

**Patients who've had a neardeath experience
—and there are many more than you may realize—
need another dimension of caring from you.
For insights on how to best provide**

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HELPING PATIENTS WHO'VE HAD *NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES*

I was riding my bicycle when all of a sudden a car hit me broadside. I was flung forward about 12 feet, crashing down onto the right side of skull. I realized that I was going to die. There was nothing scary about this, just a very calm and peaceful feeling....

"Then all at once I was hovering high up in the air, looking down, and separated from my physical body that lay crumpled on the ground. There was no pain...."

"As I looked down upon the group crowded in a circle over my inert body. I could distinctly hear the conversations taking place. All the while I continued to bask in feelings of warmth, peace, and tranquility.

"I could see the ambulance men putting me on a backboard, then lifting me onto a stretcher.

"Suddenly, I became aware of a kind of whooshing feeling and blackness as I was catapulted down, back into my physical body...."

"I remember my anger at having to leave...the shock of finding myself thrust back into a body that was screaming out in pain...and of course, the ultimate frustration of not being able to find the words to even remotely describe the full extent of my experience.

There was no one I could tell who wouldn't think I was either crazy or just momentarily confused because of my head injury!"

An unusual story? With little relevance to you as a nurse? Far from it.

This story, told to me by a friend, Jill, describes a near-death experience (NDE)—a phenomenon in which a person comes very close to death and has an experience with certain universal characteristics. Actually, Jill's account is amazingly similar to stories told by many people who have, so to speak, looked at the face of death and returned."

Despite extensive research, we still don't know what causes NDEs. Yet, happen they do—to people of every age, religion, and nation. About 8 million American adults, according to a Gallup poll, have had NDEs. Another recent study indicates that as many as 38% to 50% of all patients who clinically come very near to death from *any* cause may have an NDE.

So you'll want to know what to do for the patient who experiences one.

Coming back

An NDE can drastically affect a person's life, but all too often the patient is afraid to discuss it. For instance, Jill didn't confide her story to me until 3½ years after her accident. And, if a patient does share his experience, staff and family members may dismiss it as an hallucination or the effect of a drug.

Each person describes an experience that is intensely personal, but most NDEs involve at least some of these characteristics:

- *Separation from the body.*

This is the most common characteristic. As Jill reported, the first thing the person notices when the separation occurs is a total absence of pain. One patient said, "After

the accident I was in pain. Then, as I went above it all, everything was quiet and there was no pain."

A patient might go on to say something like, "I was on the operating room table, then somehow I was at the top of the room, watching the nurse and doctor" And he might describe in great detail everything that was said and done.

- *Moving through a dark tunnel or space.*

The patient may tell you that not only was he drawn through a tunnel or darkness, but he also heard loud noises and music. He might describe the noise as a "hissing" or "thunderous sound—and the music as unlike anything he's ever heard before. Some patients describe the music as temple bells," very peaceful and serene.

- *Seeing a bright light.*

Usually the patient says that, along with hearing

noise or music, he saw a bright light at the end of the tunnel. One patient described it this way: I just seemed to be surrounded by a velvet darkness. Then, sort of at the periphery of the darkness was a brilliant golden light. I don't remember feeling frightened at all—just perfectly at peace and perfectly comfortable, as if this was where I should be."

Although different patients may describe the light in different ways, it's usually associated with peace, love, and serenity. One patient said, I felt as if I were being held in my mother's arms."

- *Meeting deceased family or friends.*

Most people who have NDEs also describe seeing deceased loved ones who