

NDERF Fact Sheet

What exactly is a near-death experience (NDE)?

Prepared for public education and research literacy (NDERF.org)

Why NDE is a vitally important topic

Millions of people around the world have experienced NDEs, which are discussed as significant scientific evidence for life after death and the existence of God. NDEs, first described over 50 years ago, cannot be accounted for by physical brain function, psychological reactions, or cultural beliefs.

At-a-glance definition

NDERF research definition: An NDE is “a lucid experience associated with perceived consciousness apart from the body occurring at the time of actual or threatened imminent death.” [1,2]

In plain language: About 10-20% of people who survive a close brush with death report a clear, memorable experience often involving a sense of separation from the body, unusual clarity, and features consistently described across NDEs across all age groups and around the world. [1–4]

1. What an NDE is (and what it is not)

A near-death experience (NDE) is a recalled pattern that follows a life-threatening crisis involving loss of consciousness or clinical death. Most experiencers describe it as unusually lucid, organized, and emotionally intense. Most experiencers describe the episode as unusually lucid, organized, and emotionally powerful. [1–4]

Key features of the definition used in NDERF research include: [1,2]

- Lucidity: the experience is often described as clear, coherent, and highly memorable.
- Perceived consciousness apart from the body: commonly includes a sense of being located outside the physical body (often described as an out-of-body experience).
- Near-death context: the experience occurs during actual or threatened imminent death.

An NDE is not defined by any one single event that occurs during the experience (for example, a tunnel or a bright light). Experiences vary significantly in content, even while sharing a recognizable overall sequential pattern. [5]

People sometimes use “NDE” to describe other unusual experiences (for example, vivid dreams, spiritual experiences, or non–life-threatening out-of-body experiences). Those experiences can be very real, meaningful, and life-changing, but they are not “near-death experiences” as defined in research. [1,6]

2. Commonly reported elements

NDEs can include many different elements. In both large narrative collections (including NDERF) and prospective hospital studies, commonly reported elements include: [3,4,7]

- A sense of peace or well-being (though not always).
- A separation of consciousness from the body (out-of-body experience, OBE).
- Enhanced clarity, vivid perception, or a sense of “more real than real.”
- Encountering a light or a radiant presence; sometimes “beings” or deceased loved ones.
- A life review, which may be a panoramic memory.
- A boundary or “point of no return,” followed by return to the body.
- Altered experience of time (timelessness, time dilation, or absence of time).

No NDE feature is universal. People may report few or many features. The sequence of NDE elements is broadly consistent, though the order can vary. [5]

3. How NDEs are studied and measured

Because the term "near-death experience" is often used loosely, researchers use standardized tools and criteria to improve study consistency. [6]

Common tools include:

- Greyson Near-Death Experience Scale (1983): a 16-item instrument designed to help distinguish NDEs from non-specific stress responses and related conditions. This is the most commonly used scale in NDE research. [8]
- Near-Death Experience Content (NDE-C) scale (2020): developed to quantify NDE phenomenology more comprehensively and support reproducibility across assessors. This is the most recently developed scale, but it is not widely used. [9]

Prospective hospital-based studies (for example, in cardiac arrest survivors) interview patients after resuscitation using structured methods. These studies suggest that a minority of survivors report experiences consistent with NDEs, though reported rates vary by study design and measurement. [7,10,11]

4. What NDERF contributes

NDERF collects structured survey responses and detailed narratives from experiencers who choose to share their accounts. Peer-reviewed work using NDERF data highlights recurring features, such as reports of unusual lucidity and “enhanced consciousness,” often occurring when the person was medically compromised; cross-cultural consistency; and substantial changes in values and beliefs after the NDE. [3]

Practically, NDERF contributes by providing:

- Large-scale descriptive data: thousands of narratives that help document the range and consistency of reported features. [3,12]

- A standardized core definition and structured questions that support systematic analysis. [1,2]
- International accessibility through over 30 different language options, supporting cross-cultural engagement and research collaboration. [13]

NDERF collects structured survey responses and detailed narratives from those who share their accounts. Peer-reviewed work using NDERF data highlights recurring features: unusual lucidity with enhanced consciousness during medical compromise; cross-cultural consistency; and major changes in values and beliefs after the NDE.

[6,7]

5. What can be said with confidence (and what remains uncertain)

Researchers generally agree on several points:

- NDEs are real experiences to the people who report them, typically remembered as vivid and meaningful. [3,4]
- NDE reports show recurring patterns across large datasets and many contexts, while still having some variability across reports. [4,5]
- Clear definitions and standardized measurements are essential to avoid mixing NDEs with unrelated experiences. [6,8,9]

6. If you (or someone you care about) had an NDE

Many people feel comforted by an NDE, while others may feel confused, isolated, or distressed. If the experience is troubling or disruptive, consider talking with a trusted clinician, counselor, chaplain, or a support community familiar with NDEs. NDERF always welcomes those willing to share their NDEs ([NDERF : Share your near death experience](#)). [6,7]

References (with links)

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