered analogous to the dream world experience of living persons. Just as dreams are built up from imagery acquired during the waking state and shaped by our desires and waking state experiences, the afterlife could be a similar kind 'mental projection.'

B. H.H. Price. "Survival and the Idea of 'Another World.'" *Proceedings of the Society of Psychical Research*, 50, Part 182 (1953), pp. 1-25.

C. The NDE experience is unconsciously constructed from memories and desires acquired during our life.

D. Negative NDEs may be the product of acknowledged or repressed feelings of guilt, fear of dying, inability to let go of life, and so forth. (Should there be more negative NDEs than are actually reported?)

² Not based on either DW or DN.