



International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation.

The meaning of life to individuals who have encountered near-death experience

RaahAbishai R Alanzalon ^{1*}, Alex Vincent D Badiango ², Crisiel B. Cabulong ³, MA Kristine Pamela S ⁴, Cristine Lae C Erasga ⁵

¹⁻⁵ College of Arts and Sciences, City of Cabuyao, Laguna, Philippines

* Corresponding Author: RaahAbishai R Alanzalon

Article Info

ISSN (online): 2582-7138

Volume: 05

Issue: 04

July-August 2024

Received: 16-04-2024;

Accepted: 19-05-2024

Page No: 116-121

Abstract

This study delved into the meaning of life for individuals who experienced near-death experiences (NDEs), exploring their encounters and discerning recurring themes and patterns in their perceptions post-NDE. Guided by the 10 core elements of NDEs outlined by Dr. Greyson *et al.* (2021), seven NDE experiencers were interviewed, and data underwent Interpretative and Phenomenological Analysis. Two overarching themes emerged: Profound Perceptions After NDEs and Concept of Life after NDEs. Additionally, eight supplementary themes were identified: 1) Impact and Transformation after Near-Death Experience, 2) Personal Growth and Coping After Near-Death Experience, 3) Holistic Transformation After Near-Death Experience, 4) Personal Growth and Transformation, 5) Conscious Living and Personal Development, 6) Post-Near-Death Experience (NDE) Transformation, 7) Profound Personal Transcendence, and 8) Holistic Personal Evolution. NDEs prompted personal growth, coping strategies, and lifestyle adjustments, fostering mindfulness and positive changes. Participants also noted shifts in religious beliefs, heightened appreciation for life, and strengthened familial bonds. Spirituality played a pivotal role in guiding post-NDE lives, emphasizing conscious living and nurturing relationships.

Keywords: life perception, near-death experience, existential purpose, transformative impacts

1. Introduction

Near-death experiences (NDEs), which are vivid, subjective experiences that occur during life-threatening events, are experienced by 10% to 20% of patients who have been close to death (Kopel, 2019) ^[9]. One out of every ten persons has had at least one Near Death Experience (NDE). Discovered that 289 out of 1,034 respondents had an NDE. Surveys conducted in the United States, Australia, and Germany indicate that 4 to 15% of the population has experienced NDEs. According to research, nearly one-fourth of the population who faced imminent death claimed a near-death experience. As a result, it was determined that 8% of the population had experienced an NDE.

Moreover, in the study of (Kondziella *et al.*, 2019) ^[8], 1034 lay individuals from 35 different countries were recruited to assess the prevalence of near-death experiences, with the results indicating that 106 out of 1034 participants, or around 10%, reported a near-death experience. Furthermore, in the study of (Rousseau *et al.*, 2023) ^[16], 136 subjects were included and questioned 5 (third to seventh) days after ICU discharge. Out of this group, 19 patients (15%) reported having had a near-death experience as defined by the Greyson NDE criteria. This study (Rousseau *et al.*, 2023) ^[16] found that patients discharged from the ICU after an extended stay had an NDE rate of 15%, regardless of the serious illness they survived.

Furthermore, near-death experiences (NDEs) encompass a wide range of unusual occurrences which take place when people are on the edge of passing from this world to the next, only to be quickly drawn back to it, which is frequently referred to as an entrance to another world or a window into another dimension.

NDE is a strange phenomenon in which a person has an out-of-body experience or internal consciousness while under lethargic circumstances. Raymond Moody developed the concept in his 1975 book, *Life After Life*. A near-death experience is defined as a life-threatening occurrence or event in which death is highly likely. It can also involve major injuries or illness, as well as incidents that may have had life-threatening implications (Camelo, 2022) ^[3].

According to Naghiyae *et al.* (2020) ^[15], the "meaning of life" refers to how individuals comprehend, value, and derive purpose from their existence. This understanding plays a vital role in resilience following trauma or disasters, providing individuals with a sense of purpose amidst adversity. Recent studies highlight the importance of finding meaning in life for effectively coping with unpredictable situations, as high-stress circumstances often disrupt one's sense of purpose.

According to (Routledge & FioRito, 2021) ^[17], finding meaning in life is about having a sense of relevance, coherence, and purpose in one's life. Based on a growing body of studies, finding the meaning of life is a basic human need that significantly impacts both psychological and physical health.

Near-death experiences (NDEs) have fascinated people from every aspect of life and religions throughout centuries. These astonishing encounters, as recounted by individuals who have faced death and returned, frequently entail deep and transforming incidents that call into question traditional views about life and death. Exploring NDEs provides a unique perspective on life's core concerns, prompting introspection into existence, purpose, and the afterlife.

According to Greyson (2023) ^[6], near-death experiences (NDEs) are profoundly transformative and vivid encounters. While they vary between individuals, common features include feelings of ease and freedom from pain, the sensation of leaving the body and observing it from above, heightened mental clarity and speed, entering a dark tunnel or seeing a bright light, experiencing overwhelming calm or love, gaining profound insights, reviewing past events, glimpsing future occurrences, and encountering deceased loved ones or other entities. However, some NDEs may deviate from these typical elements and instead be distressing or frightening.

This study aims to explore the profound meaning of life for those who have had near-death experiences. It seeks to obtain a better understanding of how these exceptional experiences shape one's sense of the meaning and purpose of life by delving into the personal stories of persons who have had near-death experiences. Examine several aspects of the human experience in an attempt to shed light on the intricate and profound nature of the meaning of life as perceived by individuals who have had NDEs by implementing an interdisciplinary approach.

2. Methodology

A. Research Design

To meet the study's objectives, the researchers used qualitative research methods. Qualitative research gathers participants' experiences, behaviors, and perceptions and addresses the hows and whys rather than the how many and how much (Tenny *et al.*, 2022) ^[18]. Additionally, it is stated that exploring real-world issues and acquiring deeper insights about them are the goals of qualitative research methods. The indicated method was employed because this study was mainly focused on the meaning of life to individuals who had near-death experiences, which means this study explored the

participants' perceptions (Moser *et al.*, 2017) ^[14].

Interpretative phenomenological analysis research design (IPA) was utilized. (Alase, 2017) ^[2] affirmed that such an approach is "participant oriented," allowing the participants to express themselves and share their experiences how they wanted to. The primary goal of IPA is to look into how people interpret their experiences and the meanings they give them. Additionally, this approach shows respect and sensitivity to the participants' experiences. IPA research design allows for comprehending the innermost experiences of the participants. Moreover, stated that IPA is a qualitative research approach committed to examining how people make sense of their significant life experiences.

Such a design was used to explore the participants' meaning, experiences, and insights regarding the significance and meaning of life. Indeed, this design helped gather rich and insightful data better to understand the complexities of the participants' experiences. Through interpretative research design, the researchers were able to have an in-depth analysis and understanding of the subject of interest. Thus, by exploring participants' experiences, researchers comprehensively understand them. Correspondingly, recent studies have used interpretative phenomenological analysis for conducting research for NDEs (Zingmark *et al.*, 2022) ^[19].

B. Research Locale

This study was carried out within the vicinity of Cabuyao City, Laguna. Cabuyao is a city in the province of Laguna in the Philippines, situated in the CALABARZON region, which takes up the middle portion of the island of Luzon. The city covers an area of 16.72 square miles, which is equivalent to 43.30 square kilometers. According to the 2023 Macrotrends Population Chart, Cabuyao has an estimated population of 418,000, accounting for 10.51% of Laguna's total population and 2.19% of CALABARZON region's total population.

C. Population and Sampling

This study utilized a non-probability sampling technique. The sample used for this technique needs to accurately represent the total population within a small group of participants, resulting in not having equal chances for the population members to participate in the study. For this study, a non-probability sampling technique is necessary, for it only represents part of the population of individual who had Near-death experience within the locale of the study.

With the non-probability sampling method in hand, a purposive non-probability sampling method is utilized in gathering the participants of the study. The purposive or judgmental sampling technique enables the researchers to rely on the criteria in selecting the study participants (Purposive *et al.*). This type of method is often used in qualitative research, where it allows the researchers to have an in-depth analysis of data within a sample representative of the area of the study. The criterion sampling method for the study is the nonprobability sampling method. Selecting examples based on their adherence to a set of predefined criteria for significance is what criterion sampling entails. In this study, the basis for the criterion will be the core elements of NDE provided by Dr. Greyson *et al.*

D. Research Participants

The sample of this study are individuals living within the vicinity of the City of Cabuyao, particularly those who

qualify for the given criteria and possess the specific knowledge of their experience. This study utilized only seven participants. To support the number of participants, discussed that between three and six participants “can be reasonable for a student project” sample sizes are best if they range from 4 to 10 interviews. Similarly with the idea of who stated that studies on IPA are carried out utilizing small sample sizes. Considering that the extensive case-by-case analysis of individual transcripts takes time, the main goal of the study is to elaborate on something in detail about the perspectives and concepts held by this specific group rather than prematurely making broader general claims.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Selecting Participants

Listed below are the core elements of NDE provided by the leading pioneers Dr. Greyson *et al.* The said features will be used as guide criteria in considering an event as a near-death experience.

1) feeling very comfortable and free of pain; 2) a sensation of leaving the body, sometimes being able to see the physical body while floating above it; 3) the mind functioning more clearly and more rapidly than usual; 4) a sensation of being drawn into a tunnel or darkness; 5) a brilliant light, sometimes at the end of the tunnel; 6) a sense of overwhelming peace, well-being, or absolute, unconditional love; 7) a sense of having access to unlimited knowledge/profound insights, expanded consciousness; 8) a “life review,” or recall of important events in the past; 9) a preview of future events yet to come; 10) encounters with deceased loved ones, or with other beings that may be identified as religious figures. Conversely, a particular basis for the exclusion of participants is presented below:

- Must not be diagnosed with any incurable diseases (dementia, including Alzheimer's disease, severe stroke, and other neurological diseases, etc).
- Must not be diagnosed with any mental health disorder (post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder, depression, etc).

E. Research Instrumentation

The researchers employed semi-structured interviews to gather comprehensive data relevant to their study. Qualitative interviews were chosen to delve deeply into the unique experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of participants, providing valuable insights into the subject matter (McGrath *et al.*, 2018) ^[13]. Semi-structured interviews are particularly effective for collecting qualitative, open-ended data and exploring participants' thoughts, feelings, and opinions on a topic, including sensitive concerns (DeJonckheere *et al.*, 2019) ^[14].

During the interviews, participants were asked open-ended questions followed by probes and follow-up queries to further explore their perceptions. This approach allowed participants the freedom to express their thoughts on their terms, ensuring a rich understanding of their experiences.

The research aimed to answer central and corollary questions by analyzing data from interviews and observations. The main objective was to gather relevant information related to the research questions. To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, a rigorous validation process was conducted involving three research professionals with expertise in the field. They meticulously reviewed the interview questions, assessing clarity, comprehensiveness, and relevance to the research objectives, as well as consistency and alignment

with existing theories and literature on near-death experiences (NDEs).

Ten interview guide questions were used to collect data pertinent to the study, designed to probe into individuals' experiences with NDEs. These questions were carefully crafted to elicit detailed responses and provide a comprehensive understanding of participants' perspectives. The interview questions utilized were as follows:

1. How will you describe your near-death experience?
2. How would you define the concept of life, especially considering your near-death experience?
3. In what ways did your near-death experience influence the following?
 - a. beliefs
 - b. values
 - c. spiritual outlook regarding the meaning of life
4. How did your encounter with the possibility of death impact your priorities or your approach to life? If it did, what specific ways did it influence you?
5. Can you describe any specific actions or changes you have made in your life because of the near-death experience that you believe contribute to a deeper sense of meaning or purpose of your life?
6. Can you discuss any specific lessons or messages you realized and received during the near-death experience? (Do you believe that these realizations serve as guiding principles for finding meaning in your life?)
7. How would you describe your own interpretation of “life” before and after you're near-death experience?
8. Do you see any difference between how you interpret life before and after your near-death experience?
9. How would you describe the overall impact of your near-death experience on your personal journey of finding meaning and purpose in life?
10. How have you integrated the insights and understandings gained from your near-death experience into your daily life and actions?

F. Data gathering procedure

The data-gathering process involved conducting semi-structured interviews with individuals who experienced near-death experiences (NDEs). Various ethical permissions were obtained, including consent from relevant authorities and participants. Participants were recruited through social media and underwent pre-assessment using NDE criteria.

Interviews, scheduled based on participant preference, utilized validated guide questions to explore NDEs and related perceptions. Active listening and probing techniques ensured comprehensive data collection. Data collection methods accommodated participant comfort, with recordings or note-taking.

Post-interview, data was transcribed and analyzed qualitatively. Themes, codes, and clusters were identified from verbatim transcripts, summarizing and extracting pertinent information systematically.

Overall, the data analysis involved a thorough process of transcription, classification into themes, and summarization to extract relevant insights from participants' experiences with NDEs.

G. Ethical Consideration

This research study adhered to ethical guidelines set forth by the Psychological Association of the Philippines and Pamantasan ng Cabuyao, prioritizing participant welfare,

rights, and protection. Measures included obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and minimizing harm or discomfort.

Informed Consent and Voluntary Participation: Participants were provided with written informed consent forms detailing the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. They were informed of their voluntary participation and right to withdraw.

Risks: Psychological distress, time commitment, and confidentiality concerns were addressed. Participants could experience emotional distress when discussing near-death experiences. Time commitment was outlined, and confidentiality was ensured through data encryption, limited access, and anonymization.

Potential Biases: Response bias, recall bias, and cultural bias were acknowledged. Participants might provide socially desirable responses or recall experiences inaccurately. Cultural backgrounds could influence interpretations.

Confidentiality of Participants: Participant confidentiality was safeguarded through secure data storage, limited access, anonymization, and secure disposal measures. Technical and procedural safeguards ensured data security and anonymity.

Procedures for Informing Participants of Study Results: Participants were given options for receiving study results, such as email, postal mail, or phone calls, respecting their preferences. Clear contact information was provided for questions or concerns. Participants could opt-in or opt-out of receiving results, and follow-up communication was prompt and respectful.

3. Results and Discussions

This chapter presents the results and discussion obtained from the gathered data. Comprehensive data analysis is provided, weaving together threads of narratives, perspectives, and the main themes that emerged. The results of this study are presented in tables showing the superordinate and subordinate themes. There are four tables presenting the themes for the central question and two corollary questions; the last table presents the summary of all the themes gathered for this study.

Table 1: Superordinate Theme for Central Question: "What profound perception towards life is gained by individuals after an encounter with a near-death experience?"

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Themes
Concept of Life after Near-Death Experience	Life's Significance and Reevaluation
	Transformation and Second Chances
	Responsibility and Transformation from Violence to Caution

Participants experienced shifts in their perspectives and behaviors after Near-Death Experiences (NDEs), as observed through reevaluation of their lives, transformative actions, and increased gratitude for a second chance at life. Their close call to cease of existence heightened their responsibilities in taking caution after their NDEs towards their new chance at living. This aligns with previous research indicating common transformative journeys among individuals following NDEs. According to Kinnunen & Alt

Mellou (2023) ^[12], changes in an individuals' view about life are changed in accordance to encountering NDEs.

Table 2: Superordinate Theme for Corollary Question One: "What contributing aspects have changed and had influence the perception individuals who have had near-death experiences?"

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Themes
Holistic Transformation and Coping After Near-Death Experience	Spirituality
	Emotional Resilience and Coping
	Behavior and Lifestyle

Participants discussed specific actions that contributed to their deeper perception of life's meaning or purpose, including reflecting on decisions and considering consequences before their Near-Death Experiences (NDEs). Research suggests that mindfulness and conscious efforts can mitigate anxiety-inducing situations, leading to holistic transformations such as changes in habits and diet, ultimately improving well-being Anālayo *et al.* (2022) ^[1]. Furthermore, after experiencing NDEs, individuals tend to adopt more positive lifestyle changes, resulting in increased happiness and overall well-being. Participants also shared how the possibility of death impacted their priorities and approaches in life, leading to personal growth and improvement post-NDE. Hollingsworth, highlight that Near-Death Experiences (NDEs) prompt positive life changes, emphasizing personal growth and development.

Table 3: Superordinate Theme for Corollary Question Two: "How can these varying aspects be related to individuals' interpretation of life after experiencing NDEs?"

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Themes
Conscious Living and Improved Social Relationship	Reflective Growth
	Positive Outlook and Gratitude
	Strengthened Social Connections

Participants, influenced by their Near-Death Experiences (NDEs), became more cautious of their actions, realizing life's fragility and appreciating their second chance at living. Improved social relationships and enhanced spiritual and emotional well-being were observed post-NDE, with participants valuing and nurturing relationships and deepening their spiritual connections. Additionally, (Jahromi, 2021) ^[7] claims that after NDE most participants reported having improved social connections, showing others more generosity and love. According to Kopel & Webb (2022) ^[10], faith in God was noted as empowering individuals to release burdens and trust in a higher power's care.

4. Discussion

This section interprets and contextualizes the presented results. Included in this part is the summary of the emerging themes obtained from the qualitative data of the participants. The proposed program is also included in this section. It is designed to help comprehensive program that aims to raise awareness, provide support, and promote overall well-being for individuals who have had Near-Death Experiences (NDEs) while fostering community understanding and collaboration among various sectors.

Table 4: Summary of emerging themes from the Central and Corollary Question

Superordinate themes	Subordinate Themes
Concept of Life after Near-Death Experience	Life's Significance and Reevaluation
	Transformation and Second Chances
	Responsibility and Transformation from Violence to Caution
Holistic Transformation and Coping After Near-Death Experience	Spirituality
	Emotional Resilience and Coping
	Behavior and Lifestyle
Conscious Living and Improved Social Relationships	Reflective Growth
	Positive Outlook and Gratitude
	Strengthened Social Connections

After near-death experiences, individuals reported changes on their concept of life developing a profound perception of life, marked by heightened empathy, spirituality, purpose, appreciation, coping mechanisms, behavioral shifts, lifestyle changes, self-understanding, spiritual connections, and social interactions. These occurrences extend beyond individuals, influencing their perception of the meaning of life.

Additionally, participants highlighted Holistic Transformation and Coping After Near-Death Experience. NDE profoundly influences participants' beliefs, values, and spirituality, leading to shifts in religious viewpoints, overall perspectives, and increased appreciation for life. Participants report strengthened family connections, heightened compassion, and a sense of responsibility. Spirituality becomes a guiding force, fostering increased self-awareness, commitment to self-improvement, and a clearer recognition of life's value.

After NDEs, develop conscious living and improved social relationships which leads them to engage in practicing mindfulness, making positive lifestyle changes, and reflecting on life decisions, leading to improved well-being. They experience a renewed sense of purpose, conscious living, and deeper appreciation for relationships, fostering caution and nurturing connections. These aspects collectively shape individuals' interpretation of life post-NDEs.

The researchers are advocating for a thorough initiative focused on raising awareness, delivering assistance, and fostering holistic wellness among those who have undergone Near-Death Experiences (NDEs). Simultaneously, the program aims to cultivate understanding and cooperation within the community across various domains. The program is called "Integrated Well-Being: Navigating Life after Near-Death Experiences (IWELL-NDE)". It seeks to support individual's post-Near-Death Experiences (NDEs) by addressing their psychological, spiritual, and community integration needs. IWELL-NDE will collaborate with Religious/Spiritual Support and Community Groups who will organize regular meetings for NDErs to share experiences. Partnering with Counseling and Mental Health Services and Professionals who provide specialized support and workshops on coping mechanisms and mental health awareness for NDErs. Additionally, University Engagement and Support: Pamantasan ng Cabuyao will organize seminars and lectures to educate students and faculty about NDEs and encourage participation in related research projects. Also, Collaboration with the Philippine Psychological Association: Integrating NDE awareness into psychological practice through collaboration with the PAP, supporting research programs focusing on psychological aspects of NDEs and organizing supportive group and community events. Duration of the program will be 3-6 months, depending on the overall result and efficacy of the program. IWELL-NDE can be a yearly program.

Primary objectives, such as examining and exploring the experiences of the participants who have had near-death experiences, as well as identifying common themes and patterns in individuals' perceptions of life after near-death experiences, were carried out in this study. Profound results were obtained from all the gathered data, presenting a comprehensive discussion of the results.

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