



## “Will I Die Now?” Mystical Experiences in Individuals with COVID-19 after a Near-Death Experience

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**Abstract:** Near-death experiences (NDEs) are closely related to emotional and spiritual dimensions, even though they are subjective. This study aims to reveal the mystical experiences of individuals suffering from COVID-19 after NDEs. This article is qualitative research with a phenomenological approach. With purposive sampling, the data were collected from individuals suffering from COVID-19 who experienced NDEs but recovered. The data were then analysed with interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). This study reveals that when individuals experience NDEs, they no longer see and feel their physical body but their spirit or soul. They also have mystical experiences, such as being visited and communicating with specific religious figures and even the spirits of people who had died. After NDEs, a comprehensive reconstruction occurs regarding their personal beliefs and values regarding life and death, especially their relationship with God.

**Contribution:** This study contributes to revealing the mystical experience of people after near-death experience (NDE). This study can be a recommendation, counselling, therapy and various psychological and religious interventions for individuals who experience NDE to accept their death more easily.

**Keywords:** near-death experience (NDE); mystical experience; COVID-19; consciousness

## **Introduction**

Forty-five years ago, the evidence for near-death experience (NDE) established a new paradigm for studying the neural basis of consciousness in an unresponsive state<sup>1</sup>. Until now, the state of consciousness associated with NDEs remains an open question. Researchers argue that new concepts that differentiate awareness, wakefulness, and connectedness are needed to understand the phenomenon. Based on Judith N. Shklar's research on the NDE phenomenon<sup>2</sup>, which several respondents have analysed, it was found that they felt that God was close to them then. Everyone has their meaning in the face of death. This is influenced by various factors, including each individual's life experiences and spirituality. Ironically, currently, there is very little research that pays attention to the role of spirituality in overcoming existential dilemmas in the shadow of death, even though one of the fears in NDEs is worrying about the world after death, which is closely related to one's faith in the context of religion.

A near-death experience is closely related to the emotional, spiritual, and mystical dimensions experienced by a person; these three things are highly subjective. Perception of time, life review, out-of-body experiences, feeling one with the universe, feeling close to God, feelings of peace and acceptance, sometimes even joy, and visual and auditory hallucinations, including seeing bright lights, meeting spirits and other subjective experiences. It is interesting to study and know how a person's meaning is related to his NDA, which has implications for the quality of his spiritual well-being after being freed from death.

The results of the pre-research conducted by researchers on several individuals who tested positive for COVID-19 obtained data that they experienced extraordinary fear and anxiety. Remembering their commitment to the point of imagining how the world will be after death, whether they will go to hell, and this makes anxiety and fear even higher. Interestingly, the spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Martial et al., "Near-Death Experience as a Probe to Explore (Disconnected) Consciousness," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 24, no. 3 (2020): 173–83, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2019.12.010>.

<sup>2</sup> Judith N. Shklar, "The Phenomenology," *Western Political Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (1974): 597–623, <https://doi.org/10.1177/106591297402700404>.

is a significant part of their fear. This is by research conducted by Neal Krause,<sup>3</sup> which shows that people who feel forgiven by God may experience lower levels of death anxiety. The relationship between God's forgiveness and death anxiety varies according to how people view God. The results of this pre-research will also be a moderator variable that will be studied qualitatively to find the meaning of an individual's spiritual experience when very close to death. Besides that, it is also how individuals perceive God so that they feel their sins are forgiven. This paradigm is essential to study because the discussion about coming to terms with death is very close to how individuals evaluate life after death<sup>4</sup>.

The results of initial interviews conducted with individuals who experienced NDA stated that they found themselves outside their own physical body but still in the same physical environment—then looked at their own body from a distance as if he was a bystander. The feeling that arises is a feeling of calm because of the Out-of-Body and Out-of-Brain processes. Even though this view has pros and cons against the concept of mental health, several previous studies have explained that the NDE phenomenon does force researchers to use a spiritual point of view, not only logical empiric<sup>5</sup>. The results of the initial interview will be used as a basis for finding out in depth the dynamics of the NDE that a person feels; this dynamic will be studied based on the phenomena felt by the research participants so that it is richer in data to form a complete dynamic that can describe the NDE.

In the past one to two years, research on NDE has experienced a significant upgrade due to the analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The novelty in this study will be focused on the context of individuals experiencing NDEs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the second novelty is using positive psychological studies to explain the process of coming to terms with death because often, the review used to discuss the process from anxiety to acceptance of death uses a review of psychoanalytic theory.

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<sup>3</sup> Neal Krause and Peter C. Hill, “Assessing the Relationships Among Forgiveness by God, God Images, and Death Anxiety,” *Omega (United States)* 81, no. 3 (2020): 356–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222818777376>.

<sup>4</sup> Laura Upenieks, “Uncertainty in Faith , Fear of Death ? Transitions in Religious Doubt and Death Anxiety in Later Life,” 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00302228211029475>.

<sup>5</sup> Christian Agrillo, “Near-Death Experience: Out-of-Body and Out-of-Brain?,” *Review of General Psychology* 15, no. 1 (2011): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021992>.

## Literature Review

Summarising the opinion of Greyson, Van Lommel, Gabbard, and Twemlow a Near-Death Experience (NDE) is an intense incident of consciousness that occurs during an episode of unconsciousness. NDEs usually happen in circumstances when the individual is near death, for example, during a coma or cardiac arrest. However, NDE also occurs in individuals who have serious health problems, are depressed, are isolated after critical life events and are faced with fear-death experiences. Individuals who experience NDE have a level of acceptance of death that is not only related to near-death experiences but also to attitudes towards death. This suggests that they perceive death as a transition to a state of meaning and satisfaction in life<sup>6</sup>.

Summarising several studies, NDEs combine dissociation from the physical body and transcendental or mystical elements. NDEs are also associated with a wide variety of physiological disorders and psychological defence mechanisms. NDE consists of five stages: peace, detachment from the physical body, entering the transition of darkness, seeing a bright light and entering another dimension of life. The research is entitled "Near-Death Experience as a Probe to Explore (Disconnected) Consciousness", which explains the Near-death experience from a neurological perspective. That is any state of consciousness experienced during an NDE. This research also shows what makes NDE distinct from other subjective experiences. It discusses the potential relevance of NDE for investigating the mechanistic basis of human consciousness in an unresponsive state. The difference with this research is in exploring NDE, which focuses more on the search for meaning and subjective experience based on a psychological and Islamic perspective.

Mohammad Rababa, Audai A. Hayajneh and Wegdan Bani-Iss<sup>7</sup> studied the relationship of death anxiety with religious coping and spiritual well-being in 248 elderly living in the community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research by Jonathan F. Bassett and Mel L. Bussard<sup>8</sup> This study examines the

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<sup>6</sup> Greyson, B. (2013) Getting comfortable with near death experiences. An overview of near-death experiences. *Mo. Med.* 110, 475–481

<sup>7</sup> Mohammad Rababa, Audai A. Hayajneh, and Wegdan Bani-Iss, "Association of Death Anxiety with Spiritual Well-Being and Religious Coping in Older Adults During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Religion and Health* 60, no. 1 (2021): 50–63, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01129-x>.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan F. Bassett and Mel L. Bussard, "Examining the Complex Relation Among Religion, Morality, and Death Anxiety: Religion Can Be a Source of Comfort and

relationship between religiosity, morality, and struggling with death. The results of these studies show that there is a relationship between the level of fear of death, differences between ideal religious practices, the strength of religious beliefs, views of God as punishment or forgiveness, and behavioural efficacy (the extent to which fate in the afterlife is determined by behaviour in this life)<sup>9</sup>. Individual failure to meet religious standards is associated with more death anxiety, especially individuals who feel they will get punished by God for their bad behaviour.

Several psychological elements arise when individuals experience NDEs<sup>10</sup>. The results of Ring & Franklin's research on several participants who experienced NDE explained that there were three types of NDE, including:

a) NDE Type I: Out-of-Body Experience.

This first variation of NDE is the feeling or awareness of someone being separated from their body. The individual will state that he can see his physical body as if he were the spectator. Sometimes, the room seems lit with very bright light and feels natural.

b) NDE Type II: The Dark Void Experience

The second variation of NDE is the feeling of drifting through the dark. Respondents who reported this kind of NDE felt they "walked somewhere" but were "pulled back" before arriving. This tentative interpretation of Type II NDE represents the in-between out-of-body experiences characteristic of Type I NDEs and the more "otherworldly" experiences associated with Type II NDEs.

c) NDE Type III: "Otherworldly" Experiences

A final variation of NDE is one's feeling of escaping from a (hypothesised) transitional state or into an "other world". Like Type II NDEs, these experiences do not include an out-of-body episode but begin with an understanding of going through a dark tunnel or other opening. Unlike Type II NDE, in Type III, it seems that individuals who experience this can make configurations that are pretty definite and clear.

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Concern Regarding Fears of Death,” *Omega (United States)* 82, no. 3 (2021): 467–87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222818819343>.

<sup>9</sup> Izza Himawanti, Imam Faisal Hamzah, and Muhammad Faiq, “Finding God’s Way: Spiritual Well-Being on the People Who Do Tirakat Mlaku,” *Teosofia: Indonesian Journal of Islamic Mysticism* 11, no. 1 (2022): 43–62, <https://doi.org/10.21580/tos.v11i1.10721>.

<sup>10</sup> K. Ring and S. Franklin, “Do Suicide Survivors Report Near-Death Experiences?,” *Omega* 12, no. 3 (1981): 191–208, <https://doi.org/10.2190/47XB-EGMR-9WKP-H3BX>.

## **Method**

This research method is qualitative, using a phenomenological approach where this research will understand the meaning of the mystical experiences of individuals who experience near-death experiences. This qualitative research aims to analyse the participants' experiences more deeply. With this experience, researchers understand what and how an event is meaningful to someone's life. The focus of this research is on the experiences of individuals with COVID-19 when experiencing a near-death experience the emotional, spiritual, and mystical dimensions that a person experiences when they are in a near-death experience. The selection of participants is purposive, where participants are selected according to predetermined criteria. The criteria for these participants were being diagnosed with COVID-19 and showing severe symptoms medically, having experienced medically dying conditions (such as unconscious states visual and auditory hallucinations), having been declared cured and hostile for COVID-19, and being Muslim. The data analysis technique used in this research is interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA).

## **Results and Discussion**

When someone experiences NDA, several patterns of the same experience are found. Namely, they experience a critical period, lose control of the body, enter darkness or are disconnected from the environment, communicate with spirits or people who have died and make the decision to stay alive. Some of these experiences are consistently found in each participant.

### **The Near-Death Experience (NDE) Phase During COVID-19**

#### **1. Initial Phase of Critical Period**

At the beginning of this critical period, all research participants experienced two general and uncommon symptoms. Common symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, dry cough and shortness of breath. At the same time, symptoms that are not common are digestive tract disorders (vomiting/diarrhoea), body aches, headaches and anosmia, and loss of ability to smell. Based on the participants' expressions, with symptoms of difficulty breathing, they consciously want to live even though they are resting (in a sitting or sleeping condition). Still, they cannot fill their lungs with air and find breathing challenging, so they can only take short breaths. Participants also explained that they couldn't even hold their breath the more they forced

themselves to live. They feel like choking, chest pain, and become coughing. They continue to feel this cycle, not only several times, but even days and weeks.

These shared symptoms occur at the beginning of a critical period. Research participants can still be aware of any symptoms that occur. This shows they still have a good level of awareness. However, a good level of consciousness followed by severe common symptoms of COVID-19 (fever, cough and shortness of breath) did not stop increasing their stress level. There is fear that I will die, why I can't breathe, what should I do, why is my body like this. Various fears and anxieties began to emerge and made the condition worse.

## **2. The Phase between Consciousness until Consciousness is Disconnected**

At the beginning of the critical period, each participant was still fully aware of the conditions they were experiencing. It is precisely this full awareness that provides various psychological impacts. The standard and uncommon symptoms described above not only have a physical effect but also impact the psychological condition of the participants and further exacerbate the disturbances that occur. However, from the confessions of all participants, these persistent symptoms caused anxiety and stress to be very high. This condition gave rise to sudden confusion in the research participants. The inability to wake up, breathe, do everyday activities and maintain consciousness has a relatively heavy psychological impact. Sudden confusion and failure to maintain consciousness can also be called delirium. This confusion often occurs during the initial critical period, leading to loss of consciousness. To make it easier to explain, this condition is usually experienced by the elderly who have dementia or dementia. This condition occurs because the immune response to infection begins to decline. The form is confusion, impaired awareness, disorientation, decreased attention, and other cognitive problems.

From the participants' narratives, it can be concluded that before experiencing NDA, there was a transitional period between a conscious state and a state of loss of consciousness, which is also known as a connected state. This is based on a study presented at the Alzheimer's Association International Conference (AAIC) on July 29, 2021, in Denver, Colorado. The study shows a relationship between COVID-19 and persistent cognitive deficits; namely, there are biological indications of brain injury and neuroinflammation. This complex

brain network demonstrates that the amygdala, hippocampal formation, and entorhinal are directly or indirectly connected to association areas, thus having an anatomical impact on the processing of information originating from sensory, motor, and subcortical brain regions. Therefore, when this limbic structure experiences a problem, it plays a vital role in the loss of perception, memory, attention, emotion, and motor and autonomic functions of the body, resulting in a loss of consciousness or an NDE condition.

### **3. Mystical Out-of-Body Experience**

The phenomenon of Out-of-Body Experience or feeling like a spirit leaving the body is one of the characteristics when experiencing an NDE. As is often described in fictional stories, when a person approaches death, he feels his soul or spirit is leaving the body and going to another dimension. From the results of in-depth interviews with the three participants, information was obtained that out-of-body experience is not always the individual seeing himself out of the body in a visual form, as described in several previous studies. When experiencing an out-of-body experience, visually, he doesn't see himself leaving the body, but he feels that right now, what he is seeing and feeling is not his physical body but his soul.

### **4. Hallucinations**

This hallucination also occurred in the three participants. The first participant experienced visual and auditory hallucinations; that is, they felt that a particular religious figure was visiting them and being invited to talk. The second participant experienced visual hallucinations, namely, seeing his mother's presence and seeing the activities of his office mates. The third participant experienced auditory hallucinations, namely, hearing noisy sounds like the sound of people taking a bath.

### **5. The Presence of Certain Spirit**

The first participant said that when she had an NDE, she met two religious leaders in white clothes, and one of the religious leaders had passed away. Individuals experiencing NDEs describe having encountered some spiritual being or person who has died<sup>11</sup>. Individuals experiencing NDEs describe having met some spiritual being or person who has died. These

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<sup>11</sup> David Royse and Karen Badger, "Burn Survivors' Near-Death Experiences: A Qualitative Examination," *Omega (United States)* 80, no. 3 (2020): 440–57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222818755286>.



encounters are primarily fun. Interestingly, the first participants in this meeting with religious leaders gave a high spiritual meaning. The two religious figures the first participant met were the late mbah Maimun Zubair and Gus Baha', dressed in white. The assessment of the presence of a particular object when a person is experiencing NDE, is not merely the figure or figures present but the role and meaning of the figure for the participants.

The key word in this phase was the content or essence of the meeting. According to the first participant's statement, the two religious figures led them to read *talqin* or specific sentences that are usually recited at funerals. Based on these two things (the all-white background and the content of death), it is like giving the first participant an idea about death. Based on the experience of this first participant, the presence of specific figures or objects during NDE is closely related to the individual's experiences and perceptions of death. Some individuals describe death as a pleasant meeting and discussion with various religious figures and are living as something holy and full of peace.

If we look at the psychoanalytic theory of life and death instincts (Eros and Thanatos), meeting particular objects/figures in NDE becomes clear. Sigmund Freud, as a psychoanalytic figure, explained the dualism of the primary human instincts, namely the instinct for life and the death instinct<sup>12</sup>. These two instincts' dichotomy leads to basic human needs: peace and well-being<sup>13</sup>. In the NDA concept, at the beginning of the critical period, as described above, the demand for one's life is very high; there is a fear of death that appears in the form of stress and anxiety. The various shapes and meanings of this meeting with specific figures are the implementation of the death instinct. In a conscious state, this death instinct will be fought aggressively as a form of hope to live, but in an NDE condition, this death instinct becomes something peaceful and calming. According to psychoanalysis, in the individual's subconscious, death is inspired as something relaxed and happy; only so far, it has been distracted by the individual's life instincts. The experiences of these participants are proof that in a state of being disconnected from NDE awareness, the various experiences they have are pleasant and calming.

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Molnar, “Sigmund Freud ( 1856-1939 ): Life and Work,” 1996, 236–43.

<sup>13</sup> Maria Kli, “Eros and Thanatos: A Nondualistic Interpretation: The Dynamic of Drives in Personal and Civilizational Development from Freud to Marcuse,” *Psychoanalytic Review* 105, no. 1 (2018): 67–89, <https://doi.org/10.1521/prev.2018.105.1.67>.

## **The Spiritual Dimension when Someone is in a Near-Death Experience**

Studies on the concept of death are found in various scientific fields, not only in psychology but also in the Islamic approach. The psychological course emphasises the psychological state of people who will face death. Psychological disorders that are generally experienced by people who will face death are anxiety and fear of death itself. In Islamic studies, Ibn Sina first put forward the concept of the *nafs*, who explained that the *nafs* is a spiritual substance that radiates and animates the body<sup>14</sup>. So it can be understood that the *nafs* encourages humans to behave. Philosophers call the *nafs* the living or moving spirit or the substance that animates the body.

The concept of *nafs*, according to Ibn Sina, is in line with the *nafs* put forward by Robert Frager. Frager explained that the *nafs* result from the interaction between *jasadi* (body or body) and *ruhani* (spirit or soul) as long as the human body is ready to receive it. The *nafs* has the potential power of *gharizah* (instinct or instinct), or in Freud's personality structure, it is called the *eros* instinct and the *thanatos* instinct. Using both Freud's instinct paradigm and the *nafs* paradigm, when the need for security about life is not met due to uncertainty about the time of death, this causes anxiety and fear of death itself. Instinctively, humans will avoid something scary or uncomfortable<sup>15</sup>. The feelings of anxiety and fear that humans experience because of this unfulfilled instinct or *nafs* encourage them to behave both rationally and irrationally. Therefore, in Islamic Psychology, humans are called to have spiritual instincts. This instinct encourages humans to glorify and purify something. Humans do this as a form of diversion from their death anxiety.

Death is represented by how a person evaluates death and his attitude towards death. It is also related to cultural frameworks and social relations, such as the moral conception of a "good death"<sup>16</sup>. On the other hand, death during the COVID-19 pandemic is something terrible, with various health protocols attached and death rituals that cannot be done. This study also explores how each participant represents death and life after death. Interestingly, the results of this study show that participants' representations of

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<sup>14</sup> Syah Reza, "Konsep Nafs Menurut Ibnu Sina," *KALIMAH* 12, no. 2 (September 15, 2014): 263–80, <https://doi.org/10.21111/klm.v12i2.239>.

<sup>15</sup> Saktiyono B. Purwoko, *Psikologi Islami Teori Dan Penelitian* (Bandung: Blurb, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Ines Testoni, Dorella Ancona, and Lucia Ronconi, "The Ontological Representation of Death: A Scale to Measure the Idea of Annihilation versus Passage," *Omega (United States)* 71, no. 1 (2015): 60–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222814568289>.

death and life after death are no longer related to moral or social conceptions of death but are closely associated with the meaning of life and life expectancy.

The main point is that the NDE condition makes a person conceptualise 'non-being' and 'non-meaning' or not having any power and control over what one can do in the face of death. All that can be done is to face reality and live the ongoing fact. At the same time, death can be seen generally as a transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead, as Hertz's research shows<sup>17</sup>.

In Islamic studies, death is seen as the world's transcendence to a higher level of existence (the hereafter). What is seen as order and reality are phenomena covering the ultimate truth of the afterlife itself. The world that belongs to the individual is temporal. Its reality is only natural as the individual is ignorant of other levels of existence. The analogy that is often used is about dreams. While dreaming, the goal is real, but reality becomes unreal when awake. At this level, death is an event that projects part of his dream state onto the waking state. Where perceptions of ultimate reality are indistinguishable and cannot be conceptualised by categories, this is what eventually led to helplessness and turned to hope. Although this helplessness was initially interpreted as unfortunate, it ultimately became a hope for life. When individuals feel they have no control whatsoever and are powerless, the only thing they can do is depend on God as the only transcendence. This sense of dependence ultimately gives rise to hope for life.

In Islamic Psychology, this participant's expression is also related to certain levels or limits within oneself. That is the maximum human ability that God has ordained. When humans have certain limitations and helplessness, that's when humans will return to their God with a willing heart<sup>18</sup>. The heart becomes more peaceful when there is a balance between understanding self-limits and God's decrees. This calm and peace in the heart gives rise to the positive meaning of the participants in all domains of their lives. For example, there is faith and life expectancy. In positive psychology, life satisfaction is when individuals experience positive emotions about the past and present, including living their condition, which is very close to death, as a form of strength that belongs to something bigger than themselves. This power refers to

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand* (Routledge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315017600>.

<sup>18</sup> Achmad Su'udi, *Bersama Allah Meraih Takdir Baik* (Jakarta: QultumMedia, 2009).

belief in the power of God so that, in general, the domain of hope and faith in life cannot be separated from the part of transcendence.

## **Conclusion**

This study provides an overview of mystical experiences related to the near-death experience (NDE) in individuals with COVID-19. The results of this study also explain that when individuals experience NDA, it generally occurs in three main phases, namely the early critical phase characterised by various physical symptoms. Then, the intermediate stage, when a person is in a pre-conscious state, is characterised by a state of delirium. Then, DNE occurs when a person loses consciousness. This NDE condition cannot be separated from psychological and spiritual consequences, such as anxiety about death and various spiritual experiences that are lived as a form of religious experience.

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## **Author Contributions**

I.H. wrote a draft article, collected data, formulated methodology, and performed the analysis; M.F. conducted a review, performed data curation, conceptualised, edited, and fund acquisition.

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