

On the Banks of the River Styx

*New Perspectives on
Terminal Lucidity and
Other Near-Death Phenomena*

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Chapter Ten

The Shared Death Experience: Expanding the Scientific and Philosophical Understanding of Consciousness and Death

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Abstract

The shared death experience (SDE) is an increasingly recognized phenomenon that challenges conventional materialist paradigms of consciousness and the nature of death. During SDEs, people feel that they have participated in a dying person's transition to a post-mortem existence. Unlike near-death experiences (NDEs), which often occur when individuals are in very severe health crises and seemingly unconscious, SDEs are reported by caregivers, loved ones, or bystanders who are not in a health crisis but perceive themselves as participating in the transition of another person from life to death. This chapter examines the historical and phenomenological foundations of the SDE, drawing primarily from qualitative research and end-of-life studies. It explores SDE typologies and features and discusses implications for consciousness studies and post-materialist science.

Introduction

Death remains one of the most profound and mysterious aspects of human existence. Across cultures and historical periods, individuals have reported extraordinary experiences surrounding the transition from life to death, suggesting that consciousness may not be confined to the brain nor extinguished at the moment of physical death. Among these phenomena are shared death experiences (SDEs). They can be defined as particularly compelling events in which loved ones, caregivers, or bystanders report that they are sharing in a dying person's transition to a benevolent postmortem existence (afterlife).

The dominant motif in the SDE appears to be “journey.” Movement, often ascension, frequently toward “the light,” is a common characteristic. The dominant themes expressed by experiencers are that during their SDE, they possessed heightened knowledge, a sense of profound belonging, and ineffable feelings of love. The relationship or bond between the experiencer and the dying person appears central to the SDE. The possible features in the SDE are similar, if not identical, to the near-death experience (NDE). Numerous elements reported from NDEs, such as the separation of consciousness from the body, the perception of a mystical or transcendent light, encountering mystical or deceased beings as well as heavenly realms, and alterations of space and time are reported from both kinds of experiences, albeit with different prevalence (Shared Crossing Research Initiative, 2022). This suggests that the SDE and NDE reflect a common post-human death experience (Shared Crossing Research Initiative, 2021).

Like NDEs, which are well-documented in clinical and anecdotal literature, SDEs challenge conventional neuroscientific models. But whereas NDEs often occur under conditions of severe impairment of brain functions, SDEs generally occur in the healthy body and minds of unsuspecting others, who are often but not always loved ones, and who are either fully conscious or in a sleep state at the time of the experience. It is therefore difficult to attribute the experience of NDE-like features in SDEs to compromised brain functions. By examining the paradigm-challenging nature of these experiences, we aim to situate the SDE within a broader framework of consciousness studies and post-materialist science. In this chapter, we explore the historical and phenomenological foundations of the SDE by drawing primarily upon qualitative research findings and end-of-life studies.

The SDE has been documented for centuries in the literature, although it has been described under different terminologies. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, researchers from the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), including Frederic Myers and Sir William Barrett, collected numerous accounts of apparitions around the time of death, in which healthy individuals perceived the transition of a loved one at a distance. Myers’ 1903 publication, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, described these cases where individuals reported telepathic or visionary experiences coinciding with the death of a loved one.

Based on such reports, authors such as Ernesto Bozzano (1923) and Barrett (1926) documented numerous cases of visions around the time of death.

A review of the 58 death-related vision accounts contained in Barrett's book finds that 17 of these can be classified as SDEs. In these accounts, caregivers and family members witness the departure of a dying person's consciousness, often accompanied by visions of deceased relatives or luminous beings. Later researchers such as Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson (1971) contributed to the broader study of deathbed visions, though they did not explicitly identify the SDE as a distinct experience. During the recent years, authors made more explicit mention of them. For example, Yvonne Kason (2000) referred to the SDE by the term "death watch experiences", Phyllis Atwater (2007) referred to the SDE as an "empathic death experience", and Pim van Lommel as "empathetic NDE" (van Lommel, 2010).

Also in 2010, Raymond Moody, who coined the term "near-death experience" in 1975, formally introduced the term "shared death experience" into the literature. He highlighted SDEs as a unique phenomenon distinct from NDEs because they are experienced by healthy bystanders but not by people in health crises (Moody, 2010).

In recent years, the Shared Crossing Research Initiative, led by William Peters, has conducted groundbreaking research, focusing specifically on SDEs and their therapeutic implications, collecting more than 600 cases to date, largely unpublished. This initiative has helped establish a structured framework for understanding and categorizing these experiences. Peters published the first research-based, general-public book that features 28 SDE accounts worldwide (Peters, 2022).

Recent research further indicates that SDEs are reported across various cultures and among those with diverse belief systems. Tressoldi et al. (2023) published a survey of culturally diverse populations regarding SDEs and after-death-communications (ADCs) which included but was not limited to: Taiwanese Buddhists, Mexican and Italian participants with a Catholic religious cultural background, and Brazilian spiritists. Participants were randomly sampled and were self-selected with a final total of 121 respondents reporting 146 experiences. The largest percentage of participants, 27% of the sample, identified themselves as not following any religion at all. The next largest groups of respondents identified themselves as Spiritual 17%, Catholic 15%, and Kardecist Spiritism 14%. SDEs reported among divergent religious and cultural populations suggest that they are not merely cultural or religiously conditioned expectations but rather consistent transpersonal experiences that reveal deeper aspects of human consciousness.

Phenomenological Core Features of the Shared Death Experience

Moody (2010) originally identified seven core features that he referred to as elements of the SDE. Recent research conducted by the Shared Crossing Research Initiative has confirmed and expanded upon Moody's foundational research and identified additional core phenomenological features of the SDE, many of which closely resemble NDEs. In the following, we provide examples of eleven identified core features (see also Table 1 below).

1. *A vision of the dying*: Seeing some sort of physical form of the person who is dying.

Adela, at the time of her father's death: "I think he's gone; he's not breathing. I walked in, and he was not in his body anymore. But I saw him as clearly as I see you now, slightly elevated but in the corner of the room, a light behind him. I said to him, 'Go to the light,' and I smiled. He started laughing. It was the most beautiful, amazing moment between us, so many rich layers of things coming together right then. I was laughing, he was laughing, and then he turned and he went. He was gone" (Peters, 2022, p. 51).

2. *Heightened awareness*: SDErs express that they possessed a kind of higher knowledge, often about the higher meaning or purpose of human existence and consciousness itself. Some say they accessed the ultimate reality.

Ida, at her mother's death, recalls: "I was floating upward, and we went farther up. She was ahead of me, and we entered this black void or darkness. It was as huge as the sky, but it was an intimate feeling. I felt there were other souls there. We were floating around in this realm, and every question I ever had was answered. I had the answer to everything. I felt connected with the souls around me and this Divine Being and my mother. I felt like we were one. 'We're all one' was the strongest message I was given out of this" (Peters, 2022, p. 60).

3. *Encounters with spirit beings*: Experiencers frequently report seeing deceased relatives or spiritual beings who appear to welcome or guide the dying person. Some describe beings of light or angels.

Leslie, when her father died, said, "I had this image of this golden light and Dad with his two brothers and his mom and their arms around

each other, walking away, and he was looking back over his shoulder like, Yeah, it's okay, I'm good" (Peters, 2022, p. 164).

4. *Witnessing a transcendent light*: A frequent number of experiencers report seeing or sensing a radiant, loving light, often described as a gateway to another dimension.

Christina, at her mother's bedside, recalls, "I saw her going towards a bright light. I knew it was her because, in those exact moments, I said, "I'm here, God's here, and that's when I saw the light. I saw her go towards the light. It felt like when you're drinking water and you can feel it, and you're still drinking water. It was white and really bright. I can compare it to the sun, the sunlight" (C. Coyne, personal communication, 1/2/19).

5. *Alterations in the perception of time and space*: The realization that time has slowed, stopped, or been undiscernible. Physical environments warp or transform out of three-dimensional reality.

Karla, at her husband's deathbed, recalls, "He came right up to my face and showed me his face and his happiness. Then the hospital wall, it's hard to describe, it like it disappeared. There should have been a room right next to us, but instead, we were at the edge of the building" (Peters, 2022, p. 196).

6. *Seeing spirit leave the body*: SDErs describe witnessing a mist, light, or energetic form rising from the form of the dying body.

Sallie, at the bedside when her mother died, described seeing a "membranous, mist-like substance rise from her mother's body at the moment of death. She later felt a powerful wave of love and peace, reassuring her mother was safe" (S. Light, personal communication, 10/29/19).

7. *Appearance of heavenly realms*: A vision of beautiful environments often described as hyper-alive and pulsing with energetic vitality.

Alice recalls, "I found myself behind my husband, who is going up in the blue sky. And there is this feeling of perfect beatitude. It was perfect, perfect peace, kind of what I saw on his face when I walked into his room that morning. In this experience, I couldn't see his face exactly. It wasn't as if I could see my husband physically, but I was following him into the heavenly spheres, into blue light and white clouds. I don't know how high I was, but I was up there with him, and I kept following him

and following him. And at one point, I made the decision to come back. I'm sure I didn't actually have the choice; I think I had to come back. If I didn't, I would have to die" (Peters, 2022, p. 188).

8. *A boundary the experiencer cannot cross*: A point where the experiencer realizes they cannot go any further and immediately finds themselves back in their physical human body.

Gail remembers clearly, "I was with my dad when he suddenly began to have a seizure, and I screamed for help. The medical team descended quickly, and a nurse escorted me down the hallway to a small room with a desk and a couple of chairs. I remember sitting down. Then quite unexpectedly, I was in two places at once. I was sitting in that little hospital waiting room, but I was also outside on this incredibly beautiful day, walking down a road. I didn't see anyone, but I knew I wasn't alone. I had a feeling I was on a journey and I was escorting someone somewhere. We came to a huge gate and behind this gate was a gigantic mansion. I heard voices saying, 'Hurry! Hurry! Walter's almost here!' Walter was my dad's name. I felt this presence go through the gate—it was my dad! I wanted to go with him, but I knew that I wasn't allowed to. I looked around; then, immediately, I was back in that little room. The very next minute, the doctor walked in looking sad and said, 'I'm sorry, he's gone'" (Peters, 2022, p. 5).

9. *Sensing unusual energy*: Feelings of strong energy described as vibration, buzzing, higher frequency, or electrical in nature. This energy is often felt as a connection to a higher source.

Sonya, at the time her friend Denni died, recounts, "Then I started having this sensation of just an intense electrical sensation in my body. It was so strong it felt like it was waking me up; as I was waking up, I became...I don't know what happened. But I literally felt like I was being pulled into an upright position" (S. Fairbanks, personal communication, 6/23/20).

10. *Overpowering emotions*: Being completely overwhelmed by the most desirable feelings and emotions. Often described as the most profound sense of connection, belonging, or expression of love one has ever experienced.

Brian, at his wife's deathbed, remembers, "I'm lying there holding her, and she's on my right side, and I start feeling this opposite of

sadness. I start feeling this feeling, and it's very distinctly coming from my right side into me. It's a feeling of joy, love, and uplift. And it was a little bit dissonant in my mind because I was grieving already that she was dying. But I couldn't, couldn't really hold on to that" (B. Sackett, personal communication, 5/26/20).

11. *Physical sensations*: Actual physical, bodily responses that seem to mimic the sensations of the dying around their time of death.

Sarah recalls, "I woke up abruptly with a severe cramp in my leg. I've had cramps before but nothing like this. I leaped out of bed and began jumping up and down. I woke up my husband. What came next was terrifying. This is the part I don't remember. I was stiff and seizing. My eyes were rolling back in my head. My husband called for my kids to call 911. I woke up and told everyone I was okay. My daughter canceled the ambulance. I looked at my son and said, 'That was the strangest experience. That's what it feels like to die.' I then began to sweat profusely. I drenched the sheets for about two hours and then vomited. I called my sister, and she said I should go to the doctor. But I felt normal other than being wiped out. Twenty minutes later, my sister called and said my niece had died. She had snorted fentanyl-laced heroin" (Peters, 2022, p. 115).

Table 1: Eleven core SDE features and their prevalence (Peters, 2022, p. 238). Percentages relate to a sample of 164 cases.

A vision of the dying person	51%
Heightened awareness	37%
Encounters with spirit beings	29%
Witnessing a transcendent light	25%
Alterations in the perception of time and space	19%
Seeing the spirit leave the body	15%
Appearance of heavenly realms	12%
A boundary the experiencer cannot cross	11%
Sensing unusual energy	20%
Overpowering emotions	29%
Physical sensations	9%

Two Shared Death Experience Typologies

William Peters furthermore developed two distinct typologies to classify SDEs. The first classification, or the Main Typological Classification, includes a proximity classification with two subtypes concerning the time of the SDE in relation to the death and the number of experiences. The second typological classification, termed Modes of Participation, concerns four distinct but non-exclusive kinds of SDEs. These different types and subtypes of SDEs are described below in more detail.

1. Main Typological Classification: Location and Proximity to the Dying

The proximity of the SDEr to the dying is the first classification for which there are two designations: Bedside or Remote. Bedside SDEs occur when the experiencer is located in the same physical location (at the bedside, in the same room, or within visual sight) of the dying person. They account for 36% of all experiences and represent typical examples of SDEs as introduced by Moody (2010) in which, for example, bystanders at bed-sides co-experience NDE-like elements along with the dying person.

Remote SDEs occur when the experiencer is not in the same physical location as the dying. The experiencer can be in the next room, across town, or on the other side of the globe. These SDEs account for 64% of experiences (SCRI, 2021). They concern typical examples of experiences described in the earlier literature on death-related experiences by Myers (1903) and which include what has been called “crisis telepathy” and “crisis apparitions”, for example apparitions of the dying who seem to inform loved ones at a distance about their demise and transition.

But SDEs can further be classified by the element of time, which is referred to as the sub-type Time Variation of the Main Typological Classification:

1a. Time Variation

Most SDEs transpire very close to the observed time of death, while 7% occur a few hours or, in rare cases, a few days before death. This tends to occur when moribund individuals are declining. These SDEs are referred to as Early SDEs. Additionally, 14% occur a few hours or a few days after death. These are referred to as Delayed SDEs (SCRI, 2021). In these cases, people experience being in contact with the recently deceased individual and the SDEr expresses that they are being informed of or observing their (ongoing) transition. Most SDEs occur within a set period of time, typically a few moments to

minutes, but SDEs may also occur over a longer period of time, and these are referred to as Gradual SDEs (W. Peters, personal communication, 08/16/2020). In other contexts, delayed and gradual SDEs have previously been discussed as after-death communications (ADCs; e.g., Penberthy et al., 2023; Woollacott et al., 2022). Whereas the emphasis of the term ADC lies on the fact that these experiences occur after somebody has died, the emphasis of the latter two terms lies on the feature of sharing an experience with the deceased including the elements of transition with movement and journey motif operative.

1b. Quantity of SDEs (Single or Multi-Person) per Death

Another sub-type of the Main Typological Classification of SDEs relates to the quantity of SDEs for a particular death. The vast majority of SDEs report that, to the best of their knowledge, they were the only experiencer at the time of a particular death. However, transition-related phenomena that are experienced by more than one person around the time somebody dies have been reported as well (Barrett, 1926; Bozzano, 1923). The Shared Crossing Research Initiative has collected many dozens of multi-person SDEs and thus classifies these experiences as the Multi-person SDE sub-type (W. Peters, personal communications, 08/16/2020).

2. Secondary Typological Classification: Modes of Participation

The Modes of Participation (MOP) assesses the qualitative experience reported by the shared death experiencer (SDEr). There are four distinct and nonexclusive modes of participation: remotely sensing a death, witnessing unusual phenomena attributed to death, accompanying the dying in a visionary realm, and assisting the dying in transitioning (SCRI, 2021).

2a. MOP 1: Remotely Sensing a Death

Remotely sensing a death occurs in about 20% of SDE accounts when the experiencer has brief thoughts, feelings, or a sense of the dying's presence around the time of death (SCRI, 2021). Dawn recalls remotely sensing the death of her son Sean a few days before his wedding.

“I was home, hot-gluing flowers on this big selfie board for the wedding. I was texting Sean’s fiancé, Tessa, saying, ‘Do you like this? Do you know what this is?’ And she said, ‘Is that tissue paper?’ And I was writing her back saying, ‘Yes.’ And I was writing, Y-E-S. And I got the Y out, and then suddenly, I couldn’t see the phone. I couldn’t see anything. My feet came

off the floor. I felt like I was gonna pass out, and I got really nauseated. I scooted this bench up under me, and I looked behind me because we had all these flowers on the kitchen floor through the hallway, and real strong; all of a sudden, I felt Sean was dead. In my mind, I said, 'We're wasting our time.' At 10:31, I got a call from Tessa to tell me that Sean had been hit by a car, and I said to myself, 'This happened at 10:27.' Nearly five minutes before" (Peters, 2022, p. 111).

2b. MOP 2: Witnessing Unusual Phenomena Attributed to a Death

Witnessing unusual phenomena is the most common MOP and occurs in 88% of SDE accounts (SCRI, 2021). Scott witnessed unusual phenomena associated with the death of his stepson Nolan.

What Scott saw, as Nolan's heart stopped beating on the monitor, "was Mary Fran coming and scooping Nolan up out of his physical body. Mother and son embraced, and then they turned to Scott, and embraced me. And then the three of us merge into the clear light." Scott describes the light as an "all-encompassing, hugely bright light. Everything around you just exudes the light of the universe. So, the table, the chairs, you, me, everything. All of a sudden, you begin to see it with these eyes that are aware that we're all made of exactly the same stuff. And it is the love of the universe. You are the light." Scott describes it as being both in the room and in another dimension, "I'm in the room, but I have also entered into another dimension that is simultaneous with the one that I am in." He was aware of the grief around him, but at the same time, "I'm with Mary Fran and Nolan, and we're having this moment of unity. I'm with them, and they're with me, and I'm one with everything. And it's incredibly heart-centered. You really are just immersed in the love of the universe." Five or ten minutes passed until "Mary Fran and Nolan turned and left" (Peters, 2022, p. 81).

2c. MOP 3: Accompanying the Dying

Accompanying the dying occurs in 15% of SDE accounts (SCRI, 2021). Experiencers report that they unexpectedly found themselves in another post-death experience with the dying, or perhaps more accurately stated, the transitioning person. SDErs express that they accompanied the deceased on a beautiful journey. In MOP 2, experiencers may have contact with the recently departed and observe a variety of SDE phenomena but they do not

join the recently deceased in their transition journey. MOP 3 experiencers accompany their departing loved ones and at some point, they encountered a limit or boundary. They realized that while their deceased loved one would continue, they could not and suddenly found themselves back in their human life. Cynthia accompanied her husband when he was dying and reported the following:

“I remember lifting up out of my form, my body, and taking my husband by the hand and pulling him up. Then I pulled him up past me, and then he pulled me up past him, and we kept doing that for a long time. The sensation was very freeing. He was fully intact, you know. He wasn’t mentally compromised then. There was no sensation of constraint or discomfort from anyone’s body, and then I saw the light. I feel almost corny saying that, but I saw the light, and you know it’s not a pinpoint of light. It’s a huge light, and I told him, ‘Look, there’s the light,’ and we both turned towards it and went towards it, and his mother appeared. In the experience of the light, here was a complete wholeness sensation for me. A freedom was in that. Any of my own psychology wasn’t there. None of that was there. It was just an opportunity to experience that. Then his mother reached for him, and he reached for her, and he looked. He was still holding her hand, and he looked back at me and said, ‘But I want to stay with you,’ and then he slipped away” (C. Vitale, personal communication, 1/7/2019).

2d. MOP 4: Assisting the Dying in Transitioning

Assisting the dying in transitioning occurs in about 9% of SDE accounts (SCRI, 2021). Experiencers report that they suddenly find themselves with a recently deceased person and realize that they need to assist them with their transition. These experiences are similar to MOP 3, but the experiencers are more involved, often reminding the deceased that they have indeed died and need to orient themselves to their new reality. Experiencers report providing a variety of assistance and, in some cases, describe physically supporting the deceased along their journey and serving as guides. Experiencers often express that the knowledge of how to assist the transitioning person arose at the moment of their encounter, and they were unsure of the source of that knowledge. Mark described assisting his father in his transition, saying:

“I felt an overwhelming need to check in on him. So, I sent myself, my spirit to the hospital where I knew he was. And I get there, and he was just a wraith of a man. My dad was a big guy... Nothing physically was ever daunting to him. But now he was emaciated. I remember going to him at his bedside and speaking to him and saying, ‘Dad, why don’t you just let go? Mom’s going to be all right. All of us kids are going to be all right. You can go. There’s nothing holding you here anymore.’ And he looks at me, and there’s no surprise in his face that I was actually there talking to him, but there was puzzlement, and he said, ‘I don’t know how. I don’t know how.’” Mark had studied a meditation around life and death, specifically about bringing someone near death into the light. “I knew right away, as soon as I was there with my dad, that that’s exactly what I needed to do. And I picked him up, and he was as light as a feather. Like there was almost nothing to him. I started that meditation, walking down this particular trail, and then at a certain point, turning, stepping up these stairs, and walking towards the light” (Peters, 2022, p. 91).

Conclusion and Outlook

Shared death experiences provide experiential and phenomenological evidence challenging the notion that consciousness is a result of purely physiological processes—particularly the ability to remotely sense a death or witness another person’s transition without previous knowledge that the person was dying. The materialist view that consciousness is solely a byproduct of brain activity is inadequate to explain such phenomena.

Of course, critics of these views can argue that SDEs are hallucinations. However, if they were purely hallucinatory, we would expect random or meaningless experiences rather than consistent patterns, and a lack of verifiable elements; yet many SDE reports include accurate descriptions of distant death events. Therefore, these aspects suggest something more than just an internal brain-generated illusion.

Shared death experiences, like NDEs, present anomalous data that challenge the mainstream neuroscientific view of consciousness. If they are genuinely nonlocal in nature, they could point toward a post-materialist paradigm where consciousness is fundamental or, via alternative mechanisms, operate in ways that defy the present understanding of consciousness as a mere byproduct of brain activity alone. As post-materialist sciences continue to evolve, SDEs offer a crucial lens through which we may redefine the nature

of consciousness, death, and human connection. They offer fascinating research avenues for future studies that can enhance our understanding of the dying process and contribute to removing the taboo that often surrounds the topic of death.

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