

RESEARCH BRIEF

Intended Audience: Researchers, Clinicians, General

Impacts of the NDE on Non-NDEers

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Traditionally, the study of the near-death experience (NDE) has focused on the NDE narrative itself. More recently researchers focused on the aftereffects of the NDE, attempting to describe how a person changes after having such an experience. Occasionally the focus became how to help the individual who has had the NDE, how the NDE varies across cultures, and how learning about the NDE influences the learners' attitude toward and basic understanding of the experience. However, both Kenneth Ring and I have studied the direct impact of an individual who has had an NDE (an NDEr) on someone who has not (a non-NDEr) (e.g., Ring, 1995; Rominger, 2009). Why this effect has not been studied more, as well as what we might further discover if we do study this effect, remain questions ever present in my mind.

Cognitive Changes

A number of cognitive changes have been reported by non-experiencers, generally after an individual has either learned about the near-death experience, such as in a class, or encountered a person who has had an NDE and then shares her or his experience. After their learning, people reported changing in ways similar to how many NDErs change after the NDE. Ring's students reported a more positive view of death; an increased belief in the authenticity of the NDE, the afterlife, and the purposefulness of life; and increased spiritual orientation. Ring indicated he

believed the strongest influence on the students was the first-hand interaction with people who had an NDE.

In my study, participants reported similar changes after they participated in group expressive art and spiritual direction along with individuals who had an NDE. These individuals reported contemplating spirituality more, understanding there is a great variety of NDEs, learning how common NDEs are, and better understanding their own personal life-changing events. In one case, a “non-experencer” discovered she had an empathic NDE several years prior. Additionally, individuals reported an overall change in perspective toward those who report having had an NDE.

Emotional Changes

Along with changes in thought patterns, changes in emotional patterns have been reported. Ring’s students reported a decreased fear of death. Individuals in my study felt a greater connection with people who reported NDEs, an increased appreciation for the NDE and for the person who has had the experience, and, in some, increased positive emotions (love, caring) toward one’s own family. Additional emotional effects appeared to be a general increased sense of openness, validation, confirmation, love, and self-acceptance. One individual in my study reported, “I feel like a different human being after the group... feels like my words aren’t even touching my experience. The experience was very profound for me, hearing those stories. And I just don’t feel the same.”

Changes in Spirituality

Encountering the NDE narrative, especially as heard from the NDEr, may also change a non-NDEr’s spiritual orientation, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. As noted above, Ring’s students reported an increase in purposefulness in life, decreased fear of death, and increased belief in the afterlife, all of which can be correlated with spiritual beliefs. The participants in my study who had not had an NDE reported similar, and more extensive, changes. Simply put by one individual, “It helped me grow in my spirituality.”

Potential Neurological Changes

Considering the changes in cognition, emotion, and spiritual attitudes and beliefs, one must naturally consider the potential changes occurring in the brain. In particular, recent research regarding the mirror neuron system indicates that humans may be influencing each other at a neurological level. The mirror neuron system is a system of neurons within the brain that become active when a person either sees another person take action in the world (like picking up a tool) or when a person shares a particularly emotional life event. While seeing the action or hearing of the emotional event, various areas of the brain become active, and these happen to be the same areas that are active within the original individual's brain. The hypothesis is that through hearing an event our brain is activated in much a similar way, and thus we have a neurological basis for empathic connection with the teller. This provides a neuro-social interaction wherein the one hearing the event is, in a small way, actually "experiencing" the event at a micro-neurological level.

Applied to near-death experiences, when an individual who has had an NDE shares the experience, the question becomes: do certain areas of the brain become active in the listener, indicating some similar internal, neurological, empathic experience? If so, then NDErs are directly influencing non-experiencers at a neurological level. In this case, the one who is listening could be feeling the near-death experience subjectively, although on an obviously much smaller scale. Additionally, how long might these effects last? While research does not yet exist for the influence of NDErs on non-experiencers at the neurological level, I suspect this influence might be occurring and I have proposed research in this area.

Conclusions

One caveat with this phenomenon revolves around influence of the researchers and the context within which the study was conducted for both Ring's and my own studies. Ring conducted his study with his students, which may have led to inflated responses from the students desiring a "good grade." My own study was conducted within the guise of spiritual direction, and, like therapy, there is an expectation of change. Due to this expectation and the spiritually oriented environment, the participants may have unintentionally exaggerated changes in spirituality, cognition, and emotion.

Even with the above caveat, it is entirely possible individuals who have had an NDE, or any type of dramatic exceptional human experience, may influence a person who has not had the experience. I invite you to think back on your own experience of learning about a powerful, life-changing experience. The shared narrative of that experience, especially when it is something like the NDE, challenges one's own belief system, raises questions regarding the afterlife, and invites dialogue of things "not of this world." Because of this, NDEs, those who experience them, and how they affect others become rich areas of exploration.

References


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