

Vivid memories from hell: A systematic analysis of distressing near death experience accounts

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Objectives

Near-death experiences (NDEs)¹:

- Altered state of consciousness and life-threatening situation
- Vivid/detailed memories
- Majority of positive emotions; small proportion of **frightening NDEs**



Aims:

- 1) **Quantify** proportion of distressing NDEs in a sample of self-reported NDEs
- 2) **Classify** narratives based on Greyson and Bush's classification (inverse, void or hellish)¹
- 3) **Compare** phenomenology of distressing and classical NDEs memories

Methods

NDErs completed:

- Free **written NDE narrative**
- **Greyson NDE scale**²: identifies NDEs with a cut-off score of 7 (/32)
- **Memory Characteristics Questionnaire (MCQ)**³: assesses NDE phenomenology on 7-point Likert scale (1="not at all/very negative" to 7="completely/very positive")

- Distressing NDEs were identified and classified into 3 negative subcategories by multiple coders
- Frequentist and bayesian Mann Whitney U tests were performed, and analyses were corrected for multiple comparisons (p<0.003)

Results

1. Distressing NDEs represent 14% (17/123) of our sample
2. Text analysis confirmed Greyson and Bush's classification (**Figure 1**)

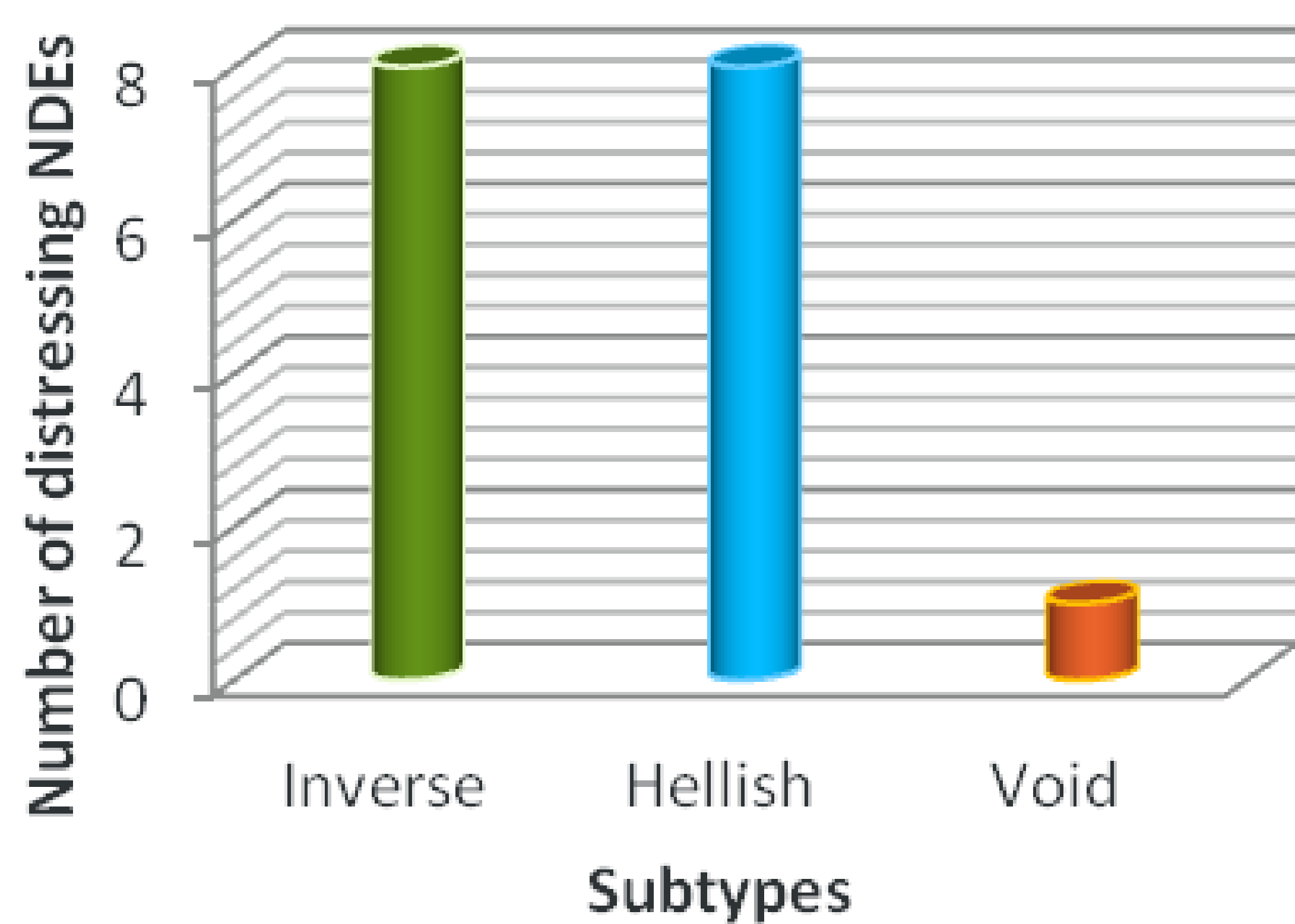


Figure 1. Distribution of distressing NDEs into the 3 subcategories proposed by Greyson and Bush (inverse, n=8; hellish, n=8, and void, n=1).

3. Apart from the emotional valence, distressing and classical NDE memories do not differ in terms of self-reported sensory details, feelings experienced while remembering, feeling of re-experiencing the event, personal importance, reactivation frequency, and confidence (**Table 1**)

Table 1. Score differences between distressing and classical NDEs at the MCQ.

Selected MCQ Items	Distressing Mdn*(IQR**)	Classical Mdn*(IQR**)	W _s	BF ₁₀	BF ₀₁
Valence	1(1-3)	7(6-7)	143***	64911	<0.001
Visual details	7(6-7)	7(6-7)	1015	0.289	3.684
Feeling emotions	7(5-7)	6(4-7)	958	0.219	4.621
Feeling of re-experiencing	6(5-7)	6(5-7)	908.5	0.248	4.357
Personal importance	7(6-7)	7(6-7)	899	0.593	3.768
Reactivation frequency	7(5-7)	6(4.25-7)	996	0.264	4.766
Real/imagined	7(6-7)	7(7-7)	819.5	0.308	3.715

*Mdn=Median

**IQR=Inter-quartile range

***Results are statistically significant at p<0.003

Conclusion

Distressing and classical NDEs are phenomenologically similar and lead to vivid memories. Still poorly studied, distressing NDEs therefore deserve careful consideration to ensure their integration into NDErs' identities and life stories.

REFERENCES

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- 3 Johnson MK, Foley MA, Suengas AG, Raye CL (1988). Phenomenal characteristics of memories for perceived and imagined autobiographical events. *J Exp Psychol Gen* 117: 371–376.