

# NDERF Fact Sheet

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## What are the most typical features of an NDE (and what's the “core pattern”)?

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

### Why typical NDE features and the “core pattern” are vitally important topics

People often hear about a single NDE feature (for example, “a tunnel” or “a light”) and wonder whether that element defines an NDE. In reality, near-death experiences (NDEs) are multi-featured experiences. Many features are commonly reported, but no single feature occurs in every NDE, and the order of features varies across individuals. NDERF and the peer-reviewed literature both emphasize that NDEs show recognizable recurring characteristics while remaining highly individualized. No two NDEs are the same. [1–3,8,9]

A careful, scholarly answer also recognizes that distressing NDEs occur and are well described in the literature, even though public discussion often focuses on peaceful experiences. [11,12]

### At-a-glance summary

Typical NDE features commonly include: profound peace or other intense emotion; altered time; heightened clarity; out-of-body experience (OBE); a sense of movement or passage (often described as darkness or a tunnel); encounter with a light; meeting beings or deceased loved ones; a life review; a boundary or “point of no return;” and return to life. [1–3,8,9]

The “core pattern” is best understood as an idealized prototype: a cluster of features that recur often enough to form a recognizable pattern, not a rigid script every NDE follows. [10]

### 1. What “typical features” means in NDE research

In research, NDE “features” are usually assessed using either (a) narratives that are coded into themes or features, or (b) standardized scales. The most widely used standardized instrument is the Greyson Near-Death Experience Scale (NDE Scale), which samples multiple domains (cognitive, affective, paranormal, and transcendental) and helps standardize identification of NDEs for research. [4,5,9]

Because methods differ across studies (population, timing of interviews, coding strategy, and measurement tool), the reported frequency of any single feature can vary. Nevertheless, across methods, a familiar cluster of recurring features repeatedly appears. [3,8,9]

### 2. The most typical NDE features (organized as a practical “core cluster”)

A. Affective and consciousness features (often central)

- Intense peace, joy, love, or well-being (though not always). [1–3]
- Unusually clear, lucid awareness; many experiencers describe the experience as exceptionally vivid or “more real than real.” [1,3,9]
- Altered experience of time (time slowing, stopping, or losing meaning). [1,5]

#### B. Separation from the body and non-ordinary perception

- Out-of-body experience (OBE): consciousness located outside the physical body, often including perceived observation of the body or surroundings. [1–3,5]

#### C. Transition imagery

- Movement or passage (often described as darkness or a tunnel), sometimes toward a light, destination, or an approaching presence. [1,8]

#### D. Encounter-related features

- Encounter with a bright light or luminous presence. [1–3]
- Encounter with deceased loved ones or other beings. [1,3,9]
- A distinct environment or “realm,” often described as coherent and meaningful. [1,9]

#### E. Review/meaning features

- Life review (partial or panoramic), sometimes described as vivid and morally or relationally significant. This may be a review of part or even all of prior life events. [1–3,5]
- Insight or direct knowing (often described as profound understanding). [1,5,9]

#### F. Boundary and return

- A boundary or “point of no return,” followed by return to life. [1,8]
- Return is sometimes described as a decision, a sense of obligation, or an instruction that it is “not your time.” [1,3,9]

### 3. What is the “core pattern” of an NDE?

In scholarly terms, a “core pattern” is best used to mean an idealized prototype rather than a mandatory script. A multidisciplinary consensus statement on studying recalled experiences in proximity to death describes typical narrative elements in an “idealized manner,” emphasizing the importance of careful definitions and methodology. [10]

Sequence studies support this nuanced view: some consecutive sequences are observed frequently (for example, OBE → tunnel → light → peace), but even the most frequently observed sequences appear in only a minority of narratives. This indicates a recurring prototype without a universally fixed order. [8]

A practical, evidence-aligned summary of a common NDE “core pattern” is:

1. Shift in consciousness (lucidity; altered time; powerful emotion such as peace).
2. Separation from the body (often an OBE).
3. Transition (movement/passage; sometimes darkness/tunnel).
4. Encounter (light; beings/deceased; environment).
5. Meaning (life review and/or insight).
6. Boundary and return (limit reached; return to life).

#### 4. How common is each feature? What research can responsibly say

Exact percentages for each feature vary substantially across studies due to differences in populations (general public vs. specific medical cohorts), interview timing, and methods of feature identification. Still, several prospective clinical studies provide illustrative figures for the distribution of commonly reported elements. [6,7]

For example, in a prospective cohort of resuscitated cardiac arrest survivors, a subset of patients reported NDEs and described multiple familiar elements. In that cohort, positive emotions and awareness of being dead were common, while other elements, such as tunnel experiences, meeting deceased persons, celestial landscapes, out-of-body experiences, life reviews, and boundaries, occurred in smaller proportions. Such findings are best understood as cohort-specific estimates rather than universal constants. [6,7]

#### 5. Bottom line

NDEs show a recognizable cluster of recurring features across NDERF accounts and peer-reviewed research, but no single feature defines every NDE, and the sequence varies. The most responsible meaning of a “core pattern” is therefore an idealized prototype—a common, recurring structure—rather than a rigid checklist or fixed storyline. [1–3,8–10]

#### References (with links)

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