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The Phenomenology of Distressing Near-death Experiences and Their Aftereffects

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Abstract

The purpose of our study was to explore what it is like to have a distressing near-death experience (NDE) and the aftereffects that follow. Positive NDEs have previously been more extensively studied, whereas research about distressing NDEs is still lacking. There have only been a handful of studies that have used qualitative methods to study both distressing and positive NDEs. We accessed all distressing NDE narratives from the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) database. In total we analyzed eight individual narratives using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Our findings show that distressing NDEs can include features such as disturbing feelings and experiences of darkness in different forms. Results also show that there are both emotional and social difficulties in dealing with the NDE afterwards. Aftereffects such as receiving negative feedback when talking about the experience and heightened emotions were reported. We found some hybrid experiences, where the distressing experience had positive features as well. Future research about NDEs should focus on hybrid experiences and employ mixed methods and more qualitative research in general.

Key words: Near-death experience, IPA, distressing near-death experience, hybrid near-death experience, NDE

Sammanfattning

Syftet med vår studie var att undersöka hur det är att ha en negativ nära döden-upplevelse (NDU) och de konsekvenser som medföljer. Positiva nära döden-upplevelser har tidigare studerats mer ingående, medan forskning om negativa nära döden-upplevelser är bristfällig. Det finns även ett begränsat antal studier som använt kvalitativa metoder för att studera både negativa och positiva NDU. Vi fick tillgång till alla negativa nära döden-upplevelser i *the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS)* databas. Totalt analyserade vi åtta individuella narrativ med *interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)*. Våra resultat visar att negativa NDU kan innehålla inslag som obehagliga känslor och upplevelser av mörker i olika former. Resultaten visar också att de finns både känslomässiga och sociala svårigheter med att hantera sin NDU efteråt. Konsekvenser som att få negativ respons när man talar om upplevelsen samt starkare och mer intensiva känslor rapporterades. Vi fann även några hybridupplevelser, där den negativa upplevelsen också hade positiva drag. Framtida forskning om NDU bör fokusera på hybridupplevelser och använda mixade metoder och kvalitativ forskning i allmänhet.

Nyckelord: Nära döden-upplevelse, IPA, negativ nära döden-upplevelse, hybrid nära döden-upplevelse, NDU

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The Phenomenology of Distressing Near-death Experiences and Their Aftereffects

There have been reports of people having vivid experiences when being close to or pronounced dead but later came back to life. These experiences have been called near-death experiences or NDEs for short (Moody, 1975). NDEs are subjective and often vivid, complex, and realistic experiences that occur to people who have been close to death (Bush, 1991; Greyson et al., 2009; Noyes et al., 2009). Examples of life-threatening conditions that might lead to an NDE include loss of consciousness, head injury, states of shock, cardiac arrest, childbirth, allergic reactions, surgery, or suicide attempts (Bush, 2012; Facco et al., 2015; Ring, 1980). There are no two identical near-death experiences, but they usually include features such as: a clear perception of being in a different dimension, feelings of peace, bodily separation, telepathic communication, meeting deceased relatives and/or other spiritual figures, traveling through a tunnel, and feeling like one is floating (Facco et al., 2015; Greyson, 1983; Greyson et al., 2009; Ring, 1982). Near-death experiences can also include an out-of-body experience. An out-of-body experience is a subjective event where one reports a sense of oneself separating from the physical body and experiencing the world outside of one's physical body (Blackmore, 2017; Moody, 1975).

People who have had NDEs generally have a very vivid, highly detailed, and stable memory of the events of their experience (Cassol et al., 2020; Martial et al., 2017; Moore & Greyson, 2017). The NDE memories play a role in how near-death experiencers (NDErs) view themselves and their identity. Near-death experiencers have also had significantly more life changes after their experience than those who have experienced a life-threatening situation without an NDE, which indicates that there is something beyond the life-threatening situations that leads to the effects reported by NDErs (Cassol et al., 2019a).

Some near-death experiencers have positive heaven-like experiences that can include positive emotions, seeing a bright light, and God or other religious figures. Others have hell-like experiences with features such as distressing emotions and a threatening environment. There is still no known way to predict when someone will experience an NDE since it is not influenced by demographics, personality traits, religious beliefs, or the duration of a state of unconsciousness (Greyson, 2003b; Parnia et al., 2001; van Lommel, 2011). The prevalence for NDEs ranges from 0,1% to 15% in different countries (Gallup & Proctor, 1982; Greyson, 2003a; Knoblauch et al., 2001; Pasricha, 1995; Perera et al., 2005; Ring & Lawrence, 1993; Sabom, 2011). These experiences are reported by 6% to 23% of cardiac arrest survivors (Parnia

et al., 2001; Schwaninger, et al., 2002; van Lommel et al., 2001) and 37% of survivors of coma (Yamamura, 1998).

Distressing NDEs

Although most reports of NDEs have been positive, some have been negative or distressing. Frightening, distressing, or hellish NDEs refer to experiences in which the dominant theme of the event is fright, fear, concern for one's safety and well-being, shock, despair, panic, or guilt. Distressing NDEs are underreported out of fear, shame, and social stigma (Bonenfant, 2001; Bush, 2012; Rawlings, 1978). There have been a few estimates of the prevalence of distressing NDEs, usually ranging from 1% to 20% of all NDEs (Bush, 2009; Charland-Verville et al., 2014; Groth-Marnat & Summers, 1998; Lindley et al., 1981).

Distressing and positive NDEs usually share a similar pattern of elements but with different emotional content. They are both likely to have out-of-body experiences, a sense of journeying, encountering beings, or an experience of another realm. Having a positive NDE might include friendly beings, beautiful environments, and an overwhelming sensation of love. In contrast, distressing NDEs might include lifeless or threatening beings, harsh environments, and danger (Atwater, 1994; Grey, 1985). Greyson and Bush (1992) have described three types of distressing NDEs: inverted, void, and hell.

Inverted Experiences

Inverted NDEs are similar to the positive ones, but the experiences are interpreted as unpleasant. According to Greyson and Bush (1992) the inverted experience is the most common type of a distressing NDE. It is not necessarily the content in the NDE that is terrifying, but the person's interpretation of it is. Situations might move too fast or the NDEr might feel helpless. There can also be a feeling that the reality they know is falling apart into something unknown. Someone with an inverted experience might feel that they do not know what is happening to them, and that they are not supposed to experience it (Bush, 2012; Ring, 1984).

Void Experiences

Another kind of distressing NDE is experiencing being in a void. The void can be described as an isolated experience of nothingness, without any sensation, and a feeling of existing in a limitless and featureless void. A void NDE might include out-of-body episodes, a sense of movement and great speed, intense emotions, strong messages, and sometimes encounters with other presences (Bush, 2012; Greyson & Bush, 1992). Some people even experience a sense of being forsaken and abandoned by God. It is not uncommon to feel a

lasting sense of emptiness even after the experience. Especially people used to Western culture are poorly prepared for the emptiness and the nothingness in void experiences, since their identity depends on objects (which can be persons or things) to ground them. In contrast, Asian cultures in general are more familiar with the concept of emptiness or detachment, which void experiences can seem similar to (Bush, 2012).

Hellish Experiences

A distressing NDE can include experiences of hell or hellish features. Experiences of hell can include different kinds of sounds, sights, and sensations. The hellish NDE can consist of features such as darkness, fire, screeching blackbirds, demons, beings with obscured faces, and bleak landscapes. The NDE may also have features of the devil or other menacing demonic figures (Atwater, 1992; Cassol et al., 2019b; Grey, 1985; Greyson & Bush, 1992; Rawlings, 1978; Ring, 1984). According to Bush (2012) strong feelings of fear and panic are common during hellish NDEs. It is common to feel fear during a hellish NDE, but it is also common to be scared of the fear itself during the NDE. Another common pattern in hellish NDEs is that people who experience them usually have the experience as an observer, i.e., they see others being tormented or suffering but they do not necessarily experience that same torment themselves.

Hybrid Experiences

There are also NDErs who have both negative and positive components in their near-death experience, so called hybrid NDEs. According to Sabom (1982), an NDE can start out as an initial passage into darkness, followed by questions about what is going on. In time the experience becomes a positive experience filled with calm, peace, and tranquility. Ring (1980) and Bush (2012) have also suggested that some NDErs may be stuck in the fearful part of their NDE and that if they were to join and accept it, the fear could possibly turn into peace. It is also possible that a positive NDE might turn into a distressing one, but that is less common. However, this is what happens in Irwin and Bramwell's (1988) case study, where a girl had a positive experience that turned into a distressing one. The girl was in a car accident and as a result ended up detaching from her body and saw a church. She was very calm (like one usually is during a positive NDE) until she entered the church and saw the devil.

Making Sense of an NDE

NDErs may experience their NDE differently and there is no clear answer as to why some have positive and others distressing experiences. Previous retrospective studies have

shown that NDErs do not differ from other comparison groups in terms of age, gender, race, religion, religiosity, or mental health (Holden et al., 2009). Locke and Shontz (1983) have also shown that NDErs do not differ either from non-experiencers in terms of intelligence, neuroticism, extraversion, traits, and state anxiety. Nevertheless, there seems to be a difference in how NDErs manage and attribute meaning to their NDEs.

Sense of Control During an NDE

Individual differences when coping with one's NDE have less to do with the experience itself and more to do with the NDErs ability to cope and process an unknown and indescribable event. Sense of control may differ when processing a NDE, since NDErs need to make sense of their NDE using previous knowledge and experiences (Roberts & Owen, 1988). There are NDErs who have reported that their experiences have included events where they felt "out of control." Some have described it as going down a slippery slope where things move too fast and it is difficult to find something physical to grab onto to slow things down. For a person who has been used to being calm and in control an NDE can be frightening and risky. This can lead to anxiety for some, especially when the situation is beyond their knowledge. For many, safety lies in control and for those who prefer to deal with the world in a rational way the feeling of chaos can be distressing. At the same time, there are those who enjoy risk taking, the adrenaline rush, and the feeling of being on the edge. Being able to trust one's own ability to handle anything can be reassuring for some. Thus, how a person reacts or copes with an NDE could possibly lie in their ability to tolerate the risk of being drawn to the unknown (Bush, 2012).

Searching for Moral Agents

There is a variation in the degree to which a person experiences a sense of control during their NDE. In a state where one feels out of control and where there is no person to blame, the search for a moral agent can give the experience meaning and a sense of control. Feeling hurt or pain may lead to the search for an agent, because it is important for people to seek guidance when experiencing negative emotions (Bering, 2002; Seligman, 1975). Although humans can make others responsible for moral outcomes, there are situations where the act exceeds human capacity and are attributed to spiritual influences. In conditions such as being suddenly cured of an illness or miraculously escaping an injury, many people may attribute the situation as being influenced or controlled by God (Pepitone & Saffiotti, 1997; Spilka & Schmidt, 1983). People tend to attribute God's influence more often to positive outcomes than to negative

ones (Lupfer et al., 1996; Pargament & Hahn, 1986). Other studies, in contrast, show that negative events are more likely to trigger rational explanations (Knobe, 2005).

Questioning of Worthiness

Making sense of one's NDE can be influenced by whether one attributes the cause of the experience to influences by either oneself or external factors. There is still no answer as to why NDErs experience NDEs differently. Those who experience more distressing NDEs might ask themselves afterwards why they had such an experience. There is often a sense of why me, what have I done to deserve this horrible experience? (Bush, 2012). In a case study by Irwin and Bramwell (1988), a girl reported that she believed that her physical injuries from the accident that led to her NDE were a way of repenting for her sins. She was offered a flaming cup from the devil, but refused and fled, which she felt she was now paying for in her current life.

There have been assumptions that those who have had distressing NDEs have had them because of certain negative or flawed beliefs, life patterns, or mental status. Some researchers have hypothesized that if you believe that hell exists, then you will experience it in your NDE (Atwater, 1992; Rommer, 2000). In contrast, Bush (2002) has challenged these assumptions, emphasizing that anyone could have a distressing experience as well as a positive one, no matter what their mental status is or whether they are deserving of it or not. Just because you are a good person does not mean you will have a positive NDE and vice versa. Similarly having a hellish NDE does not mean you are a bad person.

Aftereffects

Experiencing an NDE can cause profound changes in people's attitudes, beliefs, and values. The effects of near-death experiences, otherwise known as aftereffects, have often been reported to be overwhelmingly positive. Common aftereffects include being less materialistic, having a greater concern for others, and increased self-esteem (Jahromi, 2021; Moody, 1975; Ring, 1984). Other NDErs have described that after their NDE they felt an urge to understand themselves and the meaning of life on a deeper level. NDErs also report having a stronger belief in an afterlife and a greater appreciation for life (Foster et al., 2009; Groth-Marnat & Summers, 1998; van Lommel et al., 2001). Approximately 75-80% have reported feeling more spiritual after their NDE (Musgrave, 1997; Sutherland, 1995) and about 80% of NDErs report a lessened or lost fear of death (Ring, 1980; Sabom, 1982). It is reported that although NDErs may still

experience fear of reliving the unpleasant feelings and observations from their NDE, they are still less fearful of death itself and its process (Jahromi, 2021).

Although there are NDErs that describe positive changes in the long term, some have expressed negative aftereffects. For many, “returning to the real world” has led to a crisis in their previous worldview. This might cause issues such as increased anxiety, depression, alienation, relationship problems, and a sense of altered reality after their NDE (Bush, 1991; Foster et al., 2009; Stout et al., 2006). It has been estimated that approximately 65% go through a divorce when one partner has experienced an NDE (Christian, 2005). Many NDErs also do not dare to talk about their near-death experience and its aftereffects to health professionals or others in their social network. This may be caused by the stigma and fear of being seen as mentally ill or demonic (Bianco et al., 2017; Morris & Knafl, 2003).

Positive Aftereffects after a Distressing NDE

Studies on distressing near-death experiences have shown that a frightening NDE usually generates some form of transformation within the experiencer. The positive aftereffects that have been reported are reduced death anxiety (Bush, 2002), decreased materialism, deeper concern for others, (Irwin & Bramwell, 1988) and an increased interest in religion and spirituality (Bonenfant, 2001). For many, experiencing a frightening or even a hellish NDE can be seen as a warning and as an opportunity to change a lifestyle to avoid the consequences that might otherwise come. Thus, with high anxiety because of their experience, the person may look to change the characteristics they believe may have triggered the NDE. Religious NDErs may identify this as atoning for their own sins. Others may process their NDE by reducing its significance and focusing more on the positive aspects of the experience (Bush, 2002).

Negative Aftereffects after a Distressing NDE

Whereas some NDErs have experienced positive aftereffects, others have experienced negative ones. The NDErs might question their previous beliefs, mental status, life patterns, and what they have done to deserve an experience like this. After a distressing NDE some concerns may be about what is wrong with one or what the truth about existence is. For some, pessimism and fear of death remains even after their NDE (Bush, 2002).

Studies have shown that a distressing NDE can produce long-lasting emotional trauma, including fear of others' judgment, high fear of reliving the frightening experience, increased vulnerability, and anxiety (Greyson 1997). One case study by Bonenfant (2001) described how a boy was experiencing symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, restlessness, and

nightmares after his NDE where he briefly encountered the devil. The boy's parents noticed a change after his near-death experience, as he showed an increased interest in religion and spirituality. Another case study by Hoffman (1995) reported that an older man who had experienced a hellish-like NDE got haunted by it afterwards. He actively and intensely worked on trying to get it out of his head for the rest of his life.

People who have experienced a distressing NDE are thus more likely to develop negative long-term psychological and emotional symptoms. Further studies have also shown that those who have experienced a distressing NDE are more likely to repress their experience. Some may report a sense of emptiness and despair and others an unwillingness to talk about their experience out of fear of being dismissed or seen as mentally ill (Greyson & Bush, 1992). Others have felt that therapy or conversations with priests have been ineffective, where many have described that therapists can find it difficult to get to the real problem. Some NDErs have felt that priests have rejected their experience or not known how to respond to it. Still, they may feel betrayed by religion or by their previous perception of the afterlife (Bush, 2012).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore what it is like to have a distressing NDE as well as what kind of aftereffects such experiences give using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). Rather than simply relying on impressions or making a case study, we will systematically analyze all distressing NDE narratives found in a database. There have only been a few studies that examined positive NDEs using IPA (e.g., Bianco et al., 2017; Hou et al., 2013; Wilde & Murray, 2009) and other qualitative methods (e.g., Cassol et al., 2018; Khoshab et al., 2020; Royse & Badger, 2020). Research about distressing NDEs has mainly used quantitative methods. While distressing NDEs have been studied to some extent, there is still a need to learn more about them. Our study will be the first to explore distressing NDEs and their aftereffects using a qualitative method. By using a qualitative approach, we can learn more detailed information about the distressing experience. It is of utmost importance to understand distressing NDEs better to better help the experiencers, since NDErs might be at risk of developing emotional, psychological, and social problems afterwards (Bush, 2012; Cassol et al., 2019b). By having more information, we can more easily help those who have had distressing experiences. To date, little has been done to explore detailed NDE narratives (Cassol et al., 2018), which are not necessarily easy to get since NDErs tend to be hesitant to talk about their experiences. NDErs with distressing experiences might feel even more burdened and

stigmatized to share their experience, especially with healthcare professionals (Holden et al., 2009; Morris & Knafl, 2003). There is a lack of knowledge about aftereffects of distressing NDEs and therefore a need to systematically study them (Greyson & Bush, 1992). With this study we hope to shed light on and understand more deeply what distressing NDEs are and their aftereffects in hopes of raising awareness and understanding as well as reducing stigma. We hope to give a voice to those who are not often heard or dare to speak out about their experiences.

Method

To investigate this phenomenon, we chose to analyze distressing NDE narratives using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA uses basic principles from phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography by combining a focus on subjective experiences, interpretation of text, and an understanding of an individual retrospective account (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith et al., 2009; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). IPA is a qualitative method that studies how people understand and give meaning to their experiences. It is assumed that people are self-interpreting beings, which means that people are actively engaged in interpreting experiences, objects, and people. The aim of analyzing data with IPA is to make thorough analysis of individual cases before any potential generalization (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

IPA is especially suitable to study phenomena that are either complex, involve a process of some kind, or express something new (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA is also suitable to study anomalous experiences, a category of experiences that includes NDEs (Wilde & Murray, 2009). Anomalous experiences are unusual experiences or experiences viewed as inconsistent with descriptions of reality according to mainstream science (Cardeña et al., 2014). It is encouraged to have a small number of participants when performing an IPA since the focus is on subjective experiences (Smith et al, 2009). It would be hard to get detailed information about the experience itself through a quantitative method, as it can be challenging to find many participants with these kinds of experiences. IPA was therefore an ideal choice for analyzing the data we did have access to.

Participants and Recruitment

We received from the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) an anonymized data file only with participants' basic information such as the circumstances of the NDE, the age of the participants, the age at which the participants had their NDE, and gender.

IANDS also asked participants to fill out several forms about their NDE and describe their experience in their own words. The experiences were collected from 2016 onward. The narratives ranged from a page to four pages long. One of these forms was the Greyson NDE scale, a 16-item multiple-choice questionnaire. The scale was used to measure the intensity of the NDE and to assess key components of various NDE features. A score of 7 or higher (max 32) on the scale is considered to represent an NDE (Greyson, 1983; Lange et al, 2004). We included eight participants' narratives in our study, all of them with scores of 7 or higher on the Greyson NDE scale. All participants have been given pseudonyms.

Table 1

Demographic and NDE Information

Name	Gender	Age	Age of NDE	Circumstance NDE
Ryan	M	38	30	Illness
Ellie	F	20	20	Childbirth
Jack	M	39	27	Overdose
Chad	M	45	30	Overdose
Suzanne	F	67	22	Drowning
Gary	M	47	7	Allergies
Luke	M	40	11	Car accident
Lily	F	39	38	Allergies

Note. NDE= near-death experience.

Procedure

We accessed 39 out of 499 participants from the IANDS database, all of those who had rated their experience as frightening and specified that their data may be used for research. Out of these 39 participants only 30 had filled out narratives about their experiences. The

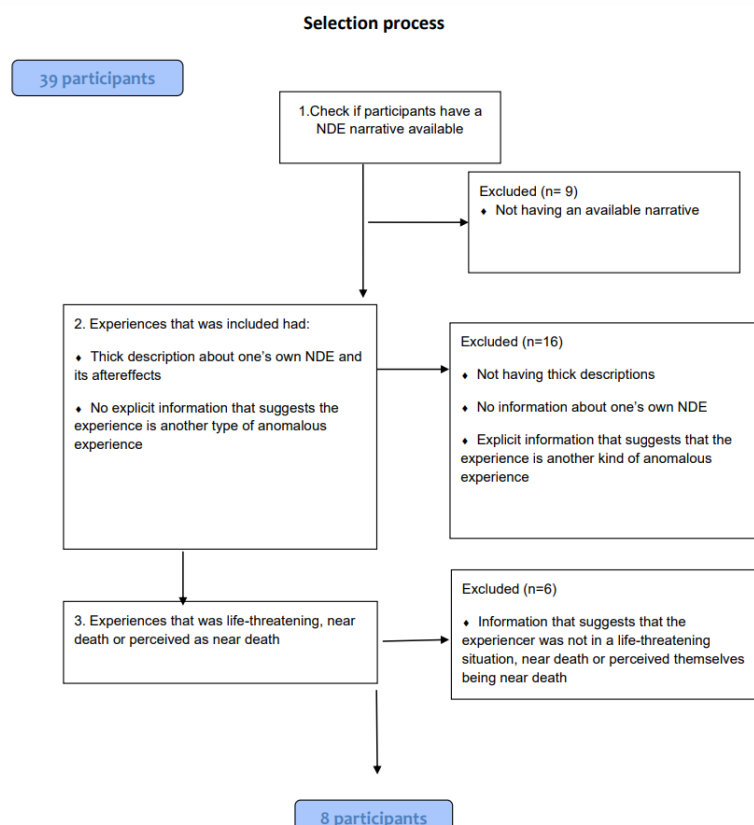
experiences could be entirely distressing or partly distressing, meaning that some parts of the NDE were described as positive. Participants who did not have a narrative were not included.

Our second sorting of experiences involved the exclusion of narratives that did not have a thick description and of narratives that described other anomalous experiences than an NDE. According to Ryle (1949) a thick description includes both observations, descriptions, interpretation, and analysis of a situation. By having a thick description, one can interpret data and generate meaning. In comparison, a thin description only includes a short surface level explanation of a situation and does not explore underlying meanings. That is why we decided to exclude the narratives that had too thin descriptions of their NDEs and/or their aftereffects. We defined aftereffects as participants' descriptions of how the NDE had affected them afterwards. Since participants were only specifically asked to describe their NDE not everyone had included descriptions of their aftereffects.

Other exclusion criteria were narratives with descriptions of other people's NDEs and narratives only about aftereffects, but lacking information about the NDE itself. We did, however, include narratives that had thick descriptions of the NDE but lacked descriptions of their aftereffects. In the last screening we only included participants who were in a physically life-threatening condition at the time of their NDE.

Figure 1

CONSORT flowchart of selection process



Analysis

We used Smith et al.'s (2009) approach and steps for IPA when analyzing the narratives. First, we got an overview of all the narratives one at a time by reading and re-reading the narratives thoroughly. We did this independently from each other to ensure a breadth of perspective on possible themes. After the individual analysis of the narrative, we merged the themes we both had identified through a joint discussion. Following the discussion, we agreed on which themes we would add, change, or discard before moving on to the next narrative. All agreed themes were written down for each individual narrative, and this process was repeated for every participant's narrative. The last step was to cluster all the identified themes into the following identifying categories: themes, master themes, and super-ordinate themes. We clustered themes together that were either similar or related to each other in some other way. Based on the themes we clustered together we created master themes and eventually the higher-level super-ordinate themes. Every identifying category is summarized in table 2.

Ethical Considerations

Microethical aspects such as voluntary participation and informed participation according to Brinkmann and Kvale (2005) were considered. The narratives and the background information we accessed were de-identified. Participants had voluntarily submitted their NDEs through the IANDS website and had given consent for their experiences to be used for research purposes. In addition, there was no intention to influence the participants either physically or psychologically as we were not in personal contact with them. Thus, the design of the study did not include anything that would require an ethical review according to § 3-5 of the law SFS 2003:460 (The Act concerning the Ethical Review of Research Involving Humans). Regarding storage and processing of data, only we and our supervisor had access to the narratives and related data.

Reflexivity

The production of knowledge is never free from perspective. Researchers see things from their own viewpoint and that perspective is shaped by the social and cultural contexts that the researcher is a part of. We did not know the social and cultural contexts of our participants and analyzed the experiences from our own unique perspective. In the process of qualitative research, one should continuously consider one's own personal reflexivity (Willig, 2022). Personal reflexivity involves reflecting on how our own subjective convictions, values, experiences, and social identities can affect the design and the results of the study. As students

of psychology, we had a certain theoretical, empirical, and practical understanding of how a distressing experience could look like, as well as how it could affect someone afterwards. Our own personal values, conception of life, beliefs about near death experiences, and life after death could also had a considerable effect on the results of our study.

According to Smith (1996) you cannot experience a phenomenon without interpretation. He points out that IPA deals with a sort of double hermeneutic, which essentially means that the participant is trying to understand their life world and the researcher in turn is trying to understand the participants' understanding of their world. Our goal with this study was not to probe the ontological nature of NDEs, but to get a deeper understanding of what it is like to experience a distressing NDE. We acknowledge that our own personal perspectives could had an impact on how we interpreted the data. During the research process we had continuous discussions about how our pre-understanding could affect the study.

Results

The analysis conducted on the eight narratives allowed us to identify three super-ordinate themes: a dark unsettling experience, fighting the frightening, and aftereffects of the distressing NDE. The super-ordinate themes a dark unsettling experience and fighting the frightening contained descriptions from the NDE itself. Aftereffects dealt with how the participants processed and dealt with the experience afterwards. Each super-ordinate theme included groups of themes called master themes. The master themes consisted of themes from codes from the analyzing process (see table 2). Some quotes originally had misspellings. These quotes have been carefully corrected, to not change the meaning of the text.

Table 2*Thematic Framework*

Super-ordinate themes	Master themes	Themes
1. A dark unsettling experience	1.1 Distressing feelings	1.1.1 Fear
		1.1.2 Confusion
	1.2 Darkness	1.2.1 Hell
		1.2.2 Dark realm
	1.3 Questioning of worthiness	1.3.1 The judgment
		1.3.2 Self questioning of worthiness
2. Fighting the frightening	2.1 Sense of control	2.1.1 Feeling in control
		2.1.2 Feeling not in control
	2.2 Desperate to be saved	2.2.1 Plea for help
		2.2.2 Rescued
	2.3 The rejection	2.3.1 Rejection
3. Aftereffects of the distressing NDE	3.1 Positive aftereffects	3.1.1 High on life
	3.2 Negative aftereffects	3.2.1 Not being understood
		3.2.2 Negative emotions

Note. NDE= near-death experience. Codes indicate the hierarchy of the themes.

1. A Dark Unsettling Experience

All eight participants expressed that their NDE was dark or unsettling in some way. The participants described distressing feelings, experiences of darkness, hell, and a fundamental questioning of their own worth. Three master themes were identified from the data: Distressing feelings, darkness, and questioning of worthiness.

1.1 Distressing Feelings

Distressing feelings were reported by all participants during their NDE. Seven participants felt different kinds of fear, such as fear upon realizing that they were dead and fear of beings or the surroundings since it was not like anything they encountered before. Three participants experienced confusion and panic, while they were struggling to figure out what was happening to them. Lily and Jack were two of the participants who expressed intense fear when realizing that they had indeed died or would.

Lily: I felt a fear so strong that it was suffocating. I've never feared dying, because in the end we all end up dying, but this? It felt different, as if some supernatural force was trying to pull my soul out of my body. It didn't feel like it was my time to go, maybe I was too young- maybe this shouldn't kill me and I vividly remember everything being muffled, like I was underwater.

Lily felt a fear of dying, which she never had before. There was something different and unknown that was happening to her. She felt that it did not feel right and that it was not her time to die yet. Like Lily, Jack also felt intense fear and panic when he realized he had died. "Suddenly I was before myself looking at my body lying there, and realized I was dead. I panicked and thought this shouldn't be happening and I looked all around my apartment for some escape."

Jack also felt a similar feeling like Lily, that this should not be happening and that it was not right. He should not be looking at his own dead body, it is not his time yet. In addition to the intense feeling of fear, three participants reported confusion about the state they were in. They were not familiar with the conditions of their experience. Gary was one of the participants that expressed this confusion in the beginning of his NDE. He felt calm yet confused but also wanted nothing more than to wake up. He did not understand where he was and why he was feeling the way he did.

Gary: I felt the sensation of a period of time passing, and entered a dreamlike state that turned into something of a nightmare that I could not wake up from. There was a strange physical sensation as I was looking down on someone in a bed with doctors working around them. It seemed to be nighttime. I felt calm, but at the same time wanted to wake up. I felt kind of confused and had not made the cognitive connection as to who that was in the bed.

Gary expressed contrasting positive and negative emotions during his NDE. He was feeling very calm but at the same time he was also deeply confused. He wanted to wake up from what he assumed was a nightmare. He did not realize yet that he was in fact looking down on himself. Ryan also described feeling very confused in the beginning of his NDE. He expressed that it must be a dream and questioned whether his experience was real or not. He was shocked with the way he was treated in his NDE and could not help but feel deeply disturbed.

Ryan: In utter shock and disbelief, I thought to myself 'This must be a dream. This can't be real.' Echoes of laughter came from afar. Maybe not wanting the answers but I could not help questioning what was taking place. 'Not me?' was another thought that raced through my head as I believed the gravity of the situation was beginning to fall on my shoulders. 'Where do you think they send angry fuckin drunks when they die dumbass?' Came from a broken-down man standing about 10 feet in front of me. His words were condescending, but his tone was resolute. I was frozen! The purest and most disturbing form of shock I have ever felt.

Ryan was feeling all kinds of distressing emotions during his NDE. He was confused as to what was going on and why he was in this place. He was even shocked at the cold and horrible tone from a man in front of him. He had never felt a shock as strong as this.

This master theme shows how the participants try to make sense of their unknown experience. They have no or little idea as to what is happening, which causes them to both panic and feel intense fear. They feel their emotions even stronger than before, suggesting that the way that they experience emotions in their NDEs differs from how they normally perceive them.

1.2 Darkness

Four out of eight participants described that their NDE had some sort of dark aspects to it. These participants had generally dark experiences, for instance being in a void. Additionally, three out of four participants reported that they had had outright hell or hell-like experiences. Two participants expressed that the experience started out being in darkness and turned more hell-like as it progressed. Gary was one of the participants experiencing a dark void, where it almost felt like he was stuck in a darkness.

Gary: At some point I met others, and we were in this dark void. Imagine you are wandering around in a large, dark room and meeting other people along the way, and we are all working together trying to find out what happened and why we are here.

Gary found himself in a dark void, almost like a big dark room. He was trying to collaborate with others to figure out a way out from this darkness. Nobody knew why they were here, but they tried to investigate together. In some ways similar to Gary, Ryan also experienced a strong and powerful darkness in the beginning of his NDE.

Ryan: There was a barrier of pitch-black darkness, darker and denser than the midnight sky, surrounding this God barren landscape. As I got closer to the darkness I felt my body being repelled back from it like the same pole of two magnets meeting each other for the first time. It was impossible! I was stuck!

Ryan experienced a kind of thick and empty darkness, even darker than the midnight sky. As he was approaching the darkness, he realized that he was completely stuck. Not only did Ryan experience darkness, but he also experienced hellish features. He was both taunted and hunted and wanted nothing more than to escape his NDE. Ryan was shocked to find out how he could think and get answers back in his mind. He was struggling against these creatures, who moved with incredible speed and strength. He was fighting for his life.

Ryan: Random 'people' in the crowd would scream out answers in the distance as if they could read my mind. The first question, of course, being 'what is this place?' 'Hell!! Mutha Fucka!! Where do you think you're at?' Came from a man in the distance on a balcony of sorts...I guess in order for this hellish game to continue it had to be that way. The only thing I could do was pick up whatever I could find and start hitting back. The speed at which everybody could move was unheard of. They ran like track stars, threw blows like boxers while wielding weapons like warriors. Things moved at such a fast pace! And from what I could see, a lot of the 'people' loved what they were doing. There was pure pleasure in the violence! What could I do but try to defend myself and fight back but there were so many of them and I was the freshest 'meat' on the

market and the Vultures were picking away every bit of my 'carcass.' It was relentless.

Ryan was in a crowd that would scream out answers to what he was thinking, almost like they could hear his own thoughts. That is when someone told him he was in hell, and it was not long until all hell broke loose. The beings started to hit and throw things at Ryan, and he did everything he could to defend himself, but it was like a never-ending game. Like Ryan, Jack also described how he entered a hell-like place in the beginning of his NDE.

Jack: When we walked past the stairwell, the hallway began lengthening and got dark, and they began to taunt me. They were holding my back, and their faces lit up like demons as they disparaged me. We came to a wall of fire, like the opening of a pit, and my face was force forward with their hands, made to look. I saw bodies in pain, people there who were crying in torment.

Jack was forced into what seemed like a hell-like place. His hands were behind his back so he could not help but follow the taunting beings into the place with a wall of fire. He was forced to look at all the pain and despair happening all around him.

This master theme illustrates how the darkness takes over the participants experiences. Participants find themselves in a dark void or hellish place. They are desperately trying to figure out how to escape or get out of this experience which seems hopeless. There was a sense of wondering what is happening and how come that this is happening.

1.3 Questioning of Worthiness

Three participants reported some sort of awaiting judgment or questioning of worthiness, describing that their worthiness was being judged by God or some being, while two participants questioned their own worthiness. Chad was one of the participants waiting for something or someone to judge him. He expressed it as “It was like I was in some sort of purgatory of sorts, and I was waiting for something. I had an eerie feeling of emptiness and sadness.” Chad expressed unpleasant feelings while he was waiting for some kind of judgment. It was like he felt in his gut that something wrong was happening. By contrast, Ryan felt that he was already paying for all his wrongdoings in his life. He described the feeling that his NDE confirmed his belief that he was not worthy in God’s eyes.

Ryan: You know the feeling you get when you get caught doing something you know was wrong... Well, imagine that same feeling multiplied exponentially due to the fact that I was reaping what I had sowed for an entire lifetime... There are no words that can encapsulate the most dreadful feeling that I have ever felt with a single thought. 'It's over!' Oh, even now it makes me want to throw up. Not only will I never see my loved ones again but the God whom I loved throughout my life doesn't want me. My lifelong assumption that I wasn't worthy was now verified.

Ryan felt distressing emotions during his experience as previous life values were shattered. He expressed concern that he would never see his loved ones again and that even God, with whom he had always had a close relationship, did not want him. Suzanne was one of the participants also expressing difficult feelings during her NDE. She was levitating (having an out-of-body experience) and questioning her own worth. She expressed fear of not having done enough in her lifetime and thus not deserving to go to heaven.

Suzanne: As I levitated over the bench, intuitively I knew this force was in control. I remember thinking this light must be God. My cloud-like self was shaking with fear. A kind of fear I've never experienced before. I was scared that I was going to be judged and found not worthy enough to go into heaven. I was fearful that I hadn't been living my earthly life to the divine fullest! I was no saint, and I wasn't all bad either.

In the context of trying to make sense of her experience, Suzanne described fearing the judgment that awaited her. She was afraid, but she knew that she was not the most awful person to exist, but she was not exactly the best person either. She was scared to be found not worthy by God.

This master theme shows how the participants were fearfully questioning their own worthiness. They felt as if they were being punished for not being good enough in their life or not doing good enough deeds. They felt an intense sadness, almost grief-like in nature, over their NDE. They were grieving the fact that the distressing experience indeed proves that they are not worthy and not good enough to be saved by God or another being.

2. Fighting the Frightening

All participants reported some sort of struggle during their experience. The NDE or parts of their NDE felt frightening in some way. The struggle could be about fleeing one's NDE or trying to gain some sense of control. Three master themes were identified: Sense of control, desperate to be saved, and rejection.

2.1 Sense of Control

Seven participants reported different levels of control during their distressing experience, two were feeling somewhat in control of their experience, while five were almost feeling hopeless in trying to control the outcome of their NDE. Ryan described how he was fighting to escape during the last moments of his NDE.

Ryan: Nothing or nobody was going to stop me, no matter how hard they tried. And believe me, they were giving it their all. I began to feel the repellant force of the Darkness pushing me back as I got closer to the border. It got so strong that I fell to my knees fighting a force I could not see. Pushing and crawling further and further as I'm being pulled back by what felt like a hundred hands scraping and clawing over every inch of my body. Feeling complete exhaustion begin to set in, I gave one last plunge out into the darkness.

Ryan reported a challenging struggle against an external force that he could not see. This force seemed to prevent him from reaching his destination. At the same time, Ryan described some form of control. He fought on after each setback and promised himself not to give up. Despite the horrible conditions of his NDE, Ryan described having some sense of control, but this was not the case for everyone. Five participants described how external forces were more in control than they were. Both Ellie and Chad reported how they were forced from their physical bodies.

Ellie: I saw white hands and arms reach for me out of the OR ceiling and felt calmness for a second, but then the hands grabbed me and removed me from my body. My initial reaction was 'this is it' fear set in and I saw dark shadows around me and the white light. Then I felt a strong shove and I opened my eyes, and my husband was there're. I believe still to this day if he didn't walk in, if he wasn't there, I wouldn't have come back.

Ellie felt both positive and distressing emotions. She felt calm at first, but that changed abruptly into strong fear. She saw a white light and dark shadows and knew that this was the moment she would die. Ellie was, however, saved by her husband and credits him for her survival. Like her, Chad was one of the participants who also expressed being forced from his physical body.

Chad: I remember being pulled out of my body into the whiteness, and it was very confusing. I didn't know where I was, or how I got there, and I didn't have any shape or body mass, I was just there.

Chad was very confused as to why he was being pulled away from his body. He did not know what was going on at all, just that he was not in his body anymore. Chad did not know why and how this happened. Jack on the other hand reported how men came and demanded that he follow them. His experience quickly turned grim as the men became demonic.

Jack: There was a knock at the door. I opened the door and there were three men who said they had to take me away. I explained that they needed to take me to the hospital, as I was lying there on the floor, but they demanded to take me and so I came with them out into the hall. When we walked past the stairwell, the hallway began lengthening and got dark, and they began to taunt me. They were holding my back, and their faces lit up like demons as they disparaged me.

The three men demanded that he go with them. Even though he tried to protest against them it seems like he felt he had no choice but to follow. They passed by the stairwell and entered a dark hall. He was being held back and taunted as the men's faces turned demonic.

This master theme illustrates that while the participants were fighting their experience, some managed to feel more in control than others. For some this meant being able to actually affect and change the course of their NDE, for others it meant that outside forces were able to help them escape. Being in control or feeling that someone/something else was in control seems to play some sort of role in how the experience itself is interpreted.

2.2 Desperate to Be Saved

Half of the participants expressed a desperate desire to be saved from their distressing NDE. Two participants expressed a sort of plea to God or some other power to save them from

their horrible experiences. Additionally, two participants described how religious figures came and saved them during their NDE. Suzanne was one of the participants who appealed to God and expressed it as: "I prayed again, 'God, please don't take me. I haven't done enough in your name.' There I was, hanging on for dear life trying to bargain with God to give me more time on earth." Suzanne was pleading to God for help and felt that she was not ready to die yet. Ryan on the other hand, was one of the two participants who described how a religious figure saved him during his NDE.

Ryan: If I didn't come across this little girl (Angel), who could only have been 3 or 4 years old, I know I wouldn't be here writing this right now... Her calmness gave me solace for that brief moment. She said, 'you haven't been here that long, you can still go back.' A feeling I had already lost and probably forgotten about slowly returned. Hope! How was my only question! She said 'you have to feel it! Feel being back where you were before you got here'.

Ryan had lost all hope, until he was saved by an Angel. He went from feeling hopeless to feeling hopeful again when he received instructions from the Angel on how to escape. He had to feel what it would be like being back where he came from. The Angel gave him back the sense of hope that he had previously lost and eventually helped him escape.

This master theme shows how important it was for the participants of maintaining hope in order to get out of their distressing experience. They prayed and looked for some higher power to help them get out of their NDE. There was a form of desire to be rescued and to have a second chance to survive and come back to life.

2.3 The Rejection

Out of eight participants, two described feeling rejected during their NDE. It was like they were not heard or understood, or just plainly left to their own devices. They almost felt invisible. This was frightening on its own since they wanted help during their various distressing experiences. Chad described this feeling below.

Chad: There was this lingering feeling that I had come too soon... Maybe they were calling to my grandmother because I needed someone familiar to send me back to where I came from? So, it wouldn't scare me as much? However, I was absolutely terrified, and I didn't know what was real and what was fake. One of the most intense parts of it was that nobody spoke, it was just known

already in my head what they were saying, and me back. After what was what felt like a strong feeling of rejection, and what I thought was them trying to get my grandmother to come forward for some reason, I literally just ran away desperately trying to get to somewhere else.

Chad felt as if his presence was not welcomed, that he had arrived somewhere too early, too soon. He was terrified and confused as to what was going on. He could communicate with others without saying anything out loud. Not one person whom he knew came forward to help him, which made him feel rejected.

This master theme illustrates how distressing it was for the participants to be in an unknown experience. Hoping to make sense of what they were going through, they tried to find something familiar in their environment that would reduce their sense of discomfort. Not knowing what would happen next or experiencing a form of communication they had never experienced before led to confusion and fear. An unfamiliar form of communication and the feeling that no one in their NDE understood or gave any answers as to why they were there made them feel rejected and alone in their experience.

3. Aftereffects of the Distressing NDE

Six of eight participants described in their narratives that their NDE profoundly changed their lives afterwards. Some changes concerned their personal attitudes towards life and death, while others were about changes in their personality. Dealing with the experience and processing it afterwards gave rise to both negative and positive emotions. Two master themes were hence identified: positive and negative aftereffects.

3.1 Positive Aftereffects

One third of the participants described positive changes in their personal attitudes to life and death. Two participants reported that they felt more open, hopeful, and positive because of their NDEs. Luke expressed it as: “I don’t want to sound crazy, but my mind is open, I’m passionate, have super high senses, taste, smell, thoughts. I’m fascinated by people, systems and technology.” Gary described a similar aftereffect: “I remember getting home and walking into my bedroom, the sun was shining through the window, and I felt very positive about the future, very hopeful, and happy to be here. I was high on life.” Both participants described a new passion and appreciation for their lives because of their NDEs.

This master theme shows how participants' personal attitudes changed positively despite their distressing experience. It seems that their NDE provided some kind of awakening and an

increased appreciation for surviving and having a second chance at life. Surviving and coming back to life led to happiness and a focus on all the positive things the new life had to offer.

3.2 Negative Aftereffects

Five of six participants reported negative aftereffects. The aftereffects included disbelief from others and an increase in negative emotions. Half of the participants described not being understood or believed when talking about their NDEs to others. They still reported having a strong conviction that their NDE was in fact real. Gary was one of the participants who tried to talk about his experience but received negative feedback in return.

Gary: I've tried speaking of this experience to my family, close friends and girlfriends over the years, and their reactions have taught me to be quiet about it. I guess it's a crazy story after all, and I suppose had I not experienced this for myself I would have a hard time believing such a thing.

Gary tried at first to talk about his experience to others, but quickly learned that it is best to keep quiet about it. Gary felt like no one could understand his experience, and that others basically needed to have an NDE to truly understand what it is like to experience one. Just like Gary, Ryan had a hard time telling others about his NDE. He tried to explain that his experience was real and was convinced that it was.

Ryan: I tried to explain what had just happened to the Doctors, but I could tell it was just falling on deaf ears...Do you think for a second that you are dreaming right now? No? My conviction is just the same!!

Ryan's attempts at disclosure of his near-death experience had met with dismissiveness. He felt that the doctors did not want to listen or did not believe him. He knew that his experience was different from a dream and that it was as real as this present moment. Similarly, Suzanne was also not believed when she talked about her NDE.

Suzanne: I was naked, bloody and twisted up in my bathing suit. I laid down on the beach and my boyfriend came to my side. I was murmuring something to him. He replied, 'Don't ever tell anyone that. They'll lock you up in a mental institution.' For years my boyfriend's words kind of froze my resolve. Over the years I experienced a few difficult relationships in my work and personal life, I believed what people were inferring about me at the time, not being worthy

and what I had to say was not valid. That belief only strengthened my ex-boyfriend's warning. But my NDE was real, and I couldn't stop thinking about it every day.

Suzanne was encouraged not to ever talk about her experience by her boyfriend and that affected her for a long time. Even though others did not believe her, she knew in her heart that her NDE was very real and was something she thought about every day. In addition to the feeling of not being understood or believed, there were two participants that felt haunted by their NDE afterwards. Four out of six participants also reported strong negative emotions and questioned the circumstances of their survival and life after death. Ellie was one of the participants who reported that she changed vastly after her distressing experience.

Ellie: After everything I started waking up in panic, I have been seeing a woman who looks exactly like me staring at me. Dressed like me, hair like me everything like me. She also pops up randomly out of the corner of my eye or in reflections etc. It started out calming now I am terrified of her. I am scared of the dark and of being completely alone. I can't sleep at night by myself and I am panicking easier. I get real angry real easy and lose my temper more than ever. I am quick to cry and feel guilty after an argument with my husband I am feeling increasingly isolated and reserved. I feel as though something is trying to bring me back that its evil and hated me for surviving. These feelings have not gone away and are increasing. I AM NOT SUICIDAL THOUGH. In fact I am fighting for my life.

Ellie described how a woman who looked like her kept appearing after her NDE. This turned out to be calming at first but then quickly changed into something terrifying. She has negative emotions more strongly and often. She is still fighting hard, even though she feels that some force did not want her to survive. While Ellie experienced a big change in her life, Ryan questioned his beliefs about life and death and was wondering if everything was predetermined. Remembering the experience still brings a lot of discomfort.

Ryan: The Nurses over the next 2 weeks 'enjoyed' hearing my experience and gave me as much comfort as they possibly could. The little girl's voice still echoes through my head as I picture being back in that horrific place. I

sometimes wonder if I have endured a lifetime of pain just to die and be delivered to a plane designed for more pain? That little Angel knew my name. I ask myself why? Is it already written? I guess only time will give me that answer.

Ryan seems to be questioning everything about his beliefs after his NDE. Why did he end up in that horrible and terrifying place? Is he only suffering in this life to only suffer forevermore after he dies? Is everything already predetermined? There is no way to know.

This master theme shows how difficult it was for the participants to process their experience afterwards. It seemed important for them to be able to tell others about their NDE, and they tried to make their voice heard, but received negative response. This may have contributed to more questions about why they had an NDE because there was no one to acknowledge their experience and their feelings. Many struggled to get rid of their negative emotions on their own and not having any support or strategies on how to deal with their NDE could possibly have led them to feel very alone.

Discussion

To shed light on what it is like to have a distressing NDE and its aftereffects, we conducted an IPA on all narratives available from an NDE database of reports. Our main results show that a distressing NDE can include features such as an experience of a void or hell, distressing feelings, positive, and/or negative aftereffects. Our participants' narratives further show that there can be a sense of questioning your own worth, a feeling of wanting to be saved, or a feeling of rejection when having a distressing NDE. Experiencers also reported contrasting feelings or descriptions. Our narratives possibly suggest that there could be differing levels of sense of control during one's NDE. Our findings also suggest that there can be hybrid experiences, where one participant has both positive and distressing features in their near-death experience.

Our participants reported experiencing distressing feelings such as fear, panic, shock, and despair. Although we did not specifically look for the typical categories of distressing NDEs our results shows that participants had experiences that are similar to previous research about inverted experiences, void (Bush, 2012; Greyson & Bush, 1992), and hellish experiences (Atwater, 1992, 1994; Cassol et al., 2019b; Grey, 1985; Lindley et al., 1981).

Our participants expressed that they had had a gut feeling that they should not be experiencing their NDE or experiencing it too soon. This is common when having an inverted

NDE. They do not know why they are having an NDE and are confused about what is going on, similarly to what previous research has shown (Bush, 2012; Ring, 1984; Sabom, 1982). Similarly, to previous descriptions of void experiences, our participants reported feeling trapped and struggling in the darkness. Another thing that confused two of our participants is that they were able to communicate telepathically with beings in their NDEs. Research (e.g., Greyson et al., 2009) shows that reported telepathic communication with other beings can be a feature of a NDE, but they are rarely mentioned.

During hellish experiences some of our participants observed the torment and suffering of others, while others also suffered themselves. Our results show that while experiencing a hellish NDE is frightening on its own, there might also be a fear of the fear itself that the NDEr is experiencing. Having an NDE can be terrifying and frightening since it is usually an unknown situation which can make someone anxious. For some trusting in their own ability to handle any situation and the unknown can aid in reacting and coping with one's NDE (Bush, 2012). Our results support that the unknown aspect of the experience can be terrifying, with or without having a hellish experience.

In exploring what it is like to have a distressing NDE we realized that some of our stories were hybrid experiences, which include both positive and distressing features and usually start out distressing and then turn positive (Bush, 2012; Sabom, 1982). Our results show that an experience might start out either positive or negative and end with the other one. About half of our participants reported contrasting descriptions of their NDE where they experienced both positive and negative emotions. Therefore, our results show that distressing experiences may not only be distressing but also positive in some sense. Our results made us wonder, are hybrid experiences more common than we might think? Or do we tend to primarily focus on either positive or distressing features of NDEs and therefore miss out on nuances in hybrid experiences?

Preceding research has shown that traumatic events and anomalous experiences can make the world feel chaotic, hard to understand, and to control for those experiencing it (Irwin, 2000). When looking at our findings, we have considered whether sense of control could affect the outcome of an NDE and/or its aftereffects. Rotter (1966) has described that those who perceive that an outcome is due to their own actions or personal characteristics are said to have an internal locus of control. On the other hand, having an external locus of control refers to individuals who think that outcomes are influenced and determined by forces beyond their

control. Could it be that internal and external locus of control could affect NDEs? To this date, there is no research directly linking locus of control, NDEs, and aftereffects. We have not specifically explored or measured if someone had or did not have internal or external locus of control, so we cannot draw any conclusions. We speculate however that one's locus of control might play a role in how one's distressing NDE plays out and how one interprets one's NDE afterwards. Could there be something special about NDEs that makes them harder to control than a regular experience?

People experiencing a distressing NDE may also ask themselves why they are experiencing it and question what they have done to deserve being in an unpleasant experience. Bush (2012) briefly mentions that people seem to question their own value when it comes to painful experiences, especially in the eyes of God. Out of eight, three participants described intense fear of judgment of not being seen as worthy in the eyes of God and thus not going to heaven. Some of them reflected on their past actions and attributed the unpleasant parts of their NDE to punishment or atonement for their sins. We do not know whether the level of self-blame of our participants was affected by the degree of belief in the Day of Judgment or not. However, there seems to be something about the unknown that makes NDErs question themselves in the process. For others who experienced a dark or hellish experience, this belief may have been reinforced.

Bush (2002) has previously discussed that one's mental status and past actions do not affect how distressing or positive one's NDE is. Despite this claim, our participants seem to reason that their previous mental state, beliefs, or actions may have affected the course of their NDE. Some of our participants feel rejected, forsaken, or abandoned by God or other beings during and after their distressing NDE. Having a distressing NDE could confirm our participants' feelings that they are a bad person and therefore deserve a more distressing experience. It is not uncommon to feel a lasting sense of emptiness even after a distressing experience. Furthermore, our results also show that participants can feel a changed worldview after their NDE and question their beliefs about life, God, and afterlife. It is not impossible to imagine that these participants felt betrayed by religion or previous beliefs about the afterlife. Many may blame themselves when they experienced a distressing NDE, since positive NDEs seem to be more common and pleasant.

Our findings show that after a distressing NDE participants could have both positive and negative aftereffects, but mostly negative. Previous research has shown that a distressing

NDE can cause long-lasting emotional trauma, increased vulnerability, and relational issues (Bush, 2012; Greyson, 2001). Our participants reported increased relational problems as well as emotional ones in the form of increased anxiety and other negative emotions. About a third of our participants also indicated that they could not stop thinking about the experience afterwards and felt haunted by it. In contrast, there were also those who reported positive aftereffects. About a third of our participants experienced positive emotions after their NDE and felt more open, hopeful, and positive. It seemed that they expressed an increased appreciation of life in general and felt motivated to live their lives in a better way. However, it is difficult to know what makes some people have negative and others positive aftereffects after their experience. One participant even had both positive and negative aftereffects, showing that it is in fact possible to have both.

Regardless of the content of one's NDE, our results seem to show that many found it challenging to share their experience. The first step to process the distressing experience is to talk about it. NDErs often, however, do not dare to talk about their NDE to others and are therefore risking developing psychological and social problems (Bianco et al., 2017; Foster et al., 2009; Greyson, 1997; Greyson & Bush, 1992; Morris & Knafl, 2003). Our participants had also tried to share the experience with their family members, friends, or healthcare professionals. However, they received negative feedback, were ignored, or told to keep quiet to avoid being locked up in a mental institution. Perhaps that might have been prevented if it was not as stigmatized. An NDE does not fit into most people's worldview, and therefore it might be very unbelievable when an NDEr tries to explain what they experienced.

Strengths and Limitations

According to Willig (2022) our own subjective values and experiences can affect the design and results of our study. Our preconceptions about distressing NDEs may have influenced our selection and interpretation of the data. Even if the participants have categorized their NDE or parts of their NDE as frightening, we do not know which parts or whether it was the whole experience that was frightening. To counteract this limitation, we strived to have a structured and systematic selection and analysis, and independent evaluation. We also considered reflexivity throughout the analyzing and writing process. A limitation of our study is that the database from which we received the narratives consists of those who wanted to send their reports and share their NDE. This might be a biased group and not necessarily be representative of those who experience distressing NDEs. There is also the fact that we could

not control what questions were answered and how. Our narratives thus differed in length and thickness, which led to some participants being highlighted more often than others in the results section. Another limitation is that the participants were not specifically asked to describe their aftereffects in their narratives, which means that only six out of eight participants described their aftereffects.

There is a research gap in terms of meaning-focused analysis methods (Bianco et al., 2017). As the core of IPA focuses on the meaning-making of the experience, we used Smith et al.'s (2009) approach and steps for IPA to gain a deeper understanding of distressing NDEs and their aftereffects. A considerable strength of our study is that we are the first to use IPA to study distressing NDEs in a qualitative yet systematic way. We had a small number of participants, which is a limitation, but we used IPA to make detailed analyses rather than draw general conclusions, which may make the smaller number of participants advantageous. Distressing NDE accounts are not always easy to come by no matter which method you use. A strength of our study is that we were able to analyze eight narratives with distressing NDEs, instead of basing our study just on single cases. Even our selection of narratives was systematic to include every person who fulfilled the criteria for a distressing NDE. This allowed us to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the different near-death experiences, which we would not have obtained through single cases. Another strength is that we have considered internal validity and reliability for qualitative research by doing independent analyses as well as comparing them together. Rather than wanting our analyses to be objectively true, we wanted to ensure that they are credible and consistent with data (Smith, 1996; Yardley, 2008).

A limitation in terms of data collection and implementation of IPA is that we were not able to conduct interviews with the participants who had experienced an NDE. Interviews could have led to a thicker description of their experience, while our narratives had a varying degree of thick descriptions. The fact that we were not able to conduct interviews might have resulted in the unevenness between the participants. By not conducting interviews we were also not able to evaluate the participants' body language, tone, and gestures, which Murray and Holmes (2014) describes as important factors in the collection of data in IPA.

Although we did not use interviews to gather our data, we compensated for this limitation by instead using narratives where participants described their experience. Similarly, to written narratives, diary entries have also been used in phenomenological research. Using diaries for phenomenological research can provide an insight into a phenomenon without the

risk of questions that might alter the description of the experience, which can be a risk during interviews (Alaszewski, 2006; Morrell-Scott, 2018). Using diaries can offer in-depth information and reflections about the participants experiences (Cudjoe, 2022). We did not use diaries for our study. Instead, we used narratives written by the participants who did not know what the research questions would be. The participants were only asked to describe their NDEs. This might in one way be a limitation, but on the other hand it allowed the participants to freely describe their NDE as they saw fit. Therefore, while interviews are usually the preferred data collection method for IPA, we argue that using participants' own written text can also work and have its benefits.

When studying anomalous experiences all methods have their strengths and weaknesses (Cardeña & Pekala, 2014). The difference between using diaries and narratives might be that you tend to write down your experience in a diary daily or close to when the events happened, while a narrative might be written years after your experience. Greyson and Bush (1992) have previously discussed how time can affect how clinically detailed an NDE is recounted. Therefore, there might be a risk that time can affect how the NDEs are remembered in our study. Some of our participants experienced their NDE several years ago, which may lead to potential bias and affect how detailed the memory is described today in the narratives.

Clinical implications

By highlighting those who have experienced distressing NDEs and/or hybrid NDEs, our study contributes to a more nuanced picture and reduces the stigma around what an NDE can include. It is not a positive experience filled with love and light for everyone. Through a qualitative approach, we have gained a deeper understanding of how a distressing NDE can negatively affect NDErs' mental health. This deeper understanding can help inform people, especially healthcare professionals, in supporting those who have experienced an NDE. Experiencing a distressing NDE may lead to an increased risk of developing trauma or other psychological symptoms, which is why healthcare professionals need to develop interventions that can help NDErs to process their experience afterwards. Being open, understanding and non-judgmental are keys to success.

Conclusions

Through a qualitative approach, our study has resulted in a deeper understanding of what it is like to have a distressing NDE and its aftereffects. Our results show that distressing experiences come in many different forms. Our participants experienced distressing emotions,

especially fear, during their NDEs. In contrast, some of our participants had hybrid experiences, with both positive and distressing elements during their NDE. Aftereffects reported by our participants included an increase in negative emotions and not being believed by others when talking about their NDE. Some also experienced positive aftereffects despite having a distressing experience. These features are similar to patterns identified in previous research, but not portrayed in their own words and with more detailed examples as in the current study. In addition to existing research, our study has revealed newer findings that include speculation about the link between locus of control and one's NDE, the experience of feeling judged/abandoned by God, and the increase in negative emotions as aftereffects after a distressing NDE. Future research should focus on exploring hybrid and distressing NDEs and their eventual differences or similarities to positive experiences. It would also be interesting to see research properly studying locus of control and NDEs. Furthermore, there is a need to have more mixed methods and qualitative research about NDEs, since it adds to the understanding of the phenomenon in a way that quantitative research alone cannot.

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