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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Near Death Experiences (NDE) of Cardiac Arrest Survivors- A Phenomenological Study

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## Abstract

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**Background and methods:** A phenomenological study of Near Death Experiences (NDE) of cardiac arrest survivors was conducted in selected Panchayats of Kannur district, Kerala. The objective of the study was to describe the NDE of cardiac arrest survivors. A descriptive phenomenological research approach was used. The setting was a selected district of Kerala, South India. The participants of the study were seven cardiac arrest survivors. Interview was done using open ended questionnaire on NDE and a background proforma.

**Result:** Participants characteristics show that the mean age of the participants were 52 years. Six out of seven participants were females and four out of them were Christians. Three were employed and two participants were graduates. One didn't have any formal education. All were married and living with their spouse except one who is divorced. Three out of seven were from joint family and all had adequate family support. None of them had prior episode of cardiac arrest and they were hospitalized for an average duration of two weeks. Only two participants had an intuition of danger going to happen. All had faith in God and only one doesn't believe in life after death. Except two all have heard of Near Death Experiences.

The phenomenon that emerged out of the analysis of the Near Death Experiences was "Near Death Experiences.....giving life a new prospect."

**Conclusion:** NDE was a life changing experience for the participants and the experiences provided a new prospect to their life. Appropriate intervention by the medical team has paved way for giving them a chance to survive in this world.

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## INTRODUCTION

Near death experiences (NDE) can take place to anyone anytime anywhere at the time when he or she comes in close contact with death. Sometimes the patients may be hesitant to talk about the experience because they may be fearful that others may think that he is crazy or if the near death experience was a disturbing one, they may try to consciously forget those experiences. But assessing for a NDE and supporting the patient who's had one are important because having a NDE may have a profound effect on his life and relationships. (Duffy, 2007)

Dr Raymond Moody is recognized as the father of NDE research who coined the term Near Death Experience in 1975. NDEs are reported by those people who are clinically dead but are resuscitated, by those who died and are able to explain their death bed visions and those who have fear that they are near to death (Greyson, 1985)

A survey was conducted by Pasricha (1993) for assessing the occurrence of Near-Death Experiences in South India. Four villages with a population of 6430 were surveyed for prevalence. Eighteen people reported that

they faced death. NDE was reported by two per thousand cases interviewed. The reported features of south Indian cases were compared with that of north Indian cases and there was resemblance. Two reported features did not resemble north Indian cases but they had closeness with American cases. Confrontation with the religious figures were reported by north Indian cases which was absent in south Indian cases. So the authors suggested that the elements of Near Death Experiences vary among cultures.(Pasricha, 1993).

The comments and conversations of the health team members during the episode of a near death experiences can have an impact on the patient being taken care. Positive comments are found to help the patients revert back to life and negative comments can adversely affect the patients. The health team must consider the belief system of the patients while taking care of them and should validate the near death experiences. The health team should respect the feelings and experiences of the client.

To explore the NDE of cardiac arrest survivors in order to obtain a holistic view of their experience, a phenomenological study of NDE of cardiac arrest survivors was carried out in selected district of Kerala, South India. The objective of the study was to describe the near death experiences (NDE) of cardiac arrest survivors.

## **Materials and methods:**

This study used a descriptive phenomenological research approach. The setting selected for the study was the selected panchayats of one of the districts of Kerala state, South India. The participants of the study included seven cardiac arrest survivors selected using intensity sampling, a type of purposive sampling which provides information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely but not extremely. Data collection and data analysis were done simultaneously.

Participants included in the study were: Cardiac arrest survivors, whose condition was stable and who could speak Malayalam; who obtained a score of thirty out of thirty in mini mental status examination (MMSE); who were able to recall the experiences and who had an episode of documented cardiac arrest and survived through resuscitation. However, cardiac arrest survivors who were diagnosed with psychiatric disorder, organic brain damage and any other co morbidities that can affect their communication and not oriented and conscious were excluded from the study.

Data was collected from the participants by the primary investigator individually at their house after discharge from hospital and when their condition was stable from October 2013 to February 2014. Background proforma and an open ended questionnaire on NDE were used to collect the data. The study was approved by the Institution Ethical Committee Clearance, Kasturba hospital, Manipal and written informed consent was obtained from the participants. The study used background proforma that consisted of 19 questions related to the characteristics of the participants such as age, gender, religion, educational status, occupation, marital status, type of family, monthly family income, family support and items related to hospitalization and Near Death Experiences. The participants were interviewed using an Open ended questionnaire on Near Death Experiences.

The validity of this study was ensured by choosing the information rich cases, bracketing and by getting feedback from informants. The background proforma and the open ended questionnaire on Near Death Experiences were given to seven experts in the field of nursing, psychiatry and psychology for content validity. The tools were translated to Malayalam and retranslated to English. Reliability of the data was ensured by tape recording the interview sessions. Data were collected by interview in Malayalam which was audiotaped. The researcher repeatedly read participant's descriptions and listened to the tapes to become familiar with their words. The data was then translated to English. The researcher followed the steps of phenomenology i.e. bracketing, intuiting, analyzing, and describing. The researcher used Open Code software (OPC) 3.6 versions for data entry and coding. The data was given for validation and submitted to experts in the field of qualitative research to derive the meanings of each statement. The sub themes were formulated into clusters which contributed to the description of the phenomenon "Near Death Experiences: Giving life a new prospect". From the emerged themes the researcher framed a conceptual framework that explained the phenomenon of Near Death Experiences among cardiac arrest survivors.

## **Result**

### **Participant's characteristics**

It was observed that the mean age of the participants were 52 years. Six out of seven participants were females and three were Christians. Three were employed and two participants were graduates. One didn't have any formal education. All were married and living with their spouse except one who was divorced. Three out of seven were from joint family and all had adequate family support. None of them had history an episode of cardiac arrest. Average days of hospitalization were one week. Only two participants had an intuition of danger going to happen. All had faith in God.

The phenomenon that emerged out of the analysis of the Near Death Experiences was “**Near Death Experiences.....giving life a new prospect.**” The sub themes extracted out of the data were:when my heart nearly ceased to beat; my near death experiences...the moment I nearly died and Life....a new prospect.

### **When my heart nearly ceased to beat**

1a. *Perception of problem:* The participants understood that there is a threat to their life from physical symptoms, intuition and psychic experience.

Participant seven: “*For me suddenly... like a difficulty in the chest... that time... what happened and all...i was not conscious. In the chest..pain... breathing difficulty and felt like breath stopped (Pause). like tension...want to go to toilet...want to pass urine...whole body was weak and felt like falling down...couldn't see with both eyes.*”

1b. *Rush to health care, a door to needle in haste:* The participants had undergone immediate medical intervention that helped them to save their life.

1c. *Resolution of problem:* There was recovery after appropriate treatment and all participants felt better.

### **2. My near death experiences...the moment I nearly died**

2a. *Conviction that one has died..woodified in death:* The participants face death and they felt as if they are like a dead body. They were unaware, uncertain and unable to do anything. They reported that they were going inside death.

Participant one: “*When I went from here, when my two eyes were closed, I thought that my death is sure. I saw my death...then when I wanted to see whether I reached hospital, I couldn't open my eyes. The eye lids were drooping ...the two eye lids were drooping.... after some time... when I reached hospital... I tried to move my hands and legs ....I had memory inside. But when I opened my eyes my legs were not moving. My hands did not move.(pause).. I was like dead body*”.

2b. *Visualization of divine, loved ones- a source of peace and happiness:* Most of the participants have visualized religious figures and deceased relatives which was a sign of consolation for them. Thoughts about heaven made one subject happy and peaceful.

Participant one: “*I was going inside... that death.. I was seeing in the nap..two angels.. like ...wearing white dress ...like this... I was seeing in front of me. ..That time I was dying ....dying... To explain the angels ....when they passed the door and came, they were smiling and dancing ...we are feeling like that.... with a song , that song for me....(pause). Lips were moving. But we are not able to hear that. I am not able to memorize what I heard, what it is..... But they came with blessings, I think*”.

2c. *When my body was floating...way out to another world:* Few participants reported floating body sensation and many felt as if they are entering another world.

Participant five: “*Some where like ...flying above ..like that.... felt like..going from this world.... body is going..like that a feeling*”.

2d. *Reality vs. fantasy:* None understood the meaning of their NDE but they tried to give their own interpretation. It was thought to be a dream by most of them. While some saw this in conscious mind others were unconscious.

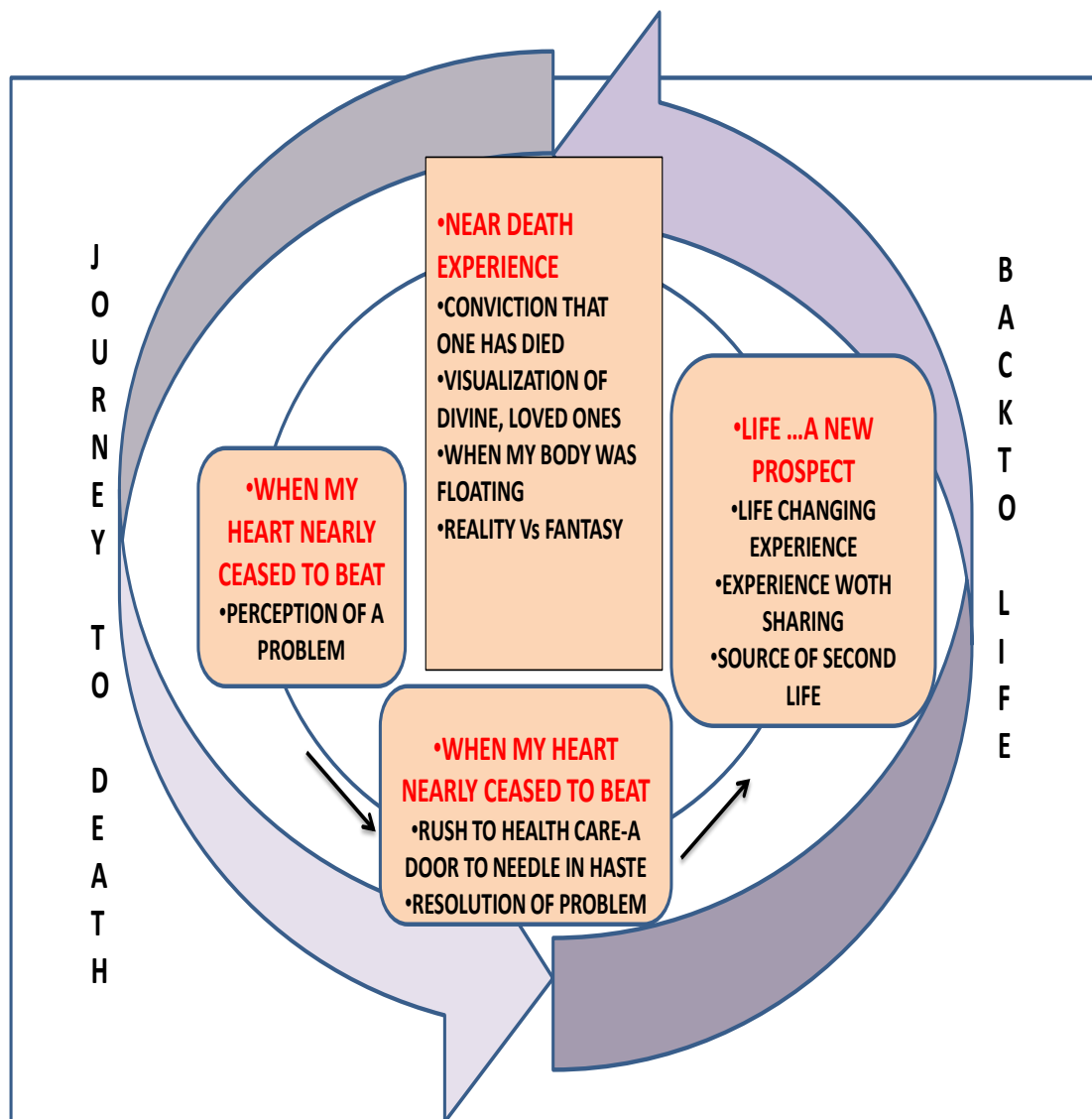
### **3. Life....a new prospect.**

3a.*NDE-a life changing experience:* NDEhas changed the life of all the participants. Their faith in God has increased and they developed positive attitude towards life.

3b. *NDE-an experience worth sharing:* All the participants were happy to share this experience with others.

3c. *Saved from death, a source of second life:* The participants were thankful to God for a second chance to live better. None wants this episode to happen again. Travelling through death is considered to be a bitter experience by everyone.

A few sub themes that emerged out of the study were conviction that one is dead, visualization of divine and deceased relatives, a source of peace and happiness and a way out to another world. The conceptual diagram of phenomenon of NDE is shown in Fig 1



**Fig.1. Conceptual Diagram of Phenomenon of NDE**

## Discussion

Near Death Experiences are thought to be emerging from the psycho socio cultural beliefs of the participants. While the journey to death offers Near Death Experiences their journey to life starts when they are reverted back to life by medical intervention. Also these experiences give a new meaning to their life and affect the attitude towards life. Near death experiences differ with regard to their elements. While for some it was clear vivid visualization others had affective distortion and floating body experience. Previous exposure to the same phenomenon can play a major role in determining the elements of Near Death Experiences. It is uncertain that again at the time of their journey to death this experience can happen. So the journey to death and journey to life are the two halves of the phenomenon of Near Death Experiences.

The studies with similar findings is noted in the study carried out by Janet S. the study was to assess the incidence of near-death experiences (NDEs) in cardiac arrest survivors, to describe distinct features and to identify the consequences from thirty patients from 1991-1994. Seven reported that they had a NDE and four others reported aNDE during the period of a prior life-threatening condition. These experiences were portrayed by "affective changes, extreme peace, lack of pain, fearlessness, absence of time and space sense, detachment from body." The

consequences of near death experiences differed between those who had a NDE and those who didn't have an NDE. Those who had a near death experience had better understanding of self, positive attitude towards self, strengthened spiritual beliefs (Janet S, 2002). This findings support the findings of this study as the Near Death Experience have few common themes that emerged out of the analysis.

A study was carried out by Sam. about the incidence and qualitative features of near death experiences among cardiac arrest survivors within one week of their episode of cardiac arrest. Eleven percent of the survivors reported memories out of which majority had a near death experience. The features of the NDE were considered to be pleasant by the cardiac arrest survivors. The researcher concluded that a relationship might exist between mind and the brain and NDE occur during the period of unconsciousness or while regaining consciousness. (Sam, 2001)

A study by Ketis was done to determine the association between NDEs and the consequence of NDE on these patients with regard to life changes. The data was collected from thirty seven survivors of cardiac arrest. The tools used included Greyson NDE scale and Ring's life change inventory. Seven patients reported to have experienced NDE. In comparison to non NDE group, life changes were more among the NDE group. They included more tolerance for others, self understanding, inner meaning of life, appreciation of nature etc (Klemenc-Ketis, 2013). This findings support this study findings as the consequence of the NDE resulted in change of attitude towards life and others, courage improved and faith in God has strengthened.

A study was carried out among eighty six survivors of head injury in China used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The study found that only three had a clear cut NDE. The themes that were extracted included distinctive light visions, ineffability, feeling of helplessness and supernatural experiences. The researchers concluded that Near Death Experience is not common in head injury cases but it affects their belief and emotions (Hou Y1, 2013).

The findings of this study support the this study as the sub themes emerged were found to be similar. The participants in the present study also had happiness, a sense of helplessness and few had a supernatural experience.

## Conclusion

Near Death Experience were a life changing experience for the participants and the experiences provided a new prospect to their life. It was evident from the findings that the phenomenon of near death experience is not uncommon among people. Sometimes people find it difficult to derive the meaning of their experiences. Appropriate intervention by the medical team has paved way for giving them a chance to survive in this world. The reaction of near death experience varies from people to people with regard to their beliefs and culture.

Near Death Experiences are an existing phenomenon reported by the survivors of life threatening illness. Many are able to provide a clear and vivid explanation. It can include meeting divine, deceased relative, peace, happiness, out of body experience and so on. It is possible for the health team members to take into account these experiences. Since the comments of health care members can have an impact on the life of the survivors, care should be taken while they converse with patients and comments on their near death experiences. Near Death Experiences are found to occur as a result of neurobiological alterations in the brain.

Small participants size of seven and population coverage i.e. one district that limits the generalizability of study findings.

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