

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

ONE FOOT ON THE OTHER SIDE:  
CHANGED ORIENTATIONS TO DEATH  
AFTER A NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
Psychology

At Massey University, Manawatū,  
Aotearoa New Zealand

Nicole Mila Lindsay

2018

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

## Abstract

---

One of the most frequently reported changes after a near-death experience (NDE) is a dramatically reduced or eliminated fear of death. Although a relatively large body of literature has attested to the presence of this aftereffect, the exact nature of this transformation, and why NDEs trigger such changes, has remained speculative. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to comprehensively explore attitudes and beliefs about death following an NDE, with the aim of expanding existing knowledge in this area. Fifty-nine near-death experiencers (NDErs), 46 people who had experienced a life-threatening event but with no NDE, and 69 participants who had never come close to death, completed an online survey measuring attitudes and beliefs about their own personal death. Seventeen NDErs also took part in a series of semi-structured interviews to better determine how and why attitudes to death change after an NDE. Findings demonstrated NDErs have a significantly more positive orientation to death than others, particularly with respect to transpersonal fears, or what happens following the body's physical demise. Attributions for change included reduced fear of pain and suffering at death, feeling that life (and death) has a purpose, relinquishing control over life, acceptance of death as a reality and increased belief in the continuation of consciousness. NDErs were significantly more likely than others to believe in some form of post-mortem continuation. Overall, results demonstrated the unique, subjective content of the NDE was integral to any changes, and that NDEs appear to affect beliefs and attitudes to death in a relatively specific and consistent manner. These findings are discussed in terms of their potential for death education and the treatment of death anxiety, particularly for those imminently facing their own death.

## Acknowledgements

---

First and foremost, I would like to thank my family. To my two beautiful children, thank you for your patience and understanding over the last few years. It has always been a pleasure and an honour to be your mother. To my lovely husband Hamish, thanks for your consistent support and encouragement, the endless deliveries of green tea and the little squares of chocolate that regularly landed on my desk. A big thank you also to my mum Kim, whose love and belief in me over the years has been a steady source of strength. Your energy and enthusiasm for life has always inspired me, and undoubtedly shaped my own natural curiosity of the world.

My sincerest gratitude goes to my three supervisors for all their valuable input. Thanks to Dr Joanne Taylor for her keen eye for detail, statistical expertise and critical challenge throughout. I feel very fortunate to have had Professor Bruce Greyson on my supervisory team, whose knowledge of the topic is second to none. Thanks Bruce, for willingly sharing your expertise and providing positive, helpful feedback. Special thanks must go to my primary supervisor Dr Natasha Tassell-Matamua for her unwavering enthusiasm and commitment, constant availability throughout (even managing to have a baby in the middle of it), and for her confidence in me. Thank you for all your encouragement, support and guidance over the last few years.

Finally, I would like to thank all the near-death experiencers who took part in this study. I know talking about your experience to others has not, and will not, always be easy. Your input has contributed to increased understanding in this area and will hopefully encourage a wider societal acceptance of NDEs in Aotearoa New Zealand (and elsewhere). I sincerely thank you for your courage to speak out about such a highly personal experience, for your honesty and your trust. This one is for you.

## Table of Contents

---

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Table of Contents.....	4
List of Tables .....	8
Table of Figures .....	9
Introduction.....	10
<b>Chapter 1. Death.</b> .....	16
1.1 What is Death?.....	16
1.2 The State of Death.....	17
1.2.1 Investigating After-Death Beliefs.....	18
1.3 Attitudes to Death.....	21
1.3.1 The Fear of Death .....	21
1.3.2 Managing the Fear of Death: The Concept of Denial.....	30
1.3.3 Death Acceptance – Another Way of Managing the Fear of Death .....	33
1.4 Summary .....	39
<b>Chapter 2. Near-Death Experience.</b> .....	40
2.1 Definition and Phenomenology.....	40
2.1.1 Core Features of NDEs .....	42
2.1.2 Measuring NDEs.....	49
2.1.3 Distressing NDEs.....	51
2.2 NDE Incidence and Correlates.....	52
2.2.1 Circumstances Triggering NDEs .....	52
2.2.2 Prevalence and Incidence.....	53
2.2.3 What Type of Person has an NDE? .....	54
2.3 Explanatory Models for NDEs.....	57
2.3.1 Neurophysiological Models .....	58
2.3.2 Psychological Models .....	61
2.3.3 Transpersonal Models.....	62
2.4 Summary .....	66

<b>Chapter 3. Aftereffects of NDEs.....</b>	<b>67</b>
3.1 The Emergence of a Pattern .....	67
3.2 Measuring NDE Aftereffects .....	68
3.3 Types of Aftereffects.....	71
3.3.1 Concern Toward Others .....	72
3.3.2 Appreciation for Life .....	73
3.3.3 Purpose in Life .....	74
3.3.4 Self-acceptance .....	75
3.3.5 Spiritual Changes .....	75
3.3.6 Belief in Life After Death .....	78
3.3.7 Psychic Ability .....	78
3.4 Behavioural Changes.....	79
3.5 Negative Effects of NDEs .....	80
3.6 Limitations and Issues .....	82
3.7 Summary .....	83
<b>Chapter 4. Changed Attitudes Towards Death.....</b>	<b>85</b>
4.1 The Loss of Fear of Death.....	85
4.2 Theoretical Propositions for a Reduced Fear of Death .....	89
4.3 Beliefs About the State of Death.....	95
4.4 Summary .....	96
<b>Chapter 5. Research Questions and Approach.....</b>	<b>98</b>
5.1 Research Questions .....	98
5.2 A Mixed Method, Retrospective Approach. ....	101
<b>Chapter 6. Quantitative Methodology .....</b>	<b>105</b>
6.1 Ethics.....	105
6.2 Recruitment Process .....	106
6.3 Participants .....	107
6.3.1 Participant Demographics .....	108
6.4 Materials and Procedure.....	110
6.4.1 Measures .....	110
6.5 Data Analysis .....	117
<b>Chapter 7. Quantitative Results .....</b>	<b>119</b>
7.1 Measures.....	119

7.2	Characteristics of Participant NDEs.....	119
7.3	Research Questions .....	123
7.4	Summary of Results .....	134
<b>Chapter 8. Qualitative Methodology .....</b>		<b>136</b>
8.1	Ethics.....	136
8.2	Participants .....	137
8.2.1	Recruitment Process.....	137
8.2.2	Participant Demographics .....	138
8.3	Procedure.....	141
8.3.1	Interview Structure and Technique .....	141
8.4	Data Analysis .....	142
<b>Chapter 9. Qualitative Results .....</b>		<b>148</b>
9.1	Overview of Participant NDEs.....	148
9.1.1	NDE Scale Responses.....	148
9.1.2	Phenomenological Descriptions of NDEs .....	150
9.2	Death Attitudes and Beliefs .....	154
9.2.1	Dimensions of Change.....	157
9.2.2	Reasons for Change .....	163
9.3	Summary .....	176
<b>Chapter 10. Discussion .....</b>		<b>178</b>
10.1	A More Positive Attitude to Death.....	178
10.2	The Changed Meanings of Death.....	179
10.3	Features of NDEs that Encourage Post-mortem Survival Beliefs .....	184
10.4	The Construct of NDErs' After Death Beliefs .....	188
10.5	Implications of the Present Study.....	193
10.5.1	Other Implications .....	199
10.6	Limitations of the Current Study and Future Directions.....	201
10.7	Summary and Conclusion .....	202
References.....		209
Appendix A: Advertisements.....		245
Appendix B: Information sheet preceding survey .....		246
Appendix C: Near Death Experiences and Attitudes to Death Questionnaire.....		249
Appendix D: Interview information sheet .....		260



Appendix E: Consent form .....	262
Appendix F: Release of transcript form.....	263
Appendix G: Interview schedule .....	264
Appendix H: Two NZ case study examples from this research.....	265

## List of Tables

---

<b>Table 1.1.</b> <i>What Do We Fear When We Fear Death? Some of the Dimensions Related to the Fear of Death</i> .....	23
<b>Table 2.1.</b> <i>Greyson Scale: Elements of the Near Death Experience</i> .....	50
<b>Table 3.1.</b> <i>Psychological Aftereffects of Near-Death Experiences</i> .....	72
<b>Table 6.1.</b> <i>Demographic Characteristics of the Participants</i> .....	109
<b>Table 7.1.</b> <i>Range, Means, Standard Deviations (SD), and Cronbach's Alphas (<math>\alpha</math>) for Measures</i> .....	120
<b>Table 7.2.</b> <i>Frequency of Near-Death Experience Elements Reported on the Near-Death Experience Scale (NDES)</i> .....	122
<b>Table 7.3.</b> <i>Kruskal-Wallis Tests for the Death Attitude Profile Scale-Revised (DAP-R) According NDE, NonNDE and Control Groups</i> .....	124
<b>Table 7.4.</b> <i>ANCOVA for Death Attitude Profile Scale-Revised Subscales (Approach Acceptance, Fear of Death and Death Avoidance) with Group (NDE, nonNDE, control) as a Fixed Factor and Age as a Covariate</i> .....	127
<b>Table 7.5.</b> <i>Kruskal-Wallis Tests for the Fear of Personal Death Scale-Revised (FPDS-R) According NDE, NonNDE and Control Groups</i> .....	127
<b>Table 7.6.</b> <i>Highest and Lowest Mean Scores for Items on the Fear of Personal Death Scale-Revised</i> .....	129
<b>Table 7.7.</b> <i>Spearman's Rank-Order Correlations for Items on the NDE Scale (NDES) Significantly Correlated with DAP-R Approach Acceptance and Fear of Death</i> .....	131
<b>Table 7.8.</b> <i>Standard Multiple Regression Analysis for Near Death Experience Scale Items and Approach Acceptance</i> .....	131
<b>Table 7.9.</b> <i>Kruskal-Wallis Tests for the After Death Belief Scale (ADBS) According to NDE, NonNDE and Control Groups</i> .....	132
<b>Table 7.10.</b> <i>Dunn's Pairwise Comparisons for NDE, NonNDE and Control Groups According to After Death Belief Scale (ADBS) Subtypes.</i> .....	133
<b>Table 8.1.</b> <i>Demographic Characteristics of Participant Sample</i> .....	139
<b>Table 9.1.</b> <i>Frequency of Near-Death Experience Elements Reported on the Near-Death Experience Scale (NDES)</i> .....	149

## Table of Figures

---

<b>Figure 1.1.</b> <i>Variations in After Death Belief as a Function of Preservation of Consciousness, Identity, and Physicality</i> .....	20
<b>Figure 7.1.</b> <i>A Comparison of Mean Scores on the AfterDeath Belief Scale (ADBS) for NDE Group (NDE), NonNDE Group (nonNDE) and Participants Who Had Never Come Close to Death (Control)</i> .....	134
<b>Figure 9.1.</b> <i>Attitudes and Beliefs About Death After an NDE</i> .....	156