

Letters to the Editor

An Experimentally Induced NDE

To the Editor:

Despite the fact that near-death experiences (NDEs) by definition seem caused by proximity to death, episodes similar to the classic NDE can emerge in other settings. Experiences remarkably concordant to the prototypical NDE, complete with out-of-body observations, tunnels, white lights, and even eschatological journeys, have been reported from situations in which the reporter was not close to death either physically or psychologically (Rogo, 1989).

Cases of this sort suggest that it might be possible experimentally to induce classic NDEs. Two settings from which such an experiment could be essayed would be conventional out-of-body experiences and lucid dreams. Some literature exists documenting the use of the latter to induce transpersonal and spiritual experiences (Gillespie, 1988; Gackenbach and Bosveld, 1989; Sparrow, 1976). I would like to describe below an impromptu experiment to employ such states to induce an NDE.

In the past, I have succeeded in experimentally inducing out-of-body experiences (OBEs) from the hypnagogic state (Rogo, 1974). This capability had ebbed over the years. During the past few years, however, I have experimented with self-inducing OBEs from rapid-eye-movement (REM) sleep when these REM states take place with short latency.

I typically enter the first phase of REM sleep within 30 minutes of sleep onset. If I have slept poorly or relied on sleeping pills that suppress REM sleep, I often experience REM "rebound" during the next one or two nights, in which the REM latency is reduced still further. I usually begin to feel drowsy but remain fully conscious when sleep catalepsy ensues. This state gives rise to rich subjective sensations, such as the feeling of "sinking" through the bed and thousands of voices screaming in my head, though visual experiences tend to be rare.

The experience is extremely unpleasant, but I have learned through practice to prolong these episodes for up to 45 seconds to over a minute, gauged by a counting procedure, before terminating it by finger movement. I never lose consciousness during this time, and I have often unsuccessfully tried to induce OBEs during such episodes.

During one such incident of intense REM rebound, I finally succeeded in leaving the body by prolonging this state, despite its unpleasantness. I was falling asleep that night on my living room couch since I had not been able to fall asleep in bed for several hours. When I became paralyzed and began to hear gushing sounds in my ears, I said to myself something like: "I'm not going to break this; I want to see exactly where it will lead."

I tried to relax into the experience instead of "fighting" to get out of the body. That's when I suddenly found myself standing in some sort of parasomatic body on the opposite side of the room, staring back at my body. I walked or floated up to the inert figure and examined it dispassionately before thinking: "Well, this is a bore. What else should I do?"

At this point in the experience, I decided to see if I could induce a classic NDE. I considered the notion practical since I *can* control my lucid dream environment, even though such dreams are rare in my life. I was also interested in replicating Marcel Louis Forhan's observation that he could control his out-of-body environment by pure thought (Yram, n.d.). I mention these factors to show that, while out-of-body, my thought processes were not dreamlike but perfectly rational.

After thinking about experiencing an NDE, I figured that I should leave the house and go outside onto the porch. I instantly began moving toward and through the front door and could feel myself go right through it. I was outside, looking at the houses and lights up and down the street that runs perpendicular to mine. The scene looked just like it would were I viewing it with my physical eyes. I then commanded myself to undergo an NDE.

The scene instantly changed. The neighborhood didn't change in its appearance, but became drab and rather oppressive, as if I were looking at a sepia-tinted photograph of it. The sky and stars seemed to disappear and a large tunnel opened in the sky, taking up roughly 30° of my visual field. I soon found myself flying down the tunnel, which seemed to be sepia-colored like the rest of the environment, toward a glowing light. I could see and sense the intensity and warmth of the light, and I marveled at the experience. I knew that I shouldn't be capable of staring into something so bright nor tolerate the intense heat I felt, but I could, which encouraged me to try merging with the light. I continued my way through the tunnel.

I was nearing the light when I lost control of the experience, or control was taken from me. My OBE/NDE environment began to fade and I had the sensation of being sucked back through the tunnel. Everything went black as I felt myself swirling down a maelstrom. I realized that I was returning to my body.

I woke up briefly back in my body and was completely awake. I decided I didn't need to write down my experience and was sure I wouldn't forget it. I then fell back to sleep and entered into a normal dream.

When I awoke the next morning, the memory of the experience was still firmly entrenched in my mind. This fact is significant since most of my dreams fade rapidly during the morning, even though my lucid dreams and OBEs do not, a pattern typical for lucid dreams in general (Gackenbach and Bosveld, 1989).

In retrospect, it is difficult for me to say clearly whether this experience was an OBE or a lucid dream. My OBEs tend to be more "logical" and "earthly" than my few lucid dreams. Some researchers believe that OBEs and lucid dreams represent the same phenomenon taking place under separate circumstances (LaBerge, 1985). However, formal electroencephalographic monitoring of gifted OBE subjects in the laboratory has not supported this suggestion (Rogo, 1985). Since the specific experience described above probably took place during stage I sleep, though not in emergent stage I, it would be difficult to state definitely that this episode was "genuine" OBE and not a lucid dream.

What did surprise me, however, was the difference in emotional tone between this experience and many NDEs described in the literature. Never did I feel ecstatic or enjoy the vivid "more real than real" sensations and perceptions described by some NDErs. The entire experience felt flat and lifeless. I felt detached from the experience, and the only emotion I felt was oppression, even while traveling down the tunnel.

Two different explanations can account for this derealized nature of my out-of-body observations. It is possible that my experience was not a "genuine" NDE but merely a pale imitation of the real product. Of course, this explanation is based on the premise that real-life NDEs represent metaphysically real experiences. It is also possible that deliberately induced NDEs are characterized by emotional or perceptual effects different from those resulting from natural circumstances. In this respect, there is some evidence that naturally occurring OBEs are more vivid than deliberately enforced projections (Crookall, 1964).

I am not trying to prove anything in this short report, but merely bringing my experience to the attention of researchers and other individuals interested in the NDE. Since no deliberately induced experi-

ence closely resembling the prototypical NDE has ever, to my knowledge, been placed in the literature, I felt this unusual episode should be reported.

If nothing else, it suggests perhaps that we naturally possess the power to explore the NDE without necessarily falling prey to life-threatening situations. Hypnosis has been used by some researchers to induce NDE-like imagery (e.g., Babb, 1989), but it is not clear whether such results represent our inherent capacity to experience such states or simply the demand characteristics of suggestion.

Such a potential to experience induced NDE-like states does not necessarily imply any specific theory on the nature of the NDE. However, if it can be shown that self-induced NDEs conform strictly to natural NDEs, such a finding might support the idea that the former represent encoded events in the mind or brain (Grof and Halifax, 1977). On the other hand, the existence of genuine differences, which this short report implies, might support the theory that there is something ontologically real to the NDE.

If nothing else, however, some intrepid voyagers in the future may learn to explore the NDE state the same way that some people have investigated the OBE and lucid dream realms. It is difficult to predict what such exploration will reveal to us.

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