

THE UNEXPLAINED FILES
— BOOK TWENTY —

NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES:

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE DIE?

The Evidence, Accounts and Science
Behind Life's Greatest Mystery

REAL STORIES

SCIENTIFIC STUDIES

SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS



ALDEN M. CORVALE

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Near-Death Experiences: What Happens When We Die?

*The Evidence, Accounts and Science Behind Life's
Greatest Mystery*

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PUBLISHING NOTE

This book examines near-death experiences from scientific, historical and philosophical perspectives. It does not provide medical advice and should not be used to diagnose or treat any condition.

Accounts of extraordinary experiences are presented as reports and claims unless supported by independent evidence. Scientific findings are described with their limitations, and no claim of an afterlife is presented as established fact.

Names of research studies and published sources are included for education and further reading.

CONTENTS

Preface	1. What Is a Near-Death Experience?
2. A Brief History of NDE Research	3. The Core Features of NDEs
4. Out-of-Body Experiences	5. The Tunnel and the Light
6. Encounters with Beings and the Deceased	7. The Life Review
8. Time, Space and the Sense of Reality	9. The Boundary and the Decision to Return
10. Why Do Some People Remember and Others Do Not?	11. Children and Near-Death Experiences
12. Cross-Cultural Patterns	13. Distressing Near-Death Experiences
14. Cardiac Arrest: What Happens to the Brain?	15. AWARE I and the Search for Verifiable Perception
16. AWARE II: Consciousness During CPR	17. The Dying Brain and Gamma Activity
18. Hypoxia and Hypercapnia	19. REM Intrusion and Dream Mechanisms
20. Ketamine, DMT and Neurochemical Models	21. Memory, Reconstruction and the ICU
22. Can People See Accurately During an OBE?	23. Blind Experiencers and Visual Imagery
24. Shared and End-of-Life Experiences	25. How NDEs Change Lives
26. Religion, Spirituality and Interpretation	27. Can Consciousness Exist Without the Brain?
28. What Would Convincing Evidence Look Like?	29. The Ethics of Studying Consciousness at Death
30. The Future of NDE Research	Conclusion - The Question That Remains
Special Dossier 1 - AWARE II: What the Study Actually Showed	Special Dossier 2 - Does an NDE Prove an Afterlife?
Appendix A - Glossary	Appendix B - Common NDE Features
Appendix C - The Greyson NDE Scale	Appendix D - How to Evaluate an Extraordinary NDE Claim

Appendix E - Talking With Someone
After an NDE
Sources and Further Reading

Appendix F - Notes and Further
Reading
About the Author

PREFACE

Death is one of the few human experiences that everyone will approach and no living person can completely describe from the far side. Yet thousands of people who have come close to dying report experiences so vivid, structured and memorable that they often divide life into a before and an after. They describe peace, light, separation from the body, encounters with people or presences, panoramic memory, altered time and a sense of entering a reality more convincing than ordinary waking life.

Near-death experiences are difficult to study because they arise in emergencies rather than laboratories. Cardiac arrest, trauma, severe respiratory failure, anesthesia complications and other crises are unpredictable. Survivors are a selected group. Memories can be affected by medication, delirium and the passage of time. Even the word death has several medical meanings. None of this makes the experiences trivial. It makes them scientifically demanding.

This book follows two rules. First, an experience can be psychologically real and life-changing without automatically proving a supernatural interpretation. Second, a biological hypothesis is not the same as a complete explanation. Hypoxia, hypercapnia, REM intrusion, dissociation, neurotransmitters, temporal-parietal activity and the unusual electrophysiology of the dying brain may illuminate parts of the phenomenon, but research has not yet reduced every reported feature to one mechanism.

The most productive question is therefore not whether near-death experiences are "real". People really report them. The deeper questions are when they occur, what the brain is doing, how memory is formed, why the experiences share certain motifs, why culture changes some details, and whether any observation can distinguish a brain-based model from a model in which consciousness is not fully generated by the brain.

The evidence does not currently justify certainty about an afterlife. It also does not justify pretending that consciousness at the edge of death is a solved problem. That unresolved territory is exactly where this volume begins.