

Fact Sheet: Shared Death Experience (SDE)

A shared death experience (SDE) occurs when someone dies and a living loved one, caregiver, or bystander reports that they sensed, observed, accompanied, or assisted the dying in their transition into a postmortem existence.

What forms do SDEs take?

Although every SDE is unique, some elements commonly recur across SDEs.

The dominant motif of an SDE is a journey or movement, often ascending and toward a luminous light. Common themes expressed by experiencers (SDErs) are love, understanding, and belonging, as well as strong bonds or connections between SDErs and the dying. SDEs have features similar to near-death experiences (NDEs), suggesting that both experiences share a common landscape.

The most common SDE features include:

- A vision of the dying person alive and well
- Heightened awareness/expanded knowledge
- Encounters with spirit beings
- Transcendent light
- Alterations in perception of time and space
- Seeing the spirit/soul leave the body of the dying
- Appearance of heavenly realms
- Perceiving a boundary the SDEr cannot cross
- Strong physical and emotional sensations
- Sensing unusual energy
- Feelings of peace and connectivity/unity
- Observing a life review
- Tunnels and gateways
- Ineffability—difficulty describing the experience in human language

SDEs can be separated into two distinct types: bedside and remote.

- Bedside SDEs occur when the SDEr is in the same room with the dying;

- Remote SDEs occur when the SDEr is not in the same room with the dying, which can range from being in a different room near the dying to being far away on another continent.
 - The physical distance between the SDEr and the dying does not appear to influence the quality of the SDE.

Bedside and remote SDEs each have two possible subtypes: time variation and multi-person.

- Time variation: Most SDEs occur at the same time as the physical death. However, roughly one-fourth of SDEs occur a few minutes, hours, or in rare cases a few days or even weeks, before or after the actual time of death. Although most SDEs last a few minutes, some occur more gradually with varying degrees of intensity over a few days or weeks.
- Multi-person: Most SDE reports have only one living experiencer per death, but sometimes multiple SDErs are involved. In these instances, the SDErs may report some common SDE features, but in most cases they report either different features or an experience suggesting a different vantage point.

Who has SDEs?

Why some people have SDEs and others do not is a great mystery and currently under investigation by the Shared Crossing Research Initiative.

Possible facilitating factors that characterize most SDErs include persons who:

- Have a strong relationship bond with the dying person,
- Identify as spiritual but not religious,
- Values mindfulness and open-mindedness,

- Accept death as a natural part of life, and
- Do not experience overwhelming emotions at the time of death, as those may interfere with a person's ability to perceive an SDE.

Are SDEs hallucinations?

As with NDEs, SDEs are fundamentally dissimilar to hallucinations.

- For example, whereas hallucinations are characterized by incoherent or fragmented imagery, SDEs report phenomena that are clear, coherent, and often experienced as “more real than real.”
- In addition, although some authors have attributed NDEs to an artifact of the dying brain, SDEs occur to unsuspecting caregivers, loved ones, and bystanders who are completely healthy in both body and mind.

What are the effects on SDEs?

SDEs report a variety of beneficial aftereffects.

Benefits include:

- Belief that the deceased person in their SDE is alive and well in a benevolent afterlife
- Belief that, upon their own death, they will reunite with their now-physically-deceased loved one
- Alleviation of fear and anxiety about death
- Awakening to a new appreciation for the purpose of a human life generally and for the dying person's and/or SDEr's life in particular
- A grief reconciliation process, whereby grief is contextualized and imbued with an understanding that human death is a transition rather than an end

Suggestions:

Recommended resources include these books:

- Peters, W., & Kinsella, M. (2022). *At heaven's door:*

What shared journeys to the afterlife teach about dying well and living better. Simon & Schuster.

- Moody, R., with Perry, P. (2010). *Glimpses of eternity: Sharing a loved one's passage from this life to the next.* Guideposts.
- Fenwick, P., & Fenwick, E. (2008). *The art of dying.* Continuum.

...and this website:

- [Sharedcrossing.com](https://www.sharedcrossing.com), where information about the following activities can be found:
 - Research and resources about SDEs and other shared crossings, including the Shared Crossing Video Story Library of personal SDE accounts
 - Shared Crossing Project educational programs, including online self-study programs and two monthly online SDE Sharing Groups at which an SDEr tells their story and group participants may then ask questions. Often a researcher from the Shared Crossing Research Initiative will draw on SDE research to contextualize the SDE as a way of providing helpful information, both general and specific.
 - Individual, family, and organizational training for methods to enable an SDE and other shared crossing experiences
 - Experiencer feedback. If you have had an SDE or wonder if you have had one, you can submit your experience to the Shared Crossing Research Initiative, and they will review your story and reply to you.

The information in this Fact Sheet is based primarily on research cited in the recommended readings listed above.

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