

AFTER, by Dr. Bruce Greyson, a Book Report
by David G. Schwartz, M.D., Part II
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In this episode we explore what Near Death Experiences reveal about the relationship between the mind and the brain, the continuation of consciousness after death, and the profound beneficial changes that occur in people's lives afterward. Space does not allow me to detail the dazzling, utterly beautiful, and amazing experiences people have in their NDE's, and so I recommend reading the book yourself, and also Dr. Eben Alexander's account of his NDE in Proof of Heaven. Also Anita Moorjani's book, Dying to Be Me, about her experience healing herself from terminal metastatic breast cancer after coming back, and amazing her doctors who never expected that this was possible. These are some of the many startling accounts of these experiences.

So in Dr. Greyson's scientific endeavor, he was still bothered by questions of whether these NDE's could be reflections of dying people's hopes and aspirations, and some of his medical colleagues dismissed NDE's as mere fantasies. Many things throughout history like meteorites, germs, etc., had been considered to be fantasy and not worth studying. The author wanted his investigation to be based on rigorous observations, credible evidence, and sound reasoning.

Neuroscientists' view is that the mind is produced by the physical brain. This model is useful *only under certain conditions*, but not with NDE's, when consciousness continues after the brain has shut down. The model must be refined to accommodate things like NDE's. Just as the nuclear physicists discovered that Newtonian physics was inadequate to accommodate relativity and quantum mechanics, new models are needed also to describe NDE's. The reality of NDE's does not require a prior belief in them. People who were atheistic and did not believe in life after death had NDE's. Being hit by a truck is a real experience and no amount of skepticism by others can convince you that the truck was imaginary. This is the same degree of certainty with which these people know that their NDE's were real.

When Dr. Greyson interviewed people about their events, and then again 20 years later, their accounts were as vivid and exactly the same as before, confirming the reliability of their memories.

Regarding questions about "meeting God," about 1/3 of the experiencers reported meeting a divine being. One described it as Oneness, not separate from anything, a state of being, not a distinctly separate being. Some state that the word "God" seemed too small to describe the magnificence of that "presence." (Remember that Christian book by J.B. Phillips, Your God is Too Small, in 1952?) Many experiencers may use a name such as "God," or "Buddha," etc., but they acknowledge that these words are only labels that the brain is using to try to make logical sense of something that is beyond words.

A survey of 600 experiencers found that 96% rated their NDE's as "definitely real," and some say, "more real than anything else I've ever experienced." Brain wave measurements found that the experiencers' brain waves were like those associated with remembering real events, and unlike those from recalling imagined events.

He writes a couple of chapters on the brain at death and considers the differences between the mind and the brain, and the theory that the brain *creates* the mind has not been proven. He proposes that the brain acts as a filter to block out unnecessary thoughts coming from the mind, and the range of thoughts and experiences expand as the filter activity of the brain decreases. One experiencer said about his NDE, "As long as I am on earth, I will never be able to comprehend it either, because I only have

human brain...Talking about it or trying to draw it diminishes it entirely. It would be like trying to talk to an infant about DNA.” To me, this sounds a lot like people having enlightenment, mystical, or ecstatic experiences through meditation, worship, or other spiritual practices, as they are unable to explain it in human language.

To me, the most meaningful chapter is, “This Changes Everything.” This is one I highly recommend people to read for themselves, even if they don’t read the whole book. Most experiencers say they never fear death again, and they also have less fear about anything else in life. It enhanced many fold the enjoyment of living. It does not encourage one to commit suicide. In fact those that survived suicide attempts say they no longer want suicide, even though their lives may still be in physical pain. The different perspective gave them the courage to face life and not to try to escape it, with a meaning and purpose for all that life entails, including the things they tried to escape, and that they feel more alive than ever before.

One person said, “It has made me want to live my life to the fullest, to take time every day to stop, look, and listen, and just take the time to really see something, for the first time.” Some say this experience “overhauled” their life in a matter of seconds. Those who come close to death but don’t have NDE’s often became anxious and depressed, withdrawn, have PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder). Those with NDE’s have greater zest for life, have more intense appreciation for nature and friendship, live more fully in the moment without concern for the impression they make.

People who have had NDE’s became more satisfied with life, had more positive relationships with people, felt more personal strength, and many felt driven to engage in further spiritual quests. Another effect is seeking and sharing knowledge and receiving and returning love, a quest for spiritual growth outside of human-made doctrines and the dogmas of organized religion. They reported daily spiritual experiences, feelings of gratitude, awe, mercy, compassionate love, and inner peace. Other effects are an increased awareness of the inter-connectedness of all people, an awareness of the truth in all spiritual traditions, and recognizing that the core of all religions is the same.

One said, “I do not believe in spiritual things, but one seemed to happen to me.” An atheist pediatrician said after her NDE that she became more compassionate and less materialistic and less competitive, and she strongly believes in a higher power, feels that her life is more balanced, and uses lifestyle modifications instead of medication to control medical problems.

Other changes occurred. One-third changed their occupations, $\frac{3}{4}$ reported marked changes in lifestyle or activities. The changes were most dramatic in professions using violence. One policeman, accustomed to seeing bloodshed, after the NDE could no longer fire a gun. He quit the police force and retrained as a teacher, and he could not watch the TV programs he used to watch because they were too violent. Another fellow who usually collected money for the Mafia, after the NDE he felt that cooperation and love were the most important things. The mob allowed him to leave, and his wife left him because he was no longer interested in jewelry and fast cars. A very successful real estate broker left the business and worked with helping the elderly get housing. A ruthless and successful financier became a licensed counselor, because his heart was “on fire with love.”

Many felt no longer driven to accumulate possessions, but they enjoy the material pleasures they have more fully, feel less attached to them, and don’t define themselves by them.

Some people have “hard landings,” feel depressed and angry that they had to “come back,” but they eventually came to terms with it. Some had a very difficult time with family and other people. One

woman was ridiculed, misunderstood, and threatened with psychiatric intervention if she mentioned her NDE one more time. Dr. Greyson arranged support groups for people with NDE's to help each other when encountering these problems. There are more than 50 IANDS affiliated groups in the US and 20 other countries.

Marriages are often less stable after one partner has an NDE, and 65% end in divorce. In my memory, changes in relationships can happen when one person undergoes dramatic life changes, whether through injury, illness, midlife crisis, or simply personal growth through therapy, drug rehab, etc. Mostly those changes are gradual, but after an NDE, this is sudden.

People who study NDE's have their lives markedly improved. Six studies of high school, college, and nursing students showed that those who studied NDE's felt more self-worth, compassion, appreciation for life, greater spirituality, and a more positive attitude towards death.

Introducing information about NDE's in the treatment of suicidal clients lead to dramatic decrease or elimination of suicidal thoughts.

Summarizing 6 lessons we learn from these people who have had NDE's: 1. NDE's are common occurrences. One in 20 people has had one, among men and women, people of all ages, all religions, all ethnic groups. It is likely that at least one person in your extended family, your workplace, or in your classroom has had one. 2. NDE's are normal experiences that happen to people in exceptional circumstances. They do not need to be referred to counselors or mental health professionals just because of the NDE's. What they need from us is reassurance that they are normal, validation that their experiences are real, and the opportunity to share their experiences and to reach their own understanding of them. 3. NDE's usually lead to a number of profound and long-lasting after effects. These changes can be positive, like enhanced freedom to enjoy life and more purposeful living, and negative, like difficulty fitting into one's current lifestyle or job. Most cope with these changes themselves, but some may need support from family, friends, and their health care providers. 4. NDE's reduce fear of death, regardless of whether it was typically blissful or rarely initially a frightening one. They worry less about loved ones dying, but still grieve their loss. They also have less fear of *living*, of making mistakes, and they feel more free to take sensible risks. They don't feel the need to maintain tight control of their lives, as they have much less to lose. 5. These people live more fully in the present moment, not to dwell on the past or worry about the future, making life more free and enjoyable.

Because in the NDE's that they believed it was their last moments, they are more likely to cherish each moment as precious. John Wren-Lewis, poisoned by a would-be thief in Thailand and unconscious for several hours, reported "eternity consciousness," which gave him a heightened appreciation for life, which stayed with him for the rest of his life. "Although I get more pleasure than before from "good" experiences like sunsets, bird songs, great art, pleasant people, or delicious food, I also get as much pleasure from things which in my old state I would have called unpleasant, like the Thai hospital room, or a very wet day, or a heavy cold." He got a kick out of the unusual sensations in his nose and throat. The tinnitus, the hissing in the ears for years, a mild annoyance, now became a positively delightful sound. He also started to enjoy tiredness and minor pains.

That reminds me of when I was getting primal scream therapy, a very experiential catharsis, going through many fearful and grievous feelings that had been locked up, repressed, in the past, accepting and thereby releasing them. I discovered that I could taste water more fully after that. I could look at my life as a drama, to enjoy the feelings, whether pleasurable or painful, in real time experiences. I was glad to be able to feel, as I had shut down many feelings for many years and therefore, had shut

down my whole repertoire of feelings. Anyway, this shows that through therapy or spiritual practices we can experience some of these benefits without having to almost die. Actually, during some of my therapy sessions I felt as though I was going to die, or “lose my mind.”

The author states that living fully in the moment can be done all the while planning for the future or remembering the past. A quote from Patricia Clifford, “The work will wait while you show the child the rainbow, but the rainbow will not wait while you do the work.” This way of being confronts our work-obsessed society’s attitude.

6. It raises questions about the relationship between minds and brains. The experiencers almost universally report that their thoughts and perceptions are clearer in the NDE’s when their brains are impaired. They sometimes report accurate perceptions of things going on around their bodies from a point of observation *outside* their physical bodies. We don’t have good answers to fully explain these phenomena, but it appears that minds and brains are separate things, with brains acting to filter out thoughts and feelings, much as a radio receiver tunes in certain signals from an abundance of electromagnetic signals to choose from.

7. It raises questions about the continuation of consciousness after death. That can’t be proven by our current scientific methods but, the answer may come through indirect evidence, like the trail of bubbles that subatomic particles leave in a bubble chamber. When a person having an NDE sees a deceased loved one when no one previously knew that the person had died. How else to explain that other than that consciousness lives on after “death.”

In the author’s dialogue with Buddhist scholars, the monks were very familiar with the NDE’s but were surprised that Western scientists were actually studying them. According to the Dalai Lama, Buddhists seek to understand how the world works in order to *live more harmoniously* with it to reduce our suffering. Western scientists seek understanding about how the world works in order to *change and control it*, sometimes also to reduce suffering. Dr. Greyson states that the 2 goals are not mutually exclusive. NDE’s are something we cannot control, yet understanding them better can relieve suffering.

He concludes by saying that NDE’s seem to give people the spark they need to make changes in what they do and in their relationships. They tell us that death is more about peace and light than about fear and suffering, that life is more about meaning and compassion than about wealth and control, and that appreciating both the physical and nonphysical aspects of life gives a much fuller understanding. The evidence shows that NDE’s transform people’s lives and their loved ones and the researchers who study them, and hopefully, those who read about them.

Many books have been written about NDE’s, but this is the most comprehensive overview I know of, airtight in its scientific rigor, and exciting to read. I think it is a must read for anyone who has not had an NDE, and can be interesting to those who have.