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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

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Aotearoa New Zealand

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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.
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