

**TRANSFORMING THE FEAR OF DEATH THROUGH NEAR-DEATH  
EXPERIENCES AND EXPERIENTIAL PSYCHEDELICS: A TRANSPERSONAL  
HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this study to all the beautiful souls whose fascinating journeys along roads rarely traveled have provided valuable insights into the mystery of transformation of which death is an essential part.

## **Abstract**

This study examined the phenomenological experience of the transformation of the fear of death in the context of the mystical and transcendent nature of a near death experience (NDE) or while using psychedelics, specifically LSD or psilocybin. The study recruited and interviewed seven participants who had experienced a life-altering mystical NDE or transcendent psychedelic journey. The analysis of emergent themes was conducted using transpersonal and hermeneutic phenomenology research methods. The identified themes unfolded in three parts: the experience itself, illumination of the experience, and the gifts and lessons learned. A prominent theme involving transformation, especially as it relates to the fear of death, emerged from the findings. Thus, the findings of this study have important implications for psychotherapy, in particular how we treat death and dying. Further research into these exceptional experiences could be an opportunity to transform our collective pathology and fears around death.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

This study explored the transformation of the fear of death, specifically through the mystical nature of psilocybin, LSD, and the near-death experience (NDE). In my opinion, the immense reality of death and its significance has been lost. My bias, as a counsellor and researcher, is my belief that we do not talk about death. Death itself or when it happens is not the greatest concern; rather, our fear of death and our lack of preparedness for death and the dying process is the problem (Assante, 2012). This fear has repressed any meaningful acceptance of, or preparation for, death, which frequently leads to existential anxiety and a spiritual crisis for those individuals facing end-of-life (Grof, 2000; Grob & Danforth, 2013; O’Gorman, 1999; Yalom, 2008).

This study has examined two sources that can transform the fear of death—the scientific research with psychedelics in the 1950s and 1960s, and the contemporary research that reexamines the clinical application of these drugs—and also considers the collective experience of humankind with respect to this fear and the modern consciousness research of NDE (Goldsmith, 2011; Grob, Danforth, Chopra et al., 2011; Grof, 2010; Greyson, 2014). Within the non-ordinary states of consciousness of the psychedelic experience and NDEs (i.e., transformative and mystical), many shared elements exist that can offer insights into the initial stages of death and dying (Grof, 1975, 1980, 2000, 2010). Mystical experiences are powerful, and individuals often report the dissolution of the ego during an NDE or psychedelic experience. This symbolic experience and the recognition of existing as an imperishable self rather than as a dismantled ego tend to comfort the dying (Goldsmith, 2011; Grof, 1990, 2000).

Specifically, this deep impression transforms the fear of death. These experiences temporarily reveal that something of the self will continue to exist after death—only the physical self ceases—which has been shown to reduce our fear of death as well as producing many other positive and persisting psychological and behavioral aftereffects (Dowling-Singh, 1998; Greyson, 2014; Grob et al., 2011; Grof, 1990, 2000).

Research into liminal zones values the autonomous nature of the psyche, consciousness, and unconscious as sources of knowledge (Davidson, 2013). Encounters with altered states of consciousness advocate for an imaginal approach to a research question that recognizes the tension between paradox and ambiguity (Davidson, 2013). According to Islamic scholars, the *imaginal world* is a place where everything existing in the sensory world has its analogue (i.e., dimension, form, color), which is not perceptible to our senses (Grof, 2008, p. 49). It is important to distinguish between *transpersonal experiences*, *mystical experiences*, *spiritual experiences*, and the concept of *spirituality* without the concerns of religion (Grof, 2000; Kaspro & Scotton, 1999).

Both religion and spirituality are difficult to define. Religious scholars have achieved little consensus when it comes to defining religion (Rodrigues & Harding, 2009). For the purpose of this study, *religion* can be defined as the beliefs shared by the major religious traditions, which hold a central belief in the existence of a non-material (spiritual) reality (Coyle, 2008). *Spirituality* can be understood as a conceptual framework, a way of seeing the world as an interconnected whole and a way of situating the self in the world (Kamppinen & Jakonen, 2015). According to Coyle (2008), it is possible to identify various dimensions of spirituality within the psychological literature. These dimensions of spirituality include a sense of meaning and purpose in life; the sense

of a calling in life; a transcendent dimension involving spirits, deities, inner guides, or higher selves; a belief in the sacredness of life; an emphasis on wholeness and/or connectedness; the notion of an eternal soul; the idea of a spiritual journey or path; the belief that pain and suffering have meaning; and a belief in personal transformation (Coyle, 2008, p. 57). Spirituality is based on direct experience with non-ordinary aspects of reality and involves personal and private experiences (Grof, 2008). Among the many ideas regarding spirituality is the concept of *the transpersonal* that can be distinguished by transpersonal elements such as the divine, the sacred, and the holy, which tend to occur beyond our normal waking consciousness and rational ways of relating to the world (Coyle, 2008; Grof, 2008).

Transpersonal psychology does not promote any particular belief system; rather, it acknowledges the genuine nature of spiritual experiences, transpersonal experiences, and transcendent states that are believed to be universal human experiences (Grof, 2008; Kasprov & Scotton, 1999). Spiritual experiences can appear in two different forms. The first is characterized by an encounter with the *immanent divine* or the *numinous* and includes a direct perception of the immaterial nature of the physical world. The second spiritual experience entails an encounter with the *transcendent divine* that involves realms of reality ordinarily not available to perception, and the manifestation of archetypal beings (Grof, 2008). *Advaita*, a Sanskrit word meaning *not two*, also known as *nondualism* is an ancient branch of Hinduism whose teachings point to the underlying unity of all things (Liquorman, 2012). The nondualist perspective is concerned with the living energy that is here now, expressing itself as us, through our lived experience, and

through our minds and bodies as life itself. More importantly, this perspective cultivates the understanding that the experience of living is itself spiritual (Liquorman, 2012, p. 28).

The word *mystical* as we use it in our ordinary language has common meanings quite different from its use in transpersonal psychology and religion, and most people consider that the word *mystical* suggests inexplicable and weird events (Roberts, 2013). However, in scholarly circles and religious disciplines, an experience is considered mystical if it includes a cluster of nine subjective experiences: unity, sacredness, transcendence of time and space, deeply felt positive mood, paradoxicality, ineffability, transiency, and persisting changes in attitudes or behaviour (Richards, 2017; Roberts, 2013). This researcher tends to agree with the pragmatic view of James (1936) who suggested that spiritual experiences should be judged by their effect on people, rather than any particular cultural or religious orientation. James's writings on radical empiricism further provides a philosophical foundation for the study of altered states of consciousness, since radical empiricism implies that these states must not and should not be excluded (Metzner, 2017, p. 241).

Grof (1990) has argued that altered states of consciousness (ASCs) were key to realizing one's psychological well-being. Grof explains that transcendent experiences are mystical states of consciousness that can be self-induced via psychedelics or are naturally occurring through spontaneous events, such as a near-death experience. These legitimate experiences could contribute to our understanding of the transformational possibilities of human consciousness during death, while, at the same time, deepen our insights into one of the most profound milestones of human existence (Assante, 2012; Dowling-Singh, 1998). An understanding of how these transcendent experiences lead to the development

of consciousness, beyond the identity of the personal self, could help to open a new lexicon concerning humanity's fears around death and dying, and possibly integrate a more holistic and psychospiritual approach to death and dying (Dowling-Singh, 1998; Grof, 2010). This understanding has important implications for the potential of human beings to discover that the transcendent and transformative dimensions of consciousness that are inherent in the dying process are normal, and are intended as our final stage of growth and are designed to increase our knowledge regarding death, which can reduce our suffering and fear of death (Dowling-Singh, 1998; Grof, 2010; Yalom, 2008).

A *near-death experience* (NDE) can be defined as the vast range of experiences remembered and reported during a special state of consciousness (Varghese, 2010). This profound altered state of consciousness is accompanied by a subjective sense of transcending the time-space dimension (Metzner, 2017) and also can include pleasant feelings, seeing a light or deceased relatives, having an out-of-body experience, experiencing a life review, and seeing one's own cardiopulmonary resuscitation (Parnia, 2014). NDEs often are called *transpersonal experiences* (Grof, 1990) due to their transcendental nature and extension of the usual personal, physical, and mental realms of human consciousness beyond the phenomenal world, and the sense of being in a different timestream than we normally perceive (Grof, 1990; Khanna & Greyson, 2014; Metzner, 2017). Transpersonal experiences involve non-ordinary states of consciousness, or more specifically, they enable the possibility of human consciousness to explore the existence of other dimensions or worlds outside the physical material universe. These non-ordinary states of consciousness occur during both the psychedelic experience and the NDE (Grof, 1990, 2000, 2010). These experiences suggest that, in our everyday states of



consciousness, we identify with only a small fraction of who we really are (Grof, 2006). Thus, these non-ordinary states of consciousness can offer insight, meaning, and purpose to those who have encountered such experiences (Greyson, 2003; Grof, 2000). The NDE experience has been reported to remove the filter of our ordinary consciousness and reality, which enables access to an altered state of consciousness or expanded consciousness (Grof, 2000, p. 165). Research also has indicated how this expansion of consciousness opens an experiencer to unitive or mystical experiences, which are believed to be related to the fear of death itself (Lorimer, 1990, p. 105). NDEs have been reported to have a profound and long-lasting impact, often transforming experiencers' lives at the personal, spiritual, and societal levels, including the realization that the experience was more real and lucid than reality or life itself (Greyson, 2014; Grof, 2000).

The ASCs induced by psychedelics also seem to amplify significance and meaning, particularly concerning one's thoughts (Goldsmith, 2011). The psychedelic experience has been reported to induce experiences known as *mystical consciousness* (Pahnke & Richards, 1966, p.176). Traditionally, psychedelics have been studied in the field of transpersonal psychology and have been found to have a profound impact on states of consciousness (Cortright, 1997; Grof, 2000). Psychedelic substances, such as LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide) and psilocybin (4-phosphoryloxy-n, N-dimethyltryptamine), when prepared properly, have been found to reliably produce intense and profound spiritual transformations (Garcia-Romeu, Kersgaard, & Addy, 2016; Griffiths, Richards, Johnson, McCann, & Jesse, 2008). According to Cortright, (1997), these true psychedelics were named as such due to the nature of their "mind-manifesting" (p. 183) properties derived from the Greek *psyche* (mind) and *delos*

(manifesting). Cortright (1997) has argued that this naming is significant for the field of transpersonal psychology because *psyche* also means soul or spirit, and thus extends the meaning of psychedelics to “mind and soul manifesting” (p. 183). These two categories match the two aspects of psychedelic therapy identified by Stanislav Grof (1975, 1980). The first is *psychedelic psychotherapy*, which uses large doses of psychedelics to induce mystical experiences, and the second is the less powerful *psycholytic psychotherapy*, which uses lower doses to bring emotionally charged events into one’s consciousness (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2016; Grof, 1975; Grof, 1980). Early research with psychedelics found evidence that the psychedelic journey could open an individual’s consciousness and reveal a reality where spirit was no longer an abstract concept, thus shattering the experienter’s previous conceptions of reality (Cortright, 1997).

Richards and Pahnke (1966) researched the effects of LSD and psilocybin on the phenomenological experiences reported by individuals using these substances. They documented the following key characteristics of the psychedelic mystical experience: a sense of unity, insightful knowledge, loss of space and time, deep-felt feelings of awe, ineffability of explaining the experience (Pahnke & Richards, 1966). Some experienters also gained an understanding of death, or non-existence, through a realization that existence is more about being than non-being (Pahnke & Richards, 1966).

In their study, Richards and Pahnke (1996) set out to compare the psychedelic mystical experience to mystical experiences reported in the literature. To test this idea further, they devised what became known as the *Good Friday experiment*, which compared the phenomenological reports of mystical psychedelic experiences against the classical mystical accounts identified by W. T. Stace, a philosopher of religion, during

the early 1960s. To test the comparison, Richards and Pahnke (1996) developed an experiment using individuals studying religion to assess whether a psychedelic experience would be considered intrinsically valid to him/her. They divided Harvard divinity students into two groups: one half were given a high dose of psilocybin and the other half a placebo in a church setting on Good Friday (Goldsmith, 2011). Most of the individuals in the psilocybin group reported experiences similar to the classical mystical experience of various religious traditions, and claimed that their overall experience had personally impacted their lives in a profound, spiritual, and meaningful manner (Pahnke & Richards, 1966). Doblin's (1991) study tracked down many of the participants of the original Good Friday experiment 25 years later to follow up on the lived experience of those who had been given a high dose of psilocybin. According to Doblin (1991), the participants described their experience as having elements of "a genuine mystical nature and characterized it as one of the high points of their spiritual life" (p. 13).

Aldous Huxley (1962) developed a fascination with the effects of psychedelics and declared that these drugs could make death a more psychospiritual and conscious experience. Eric Kast's early work on analgesics led him to LSD, and he compared its pain-relieving effects with those of opiate analgesics—Dilaudid and Demerol—on a group of patients with terminal cancer. He discovered that after the LSD experience, patients not only experienced relief from the effects of physiological pain, emotions, and sleep patterns, but also reported a reduced fear of their impending death (Grob & Danforth, 2013).

Deficiencies exist in the research, however, with respect to relating the knowledge gained from the transformative effects of NDEs and those of the psychedelic journey, and

how these experiences might generate new insights regarding our fear of death and its role in human life (Grof, 2000). These implications are important not only for counselling, psychology, psychiatry, healthcare, and science, but also, and more importantly, for all individuals (Grof, 2000). While many people dispute the validity of these experiences, many of these non-ordinary states of consciousness have been found to be healing and transformative for those who have experienced them, which is justification enough to investigate rigorously the potential of these various altered states of consciousness on our ordinary life (Cortright, 1997; Grof, 2000; Goldsmith, 2011; Griffiths, Richards, Johnson, McCann, & Jesse, 2008).

### **The Implicated Researcher**

With respect to this study of NDEs and psychedelics, it is important to note that this researcher is implicated, meaning that I have experienced both the non-ordinary states of consciousness being studied (Bryman & Cassell, 2006). My own NDE as an infant, although unconscious and preverbal, has inspired a life-long journey to understand my own innate belief, that, at our core, we are consciousness and are having a physical experience to further the evolution and growth of our consciousness. According to White (1995), the opportunity for growth and expansion occurs from exceptional human experiences (EHE), whether we study the experiences of others or explore our own. Personal EHEs, such as the NDE and experiences of altered states of consciousness, can provide glimpses into our physical limitations but also operate as gifts that enable us to experience the nature of our limitlessness (White, 1995). I always have had a deep yearning to know who we are, why we are here, and the nature of our existence. This ontological way of viewing and questioning my reality began in childhood, long before I

understood what this meant. Therefore, ultimately, my life journey has been a quest to find answers to understanding this truth. Moreover, as I searched for these answers, I began to understand how my own inner battle influenced my life as I realized how my ontological beliefs directly collided with my own epistemological uncertainty of how I had gained this NDE knowledge.

Slowly, through my own life experiences, I have realized just how much my birth-related trauma has affected and shaped who I am as a person, both consciously and unconsciously. My infant NDE gave me an intuitive knowing that death is nothing to be feared, therefore “living in the now” always has been my motto. I always have been fascinated by questions about immortality and the existence of a higher power. I believe my infant NDE has shaped my innate belief that the core of our being is consciousness—an essence, energy, or spirit—which in turn has led me down the road less travelled, so I could experience things, people, and circumstances to find answers to explain this belief. I have come to realize that my own NDE has led me on a long journey to understanding my own nondual awareness or belief in the unity of all things. Also, although this journey began before I knew what it was or what it meant, the process has led me on a path of realization to the understanding and embodiment of my own nondual beingness (Wilber, 2000).

As a researcher, I always have been fascinated with consciousness, including altered states of consciousness, death, life after death, and the possibility of higher realms. My personal use of psychedelic drugs was to explore altered states of consciousness. I was fascinated by the distorted sense of time and space, the flashes of insight and intuitive knowing, and the loving connection with everything and everyone.

My use of psychedelic drugs has influenced profoundly my psychological and spiritual perspectives on the nature of my own reality, and has impacted strongly the direction of my academic studies.

I have come to learn, through my own experiences and education, that psychedelics have a unique potential to help humanity (Goldsmith, 2011; Roberts, 2013). For example, while researching the literature, I encountered William Richards, one of the most experienced psychedelic psychotherapists and researchers currently working in the field. Richards (2017) has argued that psychedelic substances can expand our understanding of the nature of consciousness and help us to decipher the mysteries of our own being by providing a pathway of knowledge that could empower both science and religion. Recently, Richards co-authored a guideline for safely working with psychedelics in which he outlines the desired qualities and training of research team-members (who are called *study monitors*) who work with terminal patients (Goldsmith, 2011). He has suggested that to be able to facilitate psychedelic work with clients, study monitors must understand the utter vastness of the realms of altered states of consciousness and the unique subjective experience of the psychedelic trip (Goldsmith, 2011; Johnson, Richards, & Griffiths, 2008; Richards, 2017). Study monitors are required to be familiar with the descriptions of altered states of consciousness induced by hallucinogens, and should understand their potential implications for personal and spiritual growth (Johnson et al., 2008; Richards, 2017). Thus, as a researcher who is interested in researching psychedelics, it makes sense that I also am familiar with the subjective experiences of altered states of consciousness induced by psychedelics, since my own understanding of existence is cultivated through my own experiences. Psychedelics have many positive

effects, such as the capacity to foster healing, specifically trauma; the capacity to bring about mystical states; and a sense of unity consciousness, which can include positive changes in attitude and an appreciation for life (Cortright, 1997; Grof, 2008; Johnson et al., 2008). Most importantly, psychedelics also have been found to reduce the fear of death and increase the individual's knowledge of the transient nature of the physical self (Cortright, 1997; Grof, 2000; Grof, 2009; Johnson et al., 2008).

As a researcher, I believe that my personal NDE and experience using psychedelics have provided me with important insights into why induced non-ordinary states of consciousness are important for transforming our fear of death. As a therapist, I also believe these non-ordinary states of consciousness have many implications for end-of-life therapy and a further range of potentially beneficial uses.

### **Personal Theoretical Framework**

As a counsellor and a researcher, I have approached this study through a transpersonal lens. I believe we are body, mind, soul, and spirit and that our purpose is to move towards the wholeness of their integration by studying and learning from transpersonal experiences such as those induced by NDE and psychedelics. My interest in death and its spiritual transition is based in my own personal experiences. The potential knowledge gained from NDEs and psychedelics can enhance end-of-life concerns, especially palliative care and hospice. An awareness of a self-identifiable consciousness that can survive physical death could enable individuals to prepare psychologically, spiritually, and physically for death in a manner that could enhance the quality of their final days (Grob, Bossis, & Griffiths, 2013; Grob & Danforth, 2013; Grof, 1990, 2000).

More importantly, the spiritual experiences associated with NDEs and psychedelics support a worldview that is corroborated within the wisdom of ancient mystico-religious traditions and that recognizes the reality of the survival of consciousness after death (Nasr, 1989). As a researcher, I believe that the knowledge gained from these spiritual experiences can be used alongside the evidence of the positive effects of psychedelic therapy within the counsellor-client relationship. This knowledge can help a counsellor to facilitate a process that not only can help a dying individual, but also can extend to that individual's family and friends. In other words, a counsellor can support death and dying by helping to make it a profound psychospiritual event by facilitating this knowledge and opening communication and channels of emotional exchange for everyone involved (Grob, Bossis, & Griffiths, 2013; Grob & Danforth, 2013; Grof, 2000).

### **Transformation**

According to Nasr (2007), "We have forgotten that to be human is to know, and to transcend oneself. Intelligence is a gift from the divine and enables man to distinguish between the veils of illusion (*maya*) and reality" (p. 114). The root of the intellect is consciousness, which is sometimes referred to as the *soul*, and this intellect reflects divine consciousness (Nasr, 2007). Consciousness connects humanity from the periphery of our physical existence to our center, which is our true Self (Nasr, 2007, p. 131). I believe that we can transform our fear of death and find critical answers about consciousness, for which we have been searching, by investigating the knowledge intelligence of the ancient shamans, ancient wisdom traditions, perennial philosophy, and the insights we have gained from NDEs and psychedelic experiences (Grob, 1990, 2000;



Wilber, 2016). All this information can be integrated to enhance our understanding of the full complexity of the psychospiritual transformations inherent in the dying process and what they mean on our journeys as human beings (Dowling-Singh, 1998).

For the first time, we have access to the total sum of human knowledge, the wisdom, philosophy, and reflections of all the major human civilizations (Wilber, 2006, p. 1). If we took the time to examine the collective evidence, it would have much to tell us about the transformational possibilities of the human psyche and our potential as spiritual beings encompassing body, mind, and spirit (Cortright, 1997). More importantly, this kind of an examination might provide us with an opportunity to create our own understanding and knowledge about the dying experience through which all of us must journey (Dowling-Singh, 1998, p. 5). Grof (2000) has outlined the sequence of events in the transformative experience that is similar to that of sages, shamans, and other researchers of consciousness. During the unfolding of each of these events, the psychospiritual transformation of the ego involves a painful surrender of the fiction of the separate self, a willingness to enter the truth of the present moment, a healing of wounds that were caused by the distancing of the self from the ground of being on the journey to the adult-ego, and the integration process inherent in the return of the self to the ground of being (Dowling-Singh, 1998, p. 109). More importantly, Dowling-Singh (1998) has reported that the process of becoming whole again, of returning to the essential or ground of being, is the act of creating a human being—a self-realized and then God-realized being (p. 91). The nondualist perspective supports an exploration of who and what we truly are by asking questions, rather than seeking answers, since the right question at the right moment can push us beyond what we believe into directly seeing “what is.” This

perspective aids in the acceptance of “what is” in this moment, which is the realization of that which is always here—everything included and nothing excluded (Liquorman, 2012).

An important element to consider in the transpersonal map of the human being is that we exist within a spectrum of consciousness (Cortright, 1997). Since the range is wide of possible ways that we experience ourselves and our realities, it is important to realize that each state has its own qualities, potentials, and resources (Cortright, 1997). For example, an ordinary day consists of many shifts in states of consciousness from sleeping to dreaming to cognitive thinking and planning. These states of consciousness include the ordinary states of waking, sleeping and dreaming, and non-ordinary or altered states that can be induced by drugs or other catalysts such as the NDE (Metzner, 2017). The insights gained from non-ordinary states of consciousness, such as NDEs and psychedelic journeys, have a potential to change who we are in our ordinary states of consciousness (Grof, 2000). This potential has motivated me to pursue research in these non-ordinary states of consciousness as a way to understand the nature of these realities and the human potential to transform our fear of death within these realities.

### **Approach to Research**

As a researcher, I have approached this study with a transpersonal lens by incorporating the integral approach of Wilber (2016), whose model integrates knowledge from Eastern and Western perspectives. Wilber (2016) has mapped, with clarity and insight, the stages of transformation in the levels of consciousness intrinsic to the process of human development. Cortright (1997) has defined *transpersonal psychology* as the study of humanity’s highest potential through a recognition and understanding of the

spiritual and psychological aspects of human consciousness. According to Wilber (2016), each level of consciousness has its own characteristic modes of knowing and identity. Through the integration of growing up (6 stages of mind-body development) and waking up (4 stages of ego transcendence), an individual transcends each stage, state, and structure of 10 principal stages, which provides all sentient beings with the possibility of the most complete, all-pervading spiritual attainment available (Wilber, 2016, p. 117). A transpersonal therapist utilizes approaches from both East and West so to conceptualize *nonduality awareness*, which is the realization that human consciousness transcends beyond the awareness of ego identity to higher transcendental realms (Grof, 1985; Wilber, 2000, 2006, 2016).

The culmination of my life experiences, which started with my unconscious memory of my own NDE, has led to my fascination with consciousness, death, and NDEs, and eventually to my experimentation with consciousness-expanding drugs. I have had many of my own exceptional human experiences (EHE), including paranormal experiences, psychic experiences, and out-of-body experiences (White, 1994). These EHEs have inspired me to travel a path of self-discovery learning about the complexity of human behaviour from the perspective of psychology, religion, and neuroscience, which, in turn, has led me to realize that transpersonal psychology offers an opportunity for helping individuals to awaken to their true nature of nondual being. The idea of *dying before dying* is a concept found in many wisdom traditions, and has been a goal of many spiritual and enlightenment practices (Nasr, 1989). The coming to terms with the fear of death has been found to be conducive to a person's healing, is personally transformative, and is an influence on a person's quality of life. This coming to terms can change and

transform our way of being right here and now by helping us to learn to live in the present moment (Grof, 2000; Kubler-Ross, 2008; Yalom, 2008).

The present study has examined the mystical nature of psilocybin, LSD, and the NDE, and how these non-ordinary states of consciousness can transform the fear of death. Individuals who have experienced these non-ordinary states of consciousness have been offered glimpses into experiences that are free of the constrictions of body-consciousness, and which have the potential to transform their fear of death.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the possible transformation of the fear of death by exploring the mystical nature of psychedelics—specifically psilocybin and LSD—and the NDE. Consciously transforming our worldviews about death involves exploring the stages of consciousness development. In a normal life cycle, human beings go through different phases and identifiable stages, and by exploring our developing consciousness we may gain insights into how our fear of death may have developed (Dowling-Singh, 1998; Metzner, 2017; Wilber, 2016). According to Nasr (1989), we can examine the psychospiritual transformations of death as they have been described in the perennial philosophy of many of the world’s wisdom traditions (p. 4). This philosophy has strikingly similar views on how we emerge from and return to the Ground of Being (Cortright, 1997; Dowling-Singh, 1998; Nasr, 1989; Wilber, 2016).

*Materialism* is the belief that our reality is strictly physical in nature (Assante, 2012). The dominant theme in Western philosophy today is that modern human beings deny their capacity for metaphysical or spiritual knowledge (Nasr, 1989). Understanding the influence of secularism as it relates to the classical worldview of materialist

reductionism—a worldview that rejects metaphysics as valid knowledge—will help to provide a broader context for how our fear of death continues and is exploited (Assante, 2012). According to Nasr (1989), materialist philosophy defines *human beings* as rational beings and reduces humankind’s knowledge to what belongs to the physical world, which gives rise to a profane science to support this view and becomes the basis of a scientific or rationalist humanism. According to Tart (2012), “Scientism in our time consists mainly of a dogmatic commitment to a materialistic philosophy that dismisses and ‘explains away’ the spiritual, rather than actually examining it carefully and trying to understand it” (p. 506).

The present study also examined the influence of secularized reasoning and a materialist worldview on our current psychological, philosophical, and spiritual approaches to death and dying. The core of our modern, organ-based medicine is a mechanistic model that assumes when the brain dies, consciousness dies with it (Greyson, 2010; Parnia, 2014). Once *death* became known as terminology entrenched within this mechanistic medical paradigm, modern humankind progressively ignored the emotional and spiritual side of death that naturally came with it (Fenwick, Lovelace, & Brayne, 2007).

Fenwick (2007) has found that some medical practitioners, including palliative care workers, are concerned that death and dying are seldom discussed in their education and training. These workers believe that death and dying education should start with some basic requirements, such as the need to consider the spiritual pain of dying patients; how to properly handle the existential needs of patients; and knowing what to say, or having a greater understanding of spirituality in general, so to be able to engage with

dying patients at an appropriate level (Grob, Bossis, & Griffiths, 2013; Fenwick et al., 2007). This knowledge could enable the medical profession to move beyond the current paradigm that “death is failure,” and shift their mentality from survival at all costs to the existential and spiritual needs of dying patients (Fenwick et al., 2007).

The history of the transformative NDEs and psychedelic journeys that served as background information for the present study was examined within the literature. The knowledge gained from NDEs and psychedelics is mystical in nature, and, although empirical evidence exists within the literature, it is not compatible with the materialistic worldview of science (Grof, 2000). A systematic and unbiased evaluation of the related phenomena of extraordinary experiences that occur within altered states of consciousness would require a new understanding of the nature of consciousness and the material world because these experiences cannot be observed, and they exist beyond a reality that is matter (Greyson, 2010; Grof, 2000). The subjective descriptions of NDEs and psychedelic trips appear to enhance the realization of a continuity beyond death for those who experience them, which dissipates the ego into a boundaryless whole, and provides comfort to the dying by reducing their fear of death (Greyson, 2010; Grof, 2000). Since a gap exists within the literature regarding the range of subjective experiences of the dying, because these experiences were not deemed necessary constituents of our modern mechanistic medical framework, these subjective experiences of the dying are valid areas for further research (Fenwick et al., 2007; Greyson, 2010; Grof, 2000).

According to Quill (2001), the new legal right of Canadians to control when and how to die requires a social shift in how our country approaches end-of-life decisions. Quill (2001) has argued that the psychological reality at the end-of-life is the most certain

and relevant issue all human beings face. Quill believes that individuals should have access to a counselor throughout the dying process, someone who can assist them with both the personal and medical aspects of dying, since this process is more than, for example, just prescribing barbiturates. In our modern world, dying has become a problem because medical technology has extended life and the process of dying (Parnia, 2014). Recent evidence has suggested that existential anxiety increases as individuals near their end-of-life, and the challenge is to sustain meaning and purpose while the physical body declines and physical pain and psychological suffering become overwhelming (Grob & Danforth, 2013). This evidence creates concerns for those who are involved with the care and treatment of those who are dying. Individuals with an enhanced sense of spiritual well-being can cope more effectively with the process of their terminal illness that includes finding and sustaining subjective meaning in their dying experience, which often is achieved in transcendent experiences and which is related to the spirituality of the dying individual (Grob, Bossis, & Griffiths, 2013; Grob & Danforth, 2013).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of the transformation of the fear of death through the lived experiences of participants, and to understand the essential meanings of the mystical experiences of NDEs and psychedelics, specifically psilocybin and LSD. This study used a transpersonal, hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry to examine the context of how and when these experiences occurred, the properties and aspects of these phenomena, and how these experiences may have transformed the fear of death or became integrated into their experiencers' lives. Through an examination of these phenomena, the present study hopes to draw attention to the

therapeutic value of recognizing the complex contextual factors that influence death and dying; our fears regarding death; and ways to build on the positive attitudes, values, and insights regarding death that can be found in the phenomena. This study also has relevance for the transpersonal therapist who counsels clients with terminal illness. By facilitating an understanding that human consciousness possibly extends beyond the awareness of our ego identity into higher transpersonal levels, a transpersonal therapist can offer a client insight into their own higher levels of consciousness, into the levels of transpersonal consciousness beyond the identity of the personal self (Dowling-Singh, 1998; Grof, 1985; Wilber, 2000, 2016).

Grof (2000) has suggested that just before psychedelic research was shut down at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center in the 1970s, he and his colleagues were able to show the similarities between the mystical natures of NDEs and psychedelics. These similarities were reported by patients already participating in a study specifically designed to examine the effects of psychedelic therapy and terminal cancer anxiety. These patients, after a psychedelic session, later experienced an actual NDE during surgery to remove a tumor due to the regression of their disease. The patients reported that the two situations were extremely similar and described the psychedelic therapy as an invaluable, experiential teaching aid that prepared them for dying (Grof, 2000, p. 233). These results are an indication that the subjective experiences of both NDEs and psychedelics are valid areas for further research with respect to using them as experiential teaching aids for transforming the fear of death during end-of-life preparations.



The following research question was examined in the present study: How do the mystical experiences of NDEs and psychedelics, specifically psilocybin and LSD, transform the fear of death?

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review for this study examined the historical beliefs surrounding death and dying. The descriptions and themes of the mystical and transformative nature of NDEs and psychedelics are discussed, and their commonalities are examined.

Fenwick et al. (2007) have argued that we are not prepared to, and we have not learned how to, die well. According to Imhof (1994), the subject of *death* is not taught in our Western mechanistic paradigm, or in our medical schools, and he has claimed that “we need a new *ars moriendi*, or *Art of Dying*, for our time—to live a fulfilled life and to die a peaceful death” (p. 1). Our avoidance of preparing for death has created a large hole in our cultural attitudes and behaviours towards death and dying. Rinpoche (1993) also has pointed out that death and dying rarely are discussed in the West. He has proposed that learning about the essential nature of mind is the key to understanding both life and death: “death is a mirror in which the entire meaning of life is reflected” (p. 11). Death anxiety is common in our modern world, so in our contemporary approach to this psychological, emotional, and existential end-of-life distress, we need to make death and dying a more holistic and psychospiritual process for those dying and their caretakers (Grob et al., 2011).

### **Fear of Death**

The psychological importance of death and dying is arguably the most universal and pertinent issue facing human beings (Grof, 2000). Death is inescapable, but in modern society, even talking about death is considered morbid, and the fear of death is common, although often it is experienced at more of an unconscious level (Routledge & Juhl, 2010). Is death the end? Do we survive bodily death, or more specifically, does

consciousness survive bodily death? Depending on who you ask these questions, the answers still are debated and would vary. Some might claim we can never know. Others might point to modern secular science and say “no.” However, many people have an intrinsic belief that death is not the end (Grof, 1990, p. 23). Most, if not all, of the world’s cultures maintain some sort of belief in life after death, that consciousness, or existence in some form, continues beyond biological death (Grof, 1990). However, modern technological societies have developed a massive psychological fear of death, and the subject of death and dying has been one of denial, discord, and confusion (Grof, 2000).

A death-denying attitude has become the norm, and discussions about death are rare, unless they are held in the context of medical or palliative care (Rinpoche, 1993). The result of this denial is that society tends to isolate the sick, aging, and dying in hospitals and nursing homes (Rinpoche, 1993, p. 8). Despite recent advances in medical technology for treating advanced-stage disease, denial of death is obvious when it comes to addressing the psychological and psycho-spiritual needs of those who are dying (Agrillo, 2011; Grob & Danforth, 2013). In Western cultures, despite all their technological achievements, no real understanding of death exists (Rinpoche, 1993). Fear of death is the fundamental dilemma that all humans struggle with to a greater or lesser degree, even though this struggle is primarily unconscious for most of us (Becker, 1973; Yalom, 1980). Many are taught to deny death and believe that it means nothing but annihilation, since consciousness is merely a by-product of the physical body, which means the only logical conclusion is that consciousness ceases to exist with the death of the physical body (Grof, 1990).

Fear of death and expectations of what comes next affects every facet of our lives, shaping our thoughts and feelings; spilling over into our culture, society, and institutions; and essentially constructing our worldview and how we come to view the meaning of life and our reality (Assante, 2012; Dowling-Singh, 1998). From where does this fear come? First, we can examine our past historical attitudes towards death and dying to shed light on how we developed our views about an afterlife, which have induced this fear and undermined humanity's trust in its natural goodness and in a belief in a benign universe (Assante, 2012). Second, we can explore the history of the mind-body connection through science. Third, we can review the developmental stages of consciousness to understand how the egologic aspect of consciousness fears annihilation when the body dies, in terror of losing its identity; and we can examine the differences between the viewpoints of Western psychology and transpersonal psychology (Assante, 2012; Cortright, 1997). Understanding these concepts may help us to gain some insight into how we have inherited unhealthy attitudes about death, how they have permeated some of society's institutions, and how they continue to foster fears towards death and dying (Assante, 2012; Dowling-Singh, 1998; Grof, 2000).

### **A Comparative History of the Afterlife, Death, and Dying**

The *belief in life after death* is one of the oldest concepts in human history, especially considering Neanderthal burial sites as evidence, which seems to indicate a belief in an afterlife that precedes humanity itself (Greene & Krippner, 1990, p. 70). For thousands of years, humans have left signs—burial sites and valuables in graves—in the archaeological record. Whatever else these gestures signified, they tell us something quite clearly—our earliest forebears believed that when someone died, they had some faith in

something, and that the dead person went somewhere (Assante, 2012; Greene & Krippner). The intensity of this belief in a postmortem journey is found in the diverse expressions of funeral rites that appear to facilitate and hasten the transition of the deceased to a spirit world (Grof & Halifax, 1977).

Lorimer (1990) has pointed out that premodern humanity lived with a natural belief of immortality, and no doubt of the reality of life after death; a belief that was held as a certainty, just as real as their own material existence. According to archaeological records, all cultures, past and present, have believed in an afterlife of some type (Assante, 2012). These seemingly inherent beliefs in an afterlife, rites of transition, and supreme beings are known as *universals*, which are beliefs or practices that can be attested for all cultures, places, and times (Assante, 2012). *Universals* are the fundamental building blocks of most religions and have been embodied in the religious traditions and philosophical reflections of most cultures, each with their own unique expressions (Grof, 1990). The fact that these expressions of an afterlife differ does not mean that they are invalid, since often they are united by the universal belief that death is merely a transition, not the final annihilation of consciousness (Grof, 1990). More importantly, these beliefs are an indication of humanity's search for answers to some important philosophical questions, such as "Is there something more?" or "What happens when we die?" Perhaps these beliefs express an innate need to make sense of ontological reality, to consider the possibility of an afterlife, and to reduce the fear of death.

In their explorations of the history of death and the afterlife, Assante (2012) and Greene and Krippner (1990) have suggested that different cultures have developed visions of the afterlife to fit their own particular needs. In antiquity, revelations were

passed down orally through the culture's mythology (Assante, 2012). As societies evolved into urban civilizations composed of classes and ruling elites, oral myths began to be written down. However, these texts were heavily edited and rewritten to best serve the institutions and the people in power. The imposition of dogmatic versions of the afterlife were effective political tools to create and maintain centralized power (Assante, 2012; Greene & Krippner, 1990). Assante (2012) has argued that due to the political power of these texts concerning the afterlife, the nation state had control over the possibility of death, thus increasing people's fears about physical death. Assante also has indicated that the use of dogmatic religious doctrine caused the fear of death to grow even more because now a permanent extinction of a person's soul could be threatened.

Ideas about death, the afterlife, and the soul have evolved from ancient concepts. In many cultures, rites of passage have existed through which individuals experienced a powerful symbolic encounter with death during temple initiations, mystery religions, and secret societies (Grof & Halifax, 1977). Historical accounts of such temple rituals have described profound experiences of symbolic death that appear to prepare initiates for actual physical death by providing insights into the transcendent and spiritual nature intrinsic to human consciousness (Grof & Halifax, 1977). Archaeological records indicate that almost every culture had beliefs about death and specialists who could mediate between the worlds of life and death, communicate with the dead, and intervene on behalf of the living (Assante, 2012; Grof, 1990). Ancient cultures have produced prominent written works concerning death and immortality, for example, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* outlines the journey through afterlife realms in detail, and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a "how-to" manual to guide individuals through their encounter with death

(Assante, 2012; Grof, 1990). Many elaborate rites of passage have been celebrated throughout history and within various cultures to depict a transition from one stage of life to another, such as birth, marriage, or dying (Grof & Halifax, 1977). In many of these rites of passage, psychedelic substances or powerful non-drug techniques were used to help initiates undergo the experience of death and rebirth, signifying transition. Many of the encounters with death, dying, and transcendence that were experienced in other rites of passage during one's lifetime were considered powerful psychological and experiential training for the ultimate transition at the time of one's physical death (Grof & Halifax, 1977).

The beliefs about the afterlife in the ancient religions of Mesopotamia and Egypt have influenced modern Western religious views of the afterlife in two basic, yet divergent, ways as 1) exclusive and judgmental or, alternately, 2) inclusive and permissive (Assante, 2012). These ancient influences are still visible today in institutional beliefs on death and the afterlife, which are primarily social constructions built in accordance with what a culture values. For example, Egypt's mortuary cults, like later religions, dictated that unless a person followed the advice and rituals suggested, he or she would not attain eternal life (Assante, 2012). The Egyptian notion of *trials and judgment* has been adopted by later world religions. More importantly, these ancient ideas have cultivated fear and terror by way of threats of being physically and psychically devoured, either by being torn apart by the various monsters and devouring creatures of the afterworld or by losing one's identity through fragmentation and disintegration in the other worlds. In addition, in the doctrines of ancient Mesopotamia, and later Greece and Rome, people were not threatened with denial of entry into the afterworld or eternity

based on moral grounds (Assante, 2012; Chopra, 2006). These ancient doctrines of the afterlife contrast with the philosophies expressed in the mystical literature of many spiritual traditions that suggest that our essential goodness comes not from following external rules, but from going within and finding a core that encompasses our true and lasting identity and that defines our true nature or essence (Assante, 2012; Chopra, 2006).

Many of these ancient doctrines of the afterlife are entrenched within the five principal world religions of today: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Although many differences exist in the specifically held beliefs about what happens after we die, these beliefs are based on the social constructs and values deemed important within these religious doctrines. For example, in Buddhism and Hinduism, an individual's own judgment determines their fate after death, versus the external judgment that decides a person's fate after death in the doctrines of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (Assante, 2012; Chopra, 2006). Most non-Western cultures have religious and philosophical views that make it easier for their members to accept and experience death, since these cultures generally believe that consciousness, or life in some form, continues beyond the physical demise (Grof & Halifax, 1977; Chopra, 2006).

For example, the belief in reincarnation occurs in diverse cultures and in various religious frameworks as philosophies—such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism—which posit the continuation of existence after death and an eventual return to physical existence in a different form (Grof & Halifax, 1977; Rodrigues & Harding, 2009). An open-mindedness to the possibility of the continuity of consciousness could alter completely the concept of death and dying, and perhaps also alter the comparative values attributed to life and death with the process of dying becoming more important than



living, especially if the dying attitude of an individual is believed to determine the quality of the next incarnation (Grof & Halifax, 1977). Preindustrial and ancient cultures seemed to agree that death was an important transition, and the experience of dying was accepted as an important part of life that deserved to be experienced, studied, and carefully mapped (Grof, 2010). Materialist beliefs regarding death and dying are relatively new in the modern West and often conflict with religious views, perhaps due to our secular and misplaced spiritual confidence (Assante, 2012; Nasr, 1989).

According to Illich (1990), every society has a dominant image of death that determines the prevailing concept of health in a society. Moreover, Illich (1990) has theorized that over the last 500 years, this view of health, healing, death, and dying has evolved through five distinct stages. Stage one, which began in the Middle Ages, is the foundation for our contemporary beliefs regarding death, which was known as the “Dance of the Dead,” since artists often displayed people dancing with their mirror image (Illich, 1990; O’Gorman, 1998). Prior to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, death was conceived as the intervention of an enemy, a witch, an ancestor, or a god. Slowly, the idea of death became accepted as part of human life rather than the intervention of a foreign agent (Illich, 1990; O’Gorman, 1998).

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, stage two was represented as the “Dance of Death,” since artists accompanied their human subjects with a skeleton or a figure of death (Illich, 1990; O’Gorman, 1998). During this time, the Church was losing its power, and people were left to their own devices to find their own meaning and purpose in life and in death. The plague, or Black Death, changed the course of history, and death became a bitter part of life (Illich, 1990; O’Gorman, 1998). In such dire times, since people still needed

advice, protocols, and procedures on how to die without fear and without the Church or a priest, folk practices and superstitions developed that could be employed to help ensure a person's good death. People turned to the *Ars Moriendi*, a secular guidebook developed to ensure people could die well (Illich, 1990; O'Gorman, 1998). This process of dying emphasized the nature of one's spirit (Imhof, 1994).

When the idea that good health and dying a natural death due to old age began to appear in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a class-specific phenomenon of the bourgeois, stage three was aptly named "Bourgeois Death" (Illich, 1990; O'Gorman, 1998). The Industrial Revolution was creating work and wealth that subsequently created an enlarged bourgeois or middle class. As this rise in the middle class created a societal shift, families began to support the principles of good health and employed doctors, and the health of the nation became part of economic management and government policy (Illich, 1990; O'Gorman, 1998).

The stage four that arose during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was named "Clinical Death" because of the rise in the new scientifically-trained doctors fighting diseases such as consumption. With this stage, a myth grew that if diseases could be certified and cured by doctors, they must be able to control and stop death as well (Illich, 1990; O'Gorman, 1998). Towards the 20<sup>th</sup> century, society began to view the concept of *health* as a civil right and *death* as something that could be postponed by a medical doctor. With respect to the individual, the spiritual focus of dying faded away along with the rituals associated with death and dying (Illich, 1990; O'Gorman, 1998). For example, in the early 1900s, people often died in their own homes following a brief illness before the age of 50, with families gathered around the deathbed—a ritual in which much importance was placed on

the dying person; in the 1990s, the average person dies at age 65 and spends about 80 of their last days in a hospital or nursing home (Illich, 1990; O’Gorman, 1998).

Illich’s (1990), stage five “Death in Intensive Care” emphasizes our preoccupation with health, which is due to our lack of preparation for death or the ability to choose meaningful rituals when it comes to our own deaths. Aging, fatal disease, and dying are not seen as part of the life process, but rather as the ultimate defeat and a constant reminder that we are unable to master nature (Grof & Halifax, 1977). The idea of death has become conceptualized by patients that are critically ill in intensive care, and death itself has become medicalized and seen as a failure by doctors and nurses. Furthermore, we go through extraordinary measures not to discuss death by using terms such as *passed away* or *recently departed* (Illich, 1990; O’Gorman, 1998).

This lack of awareness and understanding about the psychology of death is perpetuated by a medical system that regards death as a failure and continues to perpetuate existential anxiety in patients (Quill, 2001). This “failure” suggests that when our physiological structure ceases to function, we die and that is the end (Greyson, 2010). This belief stems from the influence of a mechanistic science, a materialist mindset that refuses to admit the existence of anything non-physical (Grof, 1990). The notion of annihilation underlying this model has contributed to Western’s society’s view of death as an enemy to be defeated, and thus human behavior has been motivated to avoid or manage existential anxiety and the awareness of our own mortality (Wong & Tomer, 2011). The ultimate effects of considering death as a failure and the existential anxiety this creates for a dying person coincide with the rise of materialism and science.

## The Rise of Materialism and Science

Until the end of the 15th century, the Church maintained its monopoly on learning and power (Nasr, 1989), and then changes in social authority were energized by science.

The rise of materialism began during the Middle Ages when intellectuals outside of Christianity began to search for answers concerning the nature of things, answers that could be verified only through metaphysics and esoteric knowledge (Nasr, 1989). The Church and Christian dogma were overtaken by the disciplines of science and philosophy. Humanity sought certitude and a firm foundation of knowledge on another basis and level, which led to the rise of modern philosophy. This philosophy evolved into pure rationalism by turning its focus away from ontology to epistemology (Nasr, 1989, p. 41). Metaphysics was rejected as valid knowledge, since the new philosophy believed humanity did not have the mind or intelligence to know things beyond the finite world of time and space, even if such realities potentially existed (Sherrard, 2007, p. 70).

Philosophers such as Francis Bacon, who took the lead in integrating scientific methods, was followed by Thomas Hobbes who proposed that all questions about the nature of reality could also be answered by scientific means (Nasr, 1989). This early scientific rationalism gave rise to modern materialism, which is the foundation of a scientific or rationalist humanism (Nasr, 1989). Mechanistic explanations came to be regarded as scientific, and teleological explanations as unscientific, in the switch from purpose to cause or from why to how, which included the study of mind and consciousness.

Concepts such as *mind*, *consciousness*, and *spirituality* were purported to be explained by physical phenomena (Lorimer, 1990). Furthermore, this worldview regards a belief in the

afterlife, or survival of consciousness, as mere superstition and an expression of primitive fears regarding death and dying (Grof, 1990).

Guenon (2001) has critiqued the West for its deviation from tradition, which he has suggested has resulted in social chaos in the name of progress. He has pointed out that the traditional metaphysical sciences dealt with the nature of Reality, microcosmic and macrocosmic levels of being, and a cosmology or metaphysics of beyond being (Guenon, 2001). He has argued that Western humanity's rational perspective does not enable individuals to conceive of the possibility of Ultimate Reality. The rational perspective denies anything that transcends the concrete self, or declares it to be unknowable. According to Guenon (2001), insight into the transcendent comes from intellectual intuition and intuitive knowledge, and modern science has severed the connection to this higher principle of knowledge, which has an effect of confining knowledge to the physical realm and creating a profane science (p. 29).

Different levels of existence represent different frequencies of consciousness (Chopra, 2006). The physical world of matter is just one expression of a certain frequency, and every frequency in nature exists simultaneously; yet, from a rationalist's perspective, we only experience what we see. Many cultures have viewed the barrier between life and death as permeable, and since death takes a person out of sight, we react with fear because it's natural to fear what we can't see (Chopra, 2006).

According to Guenon (2001), in the West, materialism is the propagation of the notion of progression (p. 81). Originally, *materialism* was used as a concept and theory to accept the existence of matter. The modern and narrower use of the term is that everything that exists is just matter and its byproducts. According to Chopra (2006), the

claim that the denial of the afterlife is scientific merely represents a belief in materialism, and underneath this insistence lurks a great deal of fear. Through its belief in materialism, modern society has created an illusion that individuals can control their destiny and reality, but this also is a society whose higher knowledge has been forgotten, whose intellectual intuition is denied, and whose real nature is unknown, since an individual's holistic reality cannot be confined in its entirety to the physical realm (Guenon, 2001, p. 82).

According to Nasr (1989), the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment not only mechanized the concept of the *Western world* itself, but also the concept of *humankind*. Everything not susceptible to direct proof based on the evidence of the senses was questioned, and therefore, all phenomena was reduced to objective descriptions that ignored many of humanity's inner subjective experiences (Fenwick, Lovelace, Brayne, 2007).

The ideas generated by this period of the Scientific Revolution have had a tremendous impact on the mind-body debate, and our modern materialist worldview has its foundations in this time. Many of the ideologies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been built on scientific materialism. Its impact can be seen everywhere from advances in technology, medicine, and psychology to its influences on the way we were taught in school; and for the majority, it is an everyday reality that shapes our current attitudes toward psychology, consciousness, and death and dying (Tart, 2012). Western psychiatry and psychology have been influenced greatly by this leading paradigm, which suggests that these disciplines have formulated many of their theories based on the experiences and observations of ordinary states of consciousness, and they have scientifically avoided or

misinterpreted the evidence from non-ordinary states of consciousness, such as observations from mystical experiences, psychedelic therapy, or evidence from near-death experiences (Grof, 2008; Harner, 1980). Most cultures throughout human history believed that the mystical experiences of individuals were a means to contact and/or interact with spiritual realms (Cortright, 1997; Grof, 2008; Putman, 2016). The influence of the medical model and understanding on mainstream psychiatry and even psychology posits that spiritual experiences involving the collective unconscious or archetypal figures and realms is a psychopathology and a pathological product of the brain (Cortright, 1997; Grof, 2008; Putman, 2016).

*Consciousness* still is considered one of the great mysteries of contemporary research, and although modern science has proven that the brain plays an important role in consciousness as a person experiences life, science has not proven that the brain creates consciousness (Tart, 2012). The debate over the nature of consciousness is especially heated when considering death and what constitutes the definition of *death*, especially in light of modern consciousness research and NDEs (Parnia, 2014). An exploration of the development of human consciousness, specifically non-ordinary states of consciousness, might give us insights into understanding these phenomena. More importantly, we might learn how these experiences reduce the fear of death for those who experience them, since they can generate profound transpersonal and spiritual experiences that offer individuals a glimpse of the possibility of the existence of consciousness beyond their physical body (Cortright, 1997; Greyson, 2003; Grof, 2000, 2008).

## **Developmental Stages of Consciousness**

From a transpersonal perspective, the unfolding and development of human consciousness exist on a spectrum as we create our sense of self—the mental ego of adulthood that encompasses a multitude of personal experiences with others, events, and things in the world of our ordinary waking consciousness (Almas, 2001; Cortright, 1997; Wilber, 2016). Transpersonal psychology and the world’s wisdom traditions have mapped the stages of the levels of consciousness intrinsic to the process of human development, each level having its own characteristic modes of knowing and identity (Wilber, 2016). The psychological development of a typical healthy human being progresses from a stage that is pre-personal and pre-egoic to a stage of consciousness and identity that is personal and egoic, and beyond to a stage that is transpersonal, integrated, and whole (Cortright, 1997; Dowling-Singh, 1998; Wilber, 2016). Most people’s ego development virtually coincides with life itself, and yet we are designed to progress and unfold both intrinsically and naturally from the pre-personal to the personal to the transpersonal (Cortright, 1997; Dowling-Singh, 1998; Wilber, 2016).

At birth, in a pre-egoic and pre-personal state, we emerge from “The Ground of Being” (Tillich, 1967) that is the manifestation and ground of all life or unity consciousness into the physical world; our awareness is still inarticulate and partially emerged in the ground of being (Cortright, 1997; Dowling-Singh, 1998; Wilber, 2016). The infants’ initial sense of self is unconscious and grounded in their body, a body ego. During the first year, as we mature, we become more cognizant that our environment is separate from our body. Also, as a child begins to develop, cognitive capabilities and an emotional ego emerge, which bring an increasing awareness of a subjective inner-self



that is somehow different from the objective world of people, things, and objects that the child perceives (Cortright, 1997; Dowling-Singh, 1998; Wilber, 2016).

The child's developing consciousness enters the personal stage of development on the journey to the ego. This is the point at which individuals create the first dichotomy or separation between the self and not-self, and although this boundary establishes our sense of being a separate self, it also creates an illusion of separation on which our subsequent experienced reality is based (Cortright, 1997; Dowling-Singh, 1998; Wilber, 2016). This sense of being separate and independent is something that happens to every single one of us, and our parents, schools, and society reinforce this belief (Liquorman, 2012). Furthermore, we begin to refer to ourselves as "I," which begins a lifelong journey of the things "I" can do. This development of a mental ego is a necessary part of human development and is required for survival. In addition, this ego boundary has enormous significance in the dying process, since it is the first boundary we create, and in death, it is the last boundary we surrender (Cortright, 1997; Dowling-Singh, 1998; Wilber, 2016).

As a child's mind and ego develops, the distinction between *now* and *then* enables knowledge of the sense of time, or past, present, and future. With this knowledge comes the time-linked recognition of life and death and the realization of one's own mortality. This distinction known as the *second dualism* gives rise to humanity's fear of death (Cortright, 1997; Dowling-Singh, 1998; Wilber, 2016).

A child's developing psyche also creates a boundary between their body and mind that enables most of us to begin to locate our identification of self within the mind. The developing psyche forgets its "true nature" or "essence" in the ground of being and also its unified mind-body, which otherwise is known as *present-centered awareness*

(Cortright, 1997; Dowling-Singh, 1998; Wilber, 2016). We can spend years unconsciously defending, building, and fortifying these boundaries to help us feel safe though the use of defense mechanisms that distract us from the self-betrayal of forgetting who we are and the false selves we've created (Cortright, 1997; Dowling-Singh, 1998; Wilber, 2016).

As we mature, most of us forget our true nature. We tend to believe and act as if our created persona or identity had substance, reality, and enduring characteristics (Dowling-Singh, 1998, p. 38). The mental ego establishes a sense of being through its own inner dialogue, and our identity is who we think we are at any moment in time based on a plethora of our personal memories, beliefs, and desires (Dowling-Singh, 1998). If further growth continues, consciousness can move beyond the awareness of the ego into transpersonal realms. *Transpersonal consciousness* is a state of being, a conscious awareness of the ground of being or the experience of unity consciousness that includes a level of being and awareness, identity, and knowing that is beyond the ego and beyond the separate sense of self—this is the goal of many of the wisdom traditions of the world (Cortright, 1997; Dowling-Singh, 1998; Wilber, 2016). The *nondualist perspective* is similar in that its goal is to foster a spiritual awareness and recognition of oneself as existing as part of an essence, consciousness, god, or ground of being, rather than as the separate and independent individual valorized by the ego-self (Liquorman, 2012).

During the dying process, the ego initially is afraid of its annihilation as the body dies, is terrified of losing the identity that it believes resides within the physical body; and importantly, the mental ego fears death because it believes that death is the end of its existence (Assante, 2012; Dowling-Singh, 1998). During this dying process, the

dismantling of the ego proceeds through five physiological stages identified by Kübler-Ross (2008): denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Dowling-Sing (1998) has suggested that these Kübler-Ross stages of dying deal with the content of the mind, and thus are related to our thoughts and feelings about death as something outside of ourselves. According to Dowling-Singh (1998), our egos can surrender as we move into the transpersonal realms during the psychospiritual stages of dying. During the first psychospiritual stage of chaos, we go through the tumultuous five stages identified by Kübler-Ross in which our hard-earned persona, identity, and ideas about reality melt away as our mental ego moves beyond itself to realize it is dying. Eventually, we let go and surrender, spurred on by chaos rather than choice as the ego begins to realize that it is not only a material reality, but also, and more importantly, an inner and spiritual reality. Transcendence occurs as consciousness collides with the ground of being, and we recognize our true essence (Assante, 2012).

Dying is frightening in every imaginable way. An exploration of how our fears of dying have developed throughout history—and have continued with the support of scientific ideologies and the natural developmental progression of consciousness—can provide important insights into how these fears have continued over time (Assante, 2012; Dowling-Singh, 1998). Dowling-Sing (1998) has argued that since the act of dying may be the most powerful spiritual opportunity of a lifetime, more research is needed into the missing spiritual dimension between consciousness and altered states of consciousness (p. 129).

Wilber (2016) has created a model of the pre-personal, personal, and transpersonal to explain human development. He also has promoted a worldview in

which spirituality is central, and he has adopted the influences of various sources, such as Eastern psychology, philosophy, and mysticism; and Western developmental psychology and philosophy (Grof, 2008). However, not all transpersonal theorists have endorsed the linear or hierarchical model proposed by Wilber. Many critiques of Wilber's model make the fundamental argument that spiritual experiences often take the form of a spiral that combines regression and progression, rather than following a strict linear progression; and Wilber also has been criticized for his inability to see the paradoxical nature of his pre/trans fallacy, and for his minimization of the problem of death (Grof, 2008).

Wilber's pre/trans fallacy emphasizes the necessity of healthy ego development as a prerequisite for constructive transpersonal experiences, but he does not take into consideration the clinical evidence from experiential therapy conducted with or without psychedelic substances (Grof, 2000; Kaspro & Scotton, 1999).

Another important concept regarding spiritual development is *crisis*. Individuals in psychospiritual crisis due to illness, trauma, or drugs can have extraordinary experiences that can result in greater psychological and spiritual well-being if they can find a way to accept, explore, and learn from them (Kaspro & Scotton, 1999; Mackinnon, 2012). A transpersonal view of development—whether linear, cyclical, chaotic, or ordered—involves beliefs that spirit or consciousness is the specific essence that makes a human being and that we have an innate drive to move towards wholeness (Cortright, 1997). According to Dowling-Singh (1998), the process of becoming whole again, of returning to the essential, is the act of creating a human being (p. 91). In other words, wholeness is about spirit seeking to manifest itself through us and through the soul to its highest possible level (Mackinnon, 2012, p. 96). Our soul is our specific

human essence, and our soul guides us towards growth, change, and wholeness; therefore, transcendental reality is available to us in our everyday life—we just have to know where to look (Dowling-Singh, 1998; Mackinnon, 2012). Wilber (2016) also has claimed that, “You are actually in an ever-present state of unity consciousness, where your True Witness is one with everything that it Witnesses, whether gross, subtle, or causal” (p. 108).

Transpersonal psychology posits that our essential nature is spiritual, but during normal development, we separate from this essence (Cortright, 1997). Transpersonal psychology, like many of the world’s wisdom traditions, believes that consciousness is multidimensional and extends beyond our mind-body. Transpersonal experiences can be accessed through altered states of consciousness, and these states can increase our health and well-being (Cortright, 1997; Dowling-Singh, 1998; Grof, 2000; Wilber, 2016). Transpersonal psychology is one of the few branches of Western psychology that has carefully studied and examined the spiritual and mystical experiences of consciousness, while holding the belief that such experiences have validity (Cortright, 1997; Grof, 2000, 2008; Putman, 2016).

### **Altered States of Consciousness**

Altered states of consciousness (ASC) come in a variety of forms, such as sleep, hypnosis, and meditation, or those induced by mind altering substances (Cortright, 1997; Grof, 2008). Researchers also use the term *non-ordinary states of consciousness* to describe similar altered states, including those induced by psychedelic drugs, and they study these states by using specific variables or dimensions to examine their impact on the mental states of those undergoing the experience (Grof, 2008; Putnam, 2016).

Transpersonal psychology focuses on a specific subgroup of these non-ordinary states, such as observations from psychedelic therapy or powerful experiential psychotherapy work, meditation research, and evidence from near-death research (Cortright, 1997; Grof, 2008; & Putnam, 2016). Furthermore, these non-ordinary states are believed to be experiential, healing, and transformative, and include experiences such as those of shamans and their clients, spiritual practitioners and mystics, or individuals in spiritual crisis (Cortright, 1997; Grof, 2008; & Putnam, 2016).

### **Mystical States of Consciousness**

According to Grof (2008), careful and systematic studies of transpersonal experiences have shown that they are ontologically real and contain information about important, ordinarily hidden dimensions of existence, which have been consensually validated (p. 49). In other words, during transpersonal states of consciousness, the spiritual dimension of reality can be experienced directly in a way that is just as real as our daily experience of the material world (Cortright, 1997; Grof, 2008).

William James, the father of American psychology, revealed that his early experiments with nitrous oxide were central to his understanding of the human mind and its ability to experience multiple realities (James, 2014; Putnam, 2016). James sought out these experiences with nitrous oxide because they opened the door to altered states of consciousness that were mystical in nature. He personally believed that “the personal religious experience has its root and center in mystical states of consciousness” (James, 2014, p. 114).

James (1936) also stressed the degrees of what he called *mystical consciousness* (p. 377), and he believed that the subconscious plays a large role in this consciousness by

merging with the supernatural to create an experience that something “more” really exists. According to James (1936), the supernatural is real, since it produces the effects of another reality for the person who experiences it, and thus this other reality must be considered as real because we have no philosophical reasons for arguing against the experience of this unseen or mystical world as unreal. James (2014) characterized these mystical experiences by their noetic quality, ineffability, transience, and passive nature. In addition, these transpersonal experiences can be compared to Otto’s (2014) insight that the mystical experiences that originate in deeper levels of the psyche have a certain numinous quality, *numinous* meaning holy or sacred. The concept of *numinosity* is based on a direct experience of a mystical encounter with an element that belongs to a transpersonal dimension of reality (Grof, 2008).

In his famous work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1936), James pointed out that his observations on nitrous oxide had convinced him that the use of drugs and/or alcohol enabled humanity to transcend its normal waking rational consciousness. He claimed that “our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different” (James, 1936, p. 388). This mystical consciousness is felt to be another level of consciousness beyond our normal waking consciousness, and its unifying states or experiences tend to appeal to our “yes” function more than our “no” or rational function, and can have metaphysical significance or relevance for those who experience them (James, 2014). James proposed that these mystical states of consciousness beyond our rational critic are higher, more

elevated states of consciousness, and the feelings or emotions they evoke have the ability to change even the most non-religious of humanity (James, 1936).

William James rejected the materialist point of view that consciousness is merely a by-product of the brain, and proposed instead that consciousness is transmitted through the brain, and thus could potentially survive the death of the brain (Lorimer, 1990). James proposed a *transmissive theory*—the concept that the normal filters of consciousness could possibly expand or change at the time of death, resulting in various forms of ESP and other experiences. According to Lorimer (1990), this theory provided a framework for understanding the anomalies of human consciousness, anomalies such as NDEs that remain inexplicable in terms of conventional materialistic thought.

### **Near-Death Experiences**

A *near-death experience* (NDE) is defined as an event in which a person dies or is considered clinically dead but survives and continues his or her physical life (Greyson, 2003; Moody, 1975). NDEs have sparked contemporary debates about the possibility of life after death, and have raised questions that until recently were considered answerable only by the strong beliefs in an afterlife held by many world religions or by the explorations of theology (Greyson, 2010).

### **Transforming the Fear of Death with Near-Death Experiences**

Reports of NDEs can be found in the ancient past and around the modern world. For example, Carl Jung (1996) reported on his own near-death experience: “We shy away from the word eternal, but I can describe the experience only as the ecstasy of a non-temporal state in which present, past, and future are one” (p. 108). Traditionally, these beliefs were nurtured by most Western cultures until the decline of religious sensibility



and the rise of science made them appear absurd and impossible (Grof, 2000). In ancient and preindustrial societies, death was a part of everyday reality, and beliefs in cosmologies, religion, and philosophy were the ground for the expression of everyday spiritual rituals around death (Grof, 2000). The practical importance of the differences in attitudes of the ancient and modern worlds towards death and dying becomes obvious when considering the experience of a person who is going through the dying process today (Grof, 2000, 2010).

NDEs are not unique to the present day or modern Western society. They are universal and transhistorical, and according to Zaleski (1987), people from most world cultures have told stories about traveling to another world in which a king, shaman, or ordinary mortal passes through the gates of death and returns with a message for the living. Reports of NDEs date back centuries; for example, cave paintings in France and Spain depict what may be “after-life scenes” that are similar to the images reported to be associated with contemporary near-death experiences (Segal, 1989). Plato’s *Republic* has an account of a near-death experience of a Greek soldier named Er who awakens just before his cremation to tell a story of leaving his body and travelling with others to a place where they were to be judged (Zaleski, 1987, p. 12).

According to Grof (2000), recent evidence has indicated that an experiential confrontation with death in psychotherapy has a potential for healing and transformation. Coming to terms with one’s own mortality can lead to a spiritual awakening and improved quality of life. The encounter with death, whether it is experiential or symbolic in nature (meditation, psychedelic sessions) or real (accidents, cardiac arrest, NDE) can

bring about spiritual transformation and powerful insights, and reduce the fear of death (Becker, 1973; Greyson, 2003; Grof, 2000; Yalom, 1980).

The ability of modern technology to revive the clinically dead has brought science and religious belief together with respect to life after death (Grof, 2000; Varghese, 2010). Recent scientific advances have produced a seismic shift in our understanding of death, which are challenging our perceptions of death. Today, modern medical science can do the seemingly impossible by resuscitating people from the grips of death, people who have come back to life to tell their clear accounts of what happened to them when they were clinically dead (Parnia, 2014).

### **Near-Death Experiences, Modern Consciousness Research, and the Limitations of Science**

By finding new ways to save lives, medical science has inadvertently found new ways to investigate and answer fundamental questions about what happens during and after death, and what happens to human consciousness after death (Parnia, 2014). Reports of NDEs are being taken seriously, and contemporary research on NDEs is growing. The literature suggests that attitudes towards death and dying are starting to shift, beginning with Kübler-Ross's research on the care of the dying, which revealed that dying can be both a peaceful and transformative experience (Kübler-Ross, 2008). Greyson (2003), Moody (1988), and Ring (1996) also have provided compelling evidence that should be investigated further, and their research into near-death experiences suggests that consciousness might not end with death, which may help to reduce our fear of death because of the possibility of life after death.

Millions of people who have physically died and then were resuscitated by modern science have reported on the reality of a world beyond death. What defies logic is how these people were defined as being *dead* within the contemporary medical paradigm. Biologically and medically, death and cardiac arrest are synonymous, and the medical term for *death* is *cardiac arrest* because all three criteria of death have been reached—no heartbeat, no respiration, and fixed dilated pupils (Parnia, 2014, p. 23). Unexplainably, some patients who have no vital signs, are not breathing, and do not have a heartbeat are somehow able to see, hear, think, reason, and remember (Assante, 2012; Parnia, 2014). The phenomena of seeing without eyes, thinking, reasoning, perceiving, and remembering in the absence of all brain activity and vital signs demonstrate that everything we embrace as our awareness—including our personal thoughts, memories, and sensory experiences—might not need the physical body or a brain to function (Assante, 2012; Parnia, 2014). The evidence from these medically resuscitated patients and their reported near-death experiences appear to indicate that consciousness can exist beyond matter and suggest that our lives and consciousness might be more amazing than science has thus far considered (Assante, 2012; Parnia, 2014).

Nevertheless, skepticism remains even though near-death experiences have changed the definition of *death* as we understand it (i.e., the absence of vital signs) and even though high numbers of NDEs are being reported across the world (Assante, 2012; Parnia, 2014). Since the reported evidence of NDEs is primarily phenomenological—an individual's subjective account of their own experience—it does not meet the scientific criteria required for proof, which is mainly objective observation and replicability (Assante, 2012; Parnia, 2014).

However, when considering the reality of a phenomenon, we can state that something real is happening because of its effects on an experiencer. Some may dismiss these phenomenological accounts as the products of hallucinations, myths, frauds, or disorders of the brain. On the other end of the spectrum are the religious beliefs of premodern humanity, ancient tradition, and perennial philosophy that consider these kinds of experiences to be real. Both ends of the spectrum approach the reality of phenomena with their own preconceptions and thus find it difficult to find common ground. With respect to the person who has returned from an NDE to everyday experience, it is helpful to consider their lived experience and the information they are revealing in relation to our own everyday experience because our lived experience “grounds” the after-life-related phenomena in the here and now. This kind of interaction is an opportunity to study and understand death and to integrate science and spirituality, since they both are manifest within the inner reality of the experiencer (Assante, 2012). For this type of study and understanding the standards of proof might be higher. Proof may exist, but it cannot be physical, since our current definition of *death* brings physical life to an end. To find this non-physical proof, we must extend the boundaries of consciousness as we currently know it (Chopra, 2006).

White (1995) has claimed that the power of the NDE is the collective sum of all NDE experiences, not just the NDE that one individual experienced. Through an examination of many NDEs, we can discover the epistemological lessons of the NDE (White, 1995). NDEs seem to occur at a time when physiological functioning is seriously compromised or non-functioning. This fact has been the driving force behind many explanatory models of the mechanism of NDEs. However, to date, very little data or

empirical evidence is available to provide a scientific foundation for building an acceptable explanatory model of the NDE mechanism. The enhancement of mental functioning at a time when the brain is physiologically impaired, as well as the accompanying paranormal and other inexplicable experiences, are not easily explained within a materialistic model (Greyson, 2006).

### **Phenomenology of Near-Death Experiences**

Evidence from NDEs has shown that a definable moment of death does not exist, rather only a process of dying that starts with life and eventually ends in death (Parnia, 2014). The journey through a NDE may be best understood as an experiential counterpart of this physical dying process (Greyson, 2006; Parnia, 2014). Contrary to popular perception, death is not a specific moment; rather, it is a process that begins when the heart stops beating, the lungs stop working, and the brain ceases to function—a medical condition known as *cardiac arrest* that is considered biological death and also clinical death (Parnia, 2014).

Recent research has indicated that NDEs are reported by 12% to 18% of cardiac arrest survivors (Greyson, 2010; Parnia & Fenwick, 2002; van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, & Elfferich, 2001). Many kinds of events have been reported that give rise to NDEs, during which related enhanced states of consciousness also have been reported (van Lommel et al., 2001). Such events include cardiac arrest (clinical death), near-drowning, coma due to traumatic brain injury or intra-cerebral hemorrhage, shock after loss of blood, and diseases not originally life threatening. Importantly, we know something real happens during an NDE because of the aftereffects on survivors, which have been found to be consistent and also measurable. These dramatic aftereffects leave

no doubt that something momentous has occurred for the experiencers. NDE is a transforming experience with measurable effects that include lower average body temperatures, enhanced intuitive sensibilities, lower blood pressure and metabolic rates, shorter sleep cycles, profound changes in attitudes about life, and most often reported, the loss of the fear of death (Assante, 2012; van Lommel et al, 2001).

Recent research has provided phenomenological evidence that demonstrates that NDEs are altered states of consciousness that qualitatively are more than statistical coincidences even across reports from different cultures (van Lommel, 2013). During these experiences, people retain their consciousness, which becomes even more expansive (van Lommel, 2013). According to a recent poll conducted in Germany and the US, approximately 4% of the Western world population has experienced a NDE (van Lommel, 2013), and a 1982 Gallup Poll estimated that 15% of all Americans, or about 23 million people, reported that they had experienced a NDE, and of that number, about eight million reported some sort of accompanying mystical experience (van Lommel, 2013).

When researchers or scientists ask the question “How can near-death experiences be explained?” they tend to make the usual assumptions that the brain in this state cannot create any kind of experience; that the NDEs are purely anecdotal; and that they can be explained in terms of biological, neurological, or psychological concepts (Greyson, 2006). More specifically, some have suggested that an NDE can be explained as due to a specific brain state, a certain drug reaction, or the cultural beliefs of the person having the “so called” NDE. In contrast, others have insisted that NDEs cannot be explained because

they cannot be correlated to any specific physical or psychological condition of the person having the experience (Greyson, 2006).

However, the person who has experienced an NDE usually does not require an explanation that fits the reductionist justification that most researchers require. From the perspective of the experiencer, the NDE occurs from a first person point of view or through a direct experience of their own personal consciousness, and therefore the NDE is an experience related to their sense of self, just as their everyday experience of consciousness or self occurs in the moment and exists independently of their physical body (Varghese, 2010). Therefore, some researchers may consider the reports of NDE phenomena as anecdotal, and thus NDEs become located on the slippery slope between evidence and proof when attempts are made to discern the data from reported NDEs, since from a scientific viewpoint, most of the NDE data presented is not generated by controlled experiments that can be replicated by anyone, anywhere. None of the reports of NDE phenomena meet the scientific criteria of quantitative measurability, experimental repeatability, and universal observability (Assante, 2012). Moreover, even the self-reported evidence of NDEs does not provide any certainty about when consciousness is freed from the body by death; rather, it moves death into another dimension of reality (Assante, 2012). Therefore, the current challenge is to understand how these complex states of consciousness can occur and under what circumstances, which our current neurophysiological models have claimed are not possible (Fenwick et al., 2007; Greyson, 2010).

According to Parnia (2014), many who have survived a close brush with death after a cardiac arrest often express a sense of relief at having survived, but many others

become emotionally and mentally fragile because their experience was a warning that death is real. The transformative nature of the NDE changes the world for many of those who experience them; many no longer fear death and many come back with the memory of the NDE more real than ordinary reality itself (Parnia, 2014; Greyson, 2006; Grof; 2000).

During a NDE, an individual in a life and death situation leaves this world and enters another realm (Greyson, 2006). A NDE is a conscious experience in which a person experiences a sense of being detached from the physical world during a physiological process of dying. Individuals may be aware of their death, and at the same time, aware of their disembodied existence in an altered state in which they may experience a sense of peace, separation of consciousness from the body, entrance into darkness and seeing a light, meeting spiritual entities, panoramic life review, judgement of their life, ineffability, border or boundary, and return to the body (Moody, 1975). NDEs are associated with lasting pervasive changes in attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviours, most notably a decreased fear of death and an appreciation for life (Greyson, 2014).

Raymond Moody (1975) was the researcher who coined these experiences the near-death experience. Moody (1988) defined the *near-death experience* as “profound spiritual events that happen, uninvited, to some individuals at the time of death” (p. 11). Once considered to be meaningless hallucinations, NDEs have become the subject of extensive research due to their transformative impacts—specifically the belief that death is nothing to fear, and the subsequent feelings of expanded spiritual consciousness—as reported by those who have had NDEs, (Khanna & Greyson, 2014a).



Moody (1975) identified 15 characteristics of the NDE: ineffability, hearing oneself pronounced dead, feelings of peace and quiet, hearing strange noises, the dark tunnel, out-of-body-experience, meeting spiritual beings, encounters with a bright light or being of light, panoramic life review, realms where all knowledge exists, cities of light, a realm of bewildered spirits, a supernatural rescue, a border or limit, and coming back into the body (Greyson, 2003, 2006). These NDE elements have been thoroughly documented by those who have experienced them and by physicians and others who attended to them, although no two NDEs are exactly alike. Moody (1975) also found four common aftereffects in the reports of the experiencers, which included a deepened appreciation for life, frustration regarding how to explain the experience to others, validation of out-of-body visions, and elimination of the fear of death or dying (Greyson, 2006). Dutch cardiologist, Pim van Lommel (2001) did a 13-year study of near-death subjects through which he found similar core NDE attributes, including out-of-body experience, holographic life review, encounters with deceased relatives or friends, return to the body, and reduction in the fear of death (van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, & Elfferich, 2001).

The most common features of NDEs can be grouped into four categories: cognitive, affective, paranormal, and transcendental (Greyson, 1985, 2006). Most NDEs contain elements from all four of these components, although one or more of these features can dominate an individual NDE experience. *Cognitive features* include extraordinary functioning, such as an altered perception of time, enhanced awareness, and acceleration of thought processes. *Affective elements* include intense feelings of joy, happiness, peace, and unconditional love. *Paranormal elements* include psychic phenomena, such as extrasensory perception and a sense of being out of the body.

*Transcendental elements* include being drawn to an unusually bright light, seeing deceased others, communicating with a being of light, and feelings of cosmic unity (Greyson, 1985, 2006).

Although variations in near-death experiences have been reported in the literature, a standardization seems to prevail among those types of NDE experience referred to as positive versus negative experiences (Greyson, 2003, 2006; Assante, 2012). Moreover, negative NDEs are reported less often than positive NDEs, and the degree of discomfort reported with negative experiences ranges from confusion to extreme fear, and often negative NDEs are reported as more personalized and have more variability in images and landscape (Assante, 2012). Regardless of whether NDEs are reported as being negative or positive, all experiencers report positive aftereffects and come back with little or no fear of death (Greyson, 2003, 2006; Assante; 2012). Ironically, their own brush with death becomes the most inspiring event of their lives.

### **Effects of the Near-Death Experience**

A recent review of the literature of NDE research concluded that NDEs led to life changes similar to those reported following a spiritual awakening, and the most commonly reported characteristic following an NDE was the loss of fear of death (Greyson, 2003, 2006; van Lommel et al., 2001). Those who experience an NDE often report their encounter as ineffable, so ordinary language cannot express its power or mystery, which includes encounters with light or beings of light. Experiencers also often report a sense of dissolution of the ego, and intuitive feelings—immense love, warmth, joy and peace—of identifying with these beings of light, and most often a loss of the fear of death (Lorimer, 1990). Many who experience a NDE claim they were offered a

glimpse into a life beyond material existence, an experience that stressed love and knowledge as the purpose and meaning of life (Greyson, 2010).

Ring (1996) has reported that those who have had a near-death experience claim it taught them the importance of love and compassion for others and gave them a deeper understanding of life, especially its spiritual or religious aspects. To clarify, those who have had a NDE are not necessarily more religious but tend to be more spiritual after their experience, since they have gained a deeper understanding of a single and shared transcendent vision of the divine—a universal spirituality—that makes them realize the unity of all (Ring, 1996, p. 189).

In their study, Khanna and Greyson (2014b) explored whether daily spiritual experiences increased for individuals who had a NDE. They examined whether the intensity of the NDE increased the experiencer's frequency of daily spiritual experiences. Two hundred and twenty-nine participants completed their near-death experience scale (NDE scale) (Greyson, 1983), a 16-item self-rated scale used to explore cognitive changes, affective changes, paranormal changes, and transcendental changes during the experience. A score of 7, 1 SD below the mean, was the criterion for the experience to be considered a NDE. The researchers also used a daily spiritual experience measure (DSES) to determine experiencers' ordinary spiritual connections with the transcendent in daily life, which included a sense of connection with the transcendent and daily gratitude. The results of the study clearly indicated that daily spiritual activities increased after a NDE, and this increase varied proportionally with the depth of intensity as measured by the NDE scale, and was positively associated with increases in daily spiritual activities as measured by the DSES scores when compared to study participants

who did not report a NDE (Khanna & Greyson, 2014b). Interestingly, study participants who did not have an actual NDE, but rather had a close brush with death, also showed an increase in daily spiritual experiences, although it was significantly lower than the NDE group (Khanna & Greyson, 2014b). These results are in line with previous research that has indicated that those who have had a NDE often report a renewed sense of meaning and purpose, including a heightened sense of spiritual purpose, greater compassion for oneself and others, and a wider understanding of the value of love and service to others; and even more importantly, these results indicate that after a NDE the fear of death holds no more power, which leads to a greater appreciation for life (Khanna & Greyson, 2014b).

The most significant change following a NDE is spiritual growth (Greyson, 2006; Khanna & Greyson, 2014a). A recent definition of this *spiritual change* reflects a pattern of positive change that experiencers describe as a reevaluation of transcendent reality that includes a direct knowledge that death is nothing to fear, a sense of unity and divine love, and a strengthened belief in postmortem existence (Greyson, 2014).

### **The Mystical Nature of Near-Death Experiences**

Not all researchers would agree that reality can transcend the physical dimension. The modern view is that conscious experience is produced by brain activity and, thus, the NDE must be a purely physical phenomenon (Greyson, 2010). In her extensive research into the dying process, Kübler- Ross (2008) noted that as people approach death, they often experience altered states of consciousness that often can appear mystical, transcendental, or religious in nature. These experiential phenomena are characterized by certain features such as intensified emotions, disordered perceptions, and a loss of time

and space, which seem to comfort the dying and prepare them spiritually for death (Fenwick et al., 2007). Dowling-Singh (1998) spent many years working with dying patients and has reported that many people seem to enter a transcendent and transformed level of consciousness in what she calls the *nearing-death experience* (p. 15). Many of the features of the nearing-death experience are comparable to mystical experiences and NDEs (Greyson, 2006), which include feelings of joy and peace, the inability to explain the experience, the sense of being in the presence of something larger or transcendent than oneself, the experience of a being of light or a bright light (Greyson, 2006).

The practice of mysticism is essentially a movement of the heart, a seeking to transcend the limitations of the individual, finite self and surrender to ultimate reality (Underhill, 2008). Theologians and scholars have pointed to the similarities of typical NDE phenomenology and the lifelong mystical experiences of the medieval Roman Catholic mystics St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, and they have concluded that NDE and mystical experience share the features of out-of-body experience, visions of other beings, and the loss of the fear of death (Greyson, 2006). However, unlike a mystic who is on a spiritual path in which nearness to death plays a role, a person who experiences a NDE is suddenly thrust into spiritual consciousness without any preparation, and then returns to their body and usually to a society in which the experience is not believed nor valued (Greyson, 2006).

Walter Pahnke, a minister and psychiatrist, and William Richards, a theologian and psychologist, outlined nine aspects of the mystical experience based on the work of William James and Walter Stace: a sense of unity, transcendence of time and space, deeply felt positive mood, sense of sacredness, paradoxicality, noetic quality, ineffability,

transiency, and persistent positive aftereffects (Goldsmith, 2011; Greyson, 2006, 2014). This model was developed and operationalized by Hood's (1975) Mysticism Scale, which is the most commonly used scale today (Greyson, 2014). All nine of these mystical features are commonly reported NDE features. The most common effect found in both mystical experiences and NDEs is the transformative impact of the experience. NDEs have been reported to produce intense and lifelong changes for many who experience them, often triggering meaningful connections with an inner self and changes in attitude toward death, with a reduction of fear of dying being the most often reported, and a new sense of meaning and purpose in life (Greyson, 2006, 2014). Similarly, mystical experiences produce connection to the divine or unity experiences and often lead to lasting changes in attitudes, including compassion, love, and gratitude for oneself and others (Greyson, 2006).

Greyson's (2014) study examined how the mystical phenomena reported during NDEs are similar to and/or different from the phenomena reported during non-NDE, mystical experiences. The study quantified the mystical elements of the NDE by comparing the responses of 292 participants who experienced a NDE, as determined by Hood's Mysticism scale (1975), with 34 participants who had a close brush with death but did not meet the requirements of the NDE. The results confirmed Greyson & Khanna's (2014a) hypothesis regarding the occurrence of mystical phenomena in the participants who had NDEs compared to the group who had a close brush with death, just as he found in their previous study (2014b) comparing increased daily spiritual experiences. These results were based on summing the scores of four items in each of the eight categories of mystical experiences: ego loss, unity, inner subjectivity, timelessness,

noetic quality, ineffability, positive affect, and sacredness of the experience. The depth of the NDE measured by scores on the NDE scale was found to have a positive correlation with the scores on the entire Mysticism Scale and within each of the eight conceptual categories (Greyson, 2014). To compensate for overlapping items on the NDE Scale and the Mysticism Scale, two items were removed. Then, a factor analysis was performed on the combined non-overlapping items from the NDE and Mysticism Scale that indicated a two-factor solution that identified distinct mystical NDE factors, which suggested that although NDEs have commonalities with mystical experiences, NDEs can be differentiated from mystical experiences. Some of factors specific to the NDE included a *border of no return* and *encounters with deceased relatives* (Greyson, 2014).

Although the results of Greyson's (2014) study clearly indicated a high incidence of mystical features in NDEs, one of the limitations of this study is related to the mean mysticism scale score of the participants who experienced NDEs. Greyson found that these mean scores were not as high as those reported in other studies of mystical experiences. In addition, Greyson (2014) examined two other studies of mystical experiences associated with the psychedelic drug *psilocybin* in which the researchers found that psilocybin yielded higher scores on the Mysticism Scale (Griffiths, Richards, Johnson, McCann, & Jesse, 2008; Griffiths, Richards, McCann, & Jesse, 2006). Although Greyson found that the scores on the mystical features of NDEs in his study were lower than those of the participants in the psilocybin studies who received the highest dose of the drug, he concluded that the scores from his study were comparable to the scores of those who received lower doses of psilocybin (Greyson, 2014; Griffiths et al., 2011). Many factors could contribute to these findings, including the effects of set and setting,

and dosage on mystical experiences, particularly with respect to drug-facilitated experiences (Griffiths et al., 2006; Griffiths et al; 2008).

These findings prompt significant questions: Can psychedelics induce genuine mystical experiences? If so, who would benefit, under what circumstances, and what can we learn from these altered states of consciousness? In what ways might mystical states inform us about the states of consciousness experienced during an NDE?

### **Psychedelics**

Artists, musicians, philosophers, scientists, therapists, and other seekers of knowledge have been drawn to psychedelic drugs such as LSD, psilocybin, and mescaline because they want to learn about the human mind and believe that these drugs can open up new ways of seeing and experiencing our everyday reality, or they may offer a mystical or spiritual experience (Grof, 2000; Putnam, 2016). The mystical states of consciousness evoked by psychedelics are similar to those described in the world's wisdom traditions, such as nirvana, and include unity, transcendence of space and time, sacredness, intuitive knowledge, deeply felt positive mood, ineffability, and paradoxicality (Pahnke & Richards, 1966; Richards, 2017).

### **History of Psychedelics**

Virtually every culture throughout history has ritualized the use of mood-altering drugs to alter consciousness, for example, the Australian Aboriginals' *pituri*, Zen's tea, Hinduism's *soma*—known as the food of the gods—and the Zoroastrian *haoma* (Cortright, 1997; Roberts, 2013). Little consensus exists as to the origins of this universal impulse to alter consciousness, but some have theorized that a primordial moment existed



when proto-humans first encountered the plants that expanded their consciousness and promoted new thought and the development of language (Jay, 2010).

According to Jay (2010), the earliest drug artifacts in the archaeological record are two chillum-style pipes, made from hollowed out puma bones, found in a cave in Argentina, and radiocarbon-dated to before 2,000 BC. The pipes contained the burnt residue seeds of the mountain shrub *Anadenanthera*, a source of DMT or dimethyltryptamine, one of the most well-known powerful, and naturally occurring, hallucinogens (Jay, 2010). In addition to DMT, other naturally occurring classic hallucinogens include psilocybin, the active compound found in many species of mushrooms, and mescaline from peyote, a small cactus plant (Grob, Bossis, & Griffiths, 2013). The religious use of peyote has a long history amongst the indigenous peoples of North and South America, and its use dates back over 5,700 years. In 1971, peyote, along with other psychedelic substances, were deemed illegal and classified as Schedule I drugs because they were considered to have no medical value; were labeled as drugs of abuse; and were thought to be unsafe to administer, even by a physician (Garcia-Romeu, Kersgaard, & Addy, 2016). However, the use of peyote as a sacrament is protected in the U.S. based on the religious freedom of members of the Native American Church (Garcia-Romeu, Kersgaard, & Addy, 2016).

Feuerstein (1990) studied the Vedic sages of India who searched for direct and experiential knowledge of the fate of the soul after death using *soma*, a powerful psychedelic that enabled them to explore other dimensions of reality while experiencing altered states of consciousness. They interpreted these alternate realms of reality to be spiritual realms inhabited by the souls of the dead and other powerful forces. The sages

learned from these experiences, which they believed helped guide their destiny and lives in the physical world, and they also believed that the physical death of their bodies was merely a transition and their consciousness continued, based on their actions in life (Feuerstein 1990; Grof, 2010).

Ring's (1990) study discussed how scholars of ancient shamanism have discovered that in traditional tribal societies, the shaman was considered a "doctor of the soul" (p. 206). In some cultures, the shaman, either a man or woman, learned the sacred mysteries of otherworldly realms through ritual, sacred songs and language, specialized training, and unique visionary skills using psychotropic plant medicines. The shaman takes a transcendental journey between the world of the spirit and the body, and then returns with new knowledge to help others, thus becoming indispensable to the welfare of his or her tribe (Ring, 1990). Shamanism and its stories of shamanistic journeys related to death and dying are some of the greatest sources of eschatological mythology, stories that have contributed significantly to the knowledge of death and the experiences associated with it (Grof, 2010).

Psilocybin is a naturally occurring compound found in more than 100 species of mushrooms (Powell, 2015). The religious use of psilocybin-containing mushrooms has a long history of ceremonial use by indigenous people for religious and healing purposes with documented evidence throughout Mesoamerica, Mexico, and Central America (Garcia-Romeu, et al., 2016; Grob et al., 2013). The use of psilocybin-containing mushrooms, known as *magic mushrooms*, is believed to date back thousands of years as symbolized by eight-thousand-year-old rock paintings in Tassili, Algeria that depict

dancing shamans with seemingly magic mushrooms budding from their bodies (Powell, 2015).

Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), a semi-synthetic tryptamine derived from the naturally occurring ergot alkaloid ergotamine, was first synthesized by Albert Hofmann in 1938 (Garcia-Romeu, et al., 2016). In 1943, after intentionally ingesting a high dose of LSD in his laboratory, Hoffman experienced the incredible potency of the psychoactive properties of a drug that could alter consciousness in unusual ways (Carhart-Harris, et al., 2016; Garcia-Romeu, et al., 2016). Hoffman (2009) later wrote of his experience by initially describing it as unpleasant and characterized by altered perception, fear and paranoia, and a sense of the dissolution of his ego as his outer world disintegrated. However, the day after ingesting LSD, Hoffman was able to recall the experience vividly—he woke with a clear head and had a sensation of well-being and renewed life flowing through him (Hoffman, 2009, p. 51).

Research into these various psychedelic substances has revealed their ability to produce temporary altered states of consciousness, which provide healing and transformational experiences. These experiences are comparable to the mystical experiences described in the religious literature of mystics and shamans that corroborates the long history—dating back hundreds of years—of using psychedelics as religious sacraments for healing and spiritual rituals (Garcia-Romeu, et al., 2016). Tracing the historical and scholarly context of these hallucinogens may give us insights into the mystical healing powers of the psychedelic plants used across most ancient cultures. It appears that these plants formed an intrinsic part of the communal rituals associated with

death and that these cultures also had innate knowledge that these plants had other significant positive applications (Garcia-Romeu, et al., 2016; Roberts, 2013).

### **Psychedelics and Spirituality**

Psychedelics provide a brief, chemically-induced window through which to experience the profound beauty and wholeness reported by mystics (Goldsmith, 2011, p. 145). Throughout history, scholars and researchers of philosophy, religion, and consciousness—including William James, Abraham Maslow, Aldous Huxley, and Huston Smith—have written at length about altered states of consciousness, the mystical, and the numinous (Rodrigues & Harding, 2009). When his first wife was dying of cancer, Aldous Huxley, a scholar of comparative religion and spirituality, became interested in the transformative aspects of psychedelics to aid the dying. To aid her transition while dying, he used psychedelic-induced hypnotic techniques to help her reach altered states of consciousness and happy memories from her lifetime (Grof, 2000). While on his own deathbed in 1963, Huxley used LSD to aid his own dying process and transition to the next dimension (Goldsmith, 2011). Huxley advocated for the use of hallucinogens with the dying because they induced mystical experiences and revealed messages of the perennial philosophy of unity and a single truth (Grof et al., 2013).

In 1967, Abraham Maslow and Anthony Sutich co-founded the transpersonal psychology that honors the entire spectrum of human experiences, including various non-ordinary states of consciousness (Grof, 2008). The study of mystical experiences is a focus of transpersonal psychology and Maslow's work. Well-known for his needs hierarchy model, Maslow revised it later in his career to include mystical experiences (Roberts, 2013). His new model included transcendence, which surpassed self-

actualization at the top of the hierarchy. Maslow differentiated between those who were healthy with no experience of transcendence and those who aimed to reach transcendent experiences and believed they were vital to their well-being. To reach this level of transcendence, a person must have experienced profound changes in her/his perceptions of self and changes to their worldview through a mystical experience, such as unitive consciousness, sacredness, or ecstatic states (Roberts, 2013).

In both religious and scholarly disciplines, an experience is considered *mystical* if it includes a cluster of nine subjective experiences as measured by Ralph Hood's (1975) Mysticism Scale, the standard instrument used today for assessing mystical experiences (Goldsmith, 2011; Roberts, 2013). These nine components include paradoxicality, objectivity, transcendence, transience, mood (deeply felt and positive), unity, sacredness, ineffability, and persisting changes in attitude or behaviour (Goldsmith, 2011; Roberts, 2013). When these nine components are present, a mystical experience has been clearly identified. However, as contemporary psychedelic research has begun to gain recognition, the old question arises once again as to whether psychedelic drugs can induce genuine mystical experiences. If we review past and recent psychedelic research and examine the evidence, we will find that psychedelics can induce genuine mystical experiences, but only some of the time, for certain people, and under specific circumstances (Roberts, 2013, p. 81).

### **Early Psychedelic Research**

The first period of psychedelic research occurred between 1947, when the first human-subjects research was published, and the late 1970s when the last research done at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center was discontinued (Goldsmith, 2011). During

this timeframe, and before cultural and political concerns led to the termination of psychedelic studies, over 1,000 reports (based on studies with approximately 40,000 research subjects) were published in the psychiatric and medical literature describing therapeutic responses to various hallucinogens (Goldsmith, 2011; Grob et al., 2013). The initial interest in psychedelics began with the psychosis-mimicking properties of these compounds, which opened the door to understanding psychotic-like experiences in non-psychotic individuals (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2016). However, interest in this psychotomimetic (psychosis-mimicking) model decreased as researchers investigated the administration of hallucinogens for other therapeutic potentials. These other potentials included difficult-to-treat clinical conditions such as alcoholism; drug addiction; obsessive-compulsive disorder; chronic post-traumatic stress disorder; and spiritual experiences, which led to examining the devastating existential anxiety of the terminally ill (Grob et al., 2013; Grof, 2000).

During this time, two distinct treatment models were proposed and utilized. The first involved the administration of low dosages of hallucinogens along with the application of various theoretical modalities and psychotherapy interventions (Cortright, 1997; Grob et al., 2013; Grof, 1975, 1980, 2000). The structure of the psycholytic model, originally called *psycholytic therapy*, was to administer low doses of hallucinogens, and the goal of the therapist was to help people bring emotionally charged hidden events into consciousness, such as repressed childhood memories, to improve the outcome of the therapeutic process. Therapists using this approach claimed a reduction in the duration, and overall improvement, of the therapeutic process due to the easier access to material within their clients' psyche (Cortright, 1997; Grob et al., 2013; Grof, 2000).

Researchers also began to explore the effects of higher dosages of hallucinogens on clinical subjects and patients, originally called *psychedelic therapy*, with the intent to produce a mystical experience (Grob et al., 2013; Grof, 1975, 1980, 2000). Humphry Osmond and Abram Hoffer originally pioneered this high-dose model in the 1950s in their work with chronic alcoholics, and discovered that the administration of high dose hallucinogens, specifically LSD, could induce profound, mystical, and novel dimensions of consciousness, which enabled their participants to quit alcohol (Goldsmith, 2011; Grob et al., 2013; Grof, 2000). They further noted that giving a single large dose of LSD to participants or repeated doses over three or four sessions led to therapeutic improvement for those participants who had transcendental experiences that carried over into their everyday lives after the effects of the administered drug had worn off. This research result led Osmond and Hoffer to hypothesize that the spiritual experiences initiated by the LSD sessions enabled their participants to reorient their lives in powerful and positive ways (Goldsmith, 2011; Grob et al., 2013; Grof, 2000).

The concept that psychedelics might be beneficial as a therapeutic tool for dying individuals originated with independent researchers, which led to the collaborations of many like-minded researchers (Cortright, 1997; Grof, 2000). In the 1950s, research into psychedelics began with internal medicine investigators at UCLA and the Chicago Medical School, and later in the 1960s grew to include psychologists and psychiatrists at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center (Grob et al., 2013; Grof, 2000). During this time, investigations using the hallucinogen treatment model repeatedly improved the clinical conditions of patients with advanced cancer who were experiencing overwhelming anxiety. In addition to the reports of improvement to emotional and

psychosomatic symptoms, many patients reported an overall improved quality of life. As a result of the hallucinogenic treatment model, most often these patients reported experiences that were both transformative and mystical in nature, which changed their attitudes towards death. This transformation was reflected mainly in lower anxiety and a reduction of fears about their death (Grob et al., 2013; Grof, 2000).

During this time, at the Chicago Medical School, Kast (1967) used LSD with the dying to compare the effectiveness of Dilaudid, Demerol, and LSD for pain relief (Goldsmith, 2011). He found, on average, that Dilaudid gave patients 3 hours of pain relief, Demerol 2 hours, and LSD 92 hours to 10 days. The LSD analgesic effects came on slower but lasted significantly longer. Furthermore, 85% of patients claimed they would take LSD again, and 72% had important insights (Goldsmith, 2011). Kast (1967) theorized that patients' anticipation of their death provoked anxiety, which the ego met with denial, which created physical symptoms, predominantly pain. During this time, Goldsmith became aware that another group of researchers—Pahnke, Grof, and Yensen—were conducting research with LSD and the dying. This research team found that pain relief was not so much associated with the given dose, but rather with the peak experience that the patients reported (Goldsmith, 2011). In other words, the analgesic effects experienced by the peak group were not reliably replicable; however, a change in attitude towards death for those who had the peak experience was replicable. The changes reported included a reduced fear of death, acceptance of certain family issues, and reductions in depression and anxiety, all of which resulted in more peaceful deaths. The researchers hypothesized that a proportion of the pain involved in a cancer death was due



to a displaced fear of dying, which was manifested in more socially-acceptable pain symptoms (Goldsmith, 2011).

These studies of using psychedelics with the dying also found that critically ill patients had a reduced need for narcotic pain medications. The sessions enabled the participants to have powerful psychospiritual experiences with increased positive mood and decreased anxiety. Yet despite the promising results, political and public pressure halted the research (Grof, Danforth, Chopra et al., 2011).

Current research uses two main classes of psychedelic drugs. One class is known as the *classic psychedelics*: LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide), mescaline, DMT (dimethyltryptamine), and psilocybin, which are defined according to their chemical structure and pharmacological mechanism of action. The other main class of psychedelics is known as *entactogens*, which includes MDMA (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2016). As the researcher of the current study, my greatest interest is the mystical implications of psilocybin and LSD, and how these drugs transform the fear of death for those who experience them.

### **Effects of Psilocybin**

Psilocybin is found in over 100 species of mushrooms (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2016; Grof, 2000). Psilocybin-containing mushrooms have been used for centuries for religious purposes and have been studied with documented evidence from the pre-Columbian cultures, including Mexico where the invading Spaniards tried to suppress the native use of these visionary psychedelic plants known as “flesh of the gods,” psilocybin-containing mushrooms that were widespread in use (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2016; Goldsmith, 2011; Grof, 2000).

Pharmacologically, psilocybin is 4-phosphoryloxy-*N,N*-dimethyltryptamine, which is rapidly metabolized by the hepatic first pass metabolism to psilocin (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2016; Grob et al., 2013). Psilocybin is a highly potent agonist at the serotonin 5-HT-2A and 5-HT-2C receptors, with the primary site of action for the psychoactive effects at the 5-HT-2A receptor; psilocybin has subjective effects lasting between 4 to 6 hours (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2016; Grob et al., 2013). Research during the 1960s found psilocybin to be orally active at low doses (10mg.) with stronger effects at higher doses (30mg.), (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2016; Grob et al., 2013). Recent independent analyses have demonstrated that psilocybin presents a nonthreatening safety profile when compared to other commonly abused drugs because psilocybin exhibits the least amount of harm to self or others (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2016).

Early psychopharmacological investigations of psilocybin found that compared to mescaline and LSD, psilocybin was more potent and produced stronger visual effects, was less emotionally intense, more euphoric, and less likely to cause anxiety and panic (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2016; Grob et al., 2013). Psilocybin at high dosages (30mg.) has been observed to produce altered states of consciousness, characterized by changes in perception, mood, and cognition, including visual and internal states of ecstasy, with many psychospiritual states of consciousness (Grob et al., 2013). Generally, psilocybin can cause dizziness, weakness or tremors, and altered states of consciousness, including visions and auditory distortions and ideations, along with a distorted sense of time and space. Alterations in mood include emotions of happiness, sadness, fear, and irritability. Potential therapeutic uses include treatment for anxiety associated with terminal illness,

and risks, albeit low, include psychosis and hallucination persisting perception disorder (Tupper et al., 2015).

### **Effects of LSD**

Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) is a semi-synthetic tryptamine that acts primarily as a serotonergic agonist, but also shows action at dopaminergic and adrenergic receptor sites, with a primary mechanism of action for the psychoactive effects by the agonism of 5-HT<sub>2A</sub>R receptors; LSD has subjective effects lasting up to 12 hours (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2016; Grob et al., 2013). Generally, LSD can cause dizziness, weakness or tremors, and altered states of consciousness, including visions and auditory distortions and ideations, along with a distorted sense of time and space. Alterations in mood include emotions of happiness, sadness, fear, and irritability. Potential therapeutic uses include treatment for anxiety associated with terminal illness, and risks, albeit low, include psychosis and hallucination persisting perception disorder (Tupper et al., 2015). These effects can vary widely, and in addition to altered mood and perceptions, the occurrence of complex hallucinations can include experiences that participants describe as mystical in nature, meaning they were insightful, transcendent, and marked by a sense of unity consciousness (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2016; Grob et al., 2013).

Drug effects that are known as a “bad trip” are characterized as being disorienting and can instill fear and anxiety, often provoking the experience of dying and the perception of the dissolution of the ego. Typically, these feelings will resolve during the course of the drug effects, and according to the research, the purpose of a psychedelic trip is to reach your subconscious mind or your subconscious self, the parts of you that are lost and can't be reached during normal waking consciousness. According to the

anecdotal evidence, some have reported fear or negative subjective experiences during a psychedelic “trip.” However, the benefits that people have reported experiencing during their exploratory trips—especially the knowledge gained about themselves and others and their own reality as they understand it—have proven to be invaluable and worth the discomfort (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2016; Goldsmith, 2011; Grob et al., 2013).

Psychedelics induce visions that create a virtual reality in which the lines between what is real and what is possible are folded together in life changing moments (Strassman, 2001). The most highly sought-after experiences are mystical or spiritual or those that involve near-death and rebirth, the dissolution of the ego, and access to higher dimensions (Strassman, 2001). With respect to physical harm and dependence, psychedelics are considered relatively safe when compared with other less stringently scheduled drugs of potential misuse (Goldsmith, 2011). Psychedelic experiences are powerful and produce incredible life-altering meaning for those who have had them, especially dissociative, ego-death experiences. Psychedelics can create the most extreme states of mind, yet the visionary state does not remain, just a vivid memory of the experience. According to Goldsmith (2011), “Psychedelics become a problem when people trip repeatedly to try and sustain that mystical experience, because it doesn’t last” (p. 146). It is important to note that a drug-induced mystical experience is not the same thing as making the effort to develop a spiritual life.

Of equal importance in understanding the psychedelic experience is what early researchers called the *set and setting hypothesis* (Metzner, 2017). This hypothesis is still widely used and accepted in contemporary research. The hypothesis claims that the content of one’s psychedelic experience is not primarily a function of the drug effect, but

rather is a function of set and setting, since the drug acts as an amplifier of perception (Metzner, 2017). *Set* refers to all of the internal factors of the individual, such as intention, expectation, attitude, mood, and temperament. *Setting* refers to the external environment during the experience, which includes physical and social factors, and the attitudes and intentions of others (Metzner, 2017).

Political pressures and sensationalized cases in the 1960s media concerning “bad trips” turned LSD into a cultural phenomenon. It became known as a drug of abuse with no recognized medical value, and the termination of research with LSD and other hallucinogens came about when President Richard Nixon signed a 1970 law that virtually halted all scientific research with LSD and other psychotropic substances (Garcia-Romeu, et al., 2016).

### **Contemporary Psychedelic Research**

Although negative connotations often are associated with psychedelic drugs, renewed investigations are beginning to occur in clinical research settings around the world. However, it will take time to remove the stigmatization around these substances. Although most hallucinogens currently are restricted, some have been found to have therapeutic potential in psychiatric research and practice. In 1992 the FDA resumed its approval of human-subject research with psychedelics (Garcia-Romeu et al, 2016). Careful medical research has identified a safe physiological range of action for psilocybin and LSD in healthy volunteer subjects and people with terminal illness, anxiety, addictions, and PTSD (Tupper et al., 2015).

Recent research also has been conducted with healthy volunteers and LSD. One study compared 20 healthy volunteers in a double-blind study in which participants

received LSD (75 µg) intravenously, or saline placebo, to study the psychological effects of LSD (Carhart-Harris et al., 2016). The participants were asked about the peak effects of their LSD experience and produced self-reports using the Altered States of Consciousness Questionnaire (ASC) and the Psychotomimetic States Inventory (PSI), a tool developed to probe the psychotomimetic effects of different drugs. Participants completed the revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R), the revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO PI-R), and the Peter's Delusions Inventory at baseline and again two weeks after each session (Carhart-Harris et al., 2016). Overall results indicated that the LSD produced intense psychological effects, including heightened mood—as indicated by high scores on the PSI—an overall increased optimism, and the trait “openness,” which were observed at the two-week mark after the LSD experience but not in the placebo group. The researchers hypothesized that the increased cognitive flexibility was due to the stimulation of the serotonin 2A receptors (5-HT<sub>2A</sub>R), which promotes emotional salience and lability during LSD intoxication and leaves a residue of alterations in cognition in the midterm range that is conducive to improved psychological well-being (Carhart-Harris et al., 2016).

Recently, LSD was used for end-of-life care, for the first time in 40 years, in a controlled study with 12 terminally ill patients. The study indicated that high doses of LSD (200mg) could be administered safely and controlled by set and setting (Gasser, Kirchner & Passie, 2014). The study results showed that the patients who received high doses of LSD reported intense mystical experiences that enabled them to see their end-of-life transition in a new light. Ten of the 12 patients were tested for anxiety as measured by the Spielberger State and Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) at baseline, 1 week after

experiential sessions, and at 2-month and 12-month follow-ups. Participants also participated in a semi-structured interview, and a qualitative content analysis (QCA) was carried out on these interviews. Participants consistently reported insightful interpersonal experiences accompanied by a rise in quality of life (66.7%) and a reduction in anxiety (77.8%) up to a year after treatment (Gasser et al., 2014).

The Johns Hopkins Psilocybin Research Project is currently in its 15<sup>th</sup> year of operation. It has conducted over 600 sessions using psilocybin with 245 participants—healthy volunteers, psychologically distressed cancer patients, patients wishing to quit smoking, and long-term meditators (Griffiths, 2016). Three rigorous double-blind studies have been completed comparing high doses of psilocybin with a placebo in healthy volunteers who never had any previous experience with this type of drug. These studies controlled for dose effects and participant expectancies, and the results showed that, for most participants, psilocybin facilitated mystical-type experiences (Griffiths, 2016). One of these studies compared psilocybin (30 mg.) and methylphenidate hydrochloride (40mg) using a double-blind between group, crossover design with 30 healthy volunteers who were randomly assigned to two or three 8-hour drug sessions at two-month intervals (Griffiths, Richards, McCann, & Jesse, 2006). The volunteers completed questionnaires assessing the drug effects and mystical experience immediately after and 2 months after the sessions with community observers who later rated changes in the volunteers' attitudes and behaviours. The results were consistent with earlier findings (Pahnke & Richards, 1966) that found that 30 mg. of psilocybin produced acute perceptual changes and facilitated mystical-type experiences with sustained meaning. Furthermore, the participants rated the psilocybin experience at 2 months as sustaining personal meaning,

and 67% of the participants rated their experience with psilocybin to be the single most meaningful experience of her/his life or among the top five most meaningful experiences of his/her life (Griffiths et al., 2006). The results of this study revealed that a high dose (30 mg.) of psilocybin could be administered safely with careful screening, preparation, and well-supervised settings, and the resulting experience was interpreted by participants as both personally and spiritually meaningful (Griffiths et al., 2006).

Participants of Griffith et al.'s (2006) study were assessed again at a 14-month follow up to determine the long-term effects of the psilocybin experience on their lives. They were assessed by the following measures: NEO personality inventory; positive and negative affect scale; quality of life inventory raw score; measure of actualization potential; mysticism scale; spiritual transcendence scale; faith maturity scale; and the spiritual well-being scale (Griffiths et al., 2008). At the 14-month follow up, 58% of the volunteers met the criteria for having a complete mystical experience according to the Pahnke-Richards Mystical Experience Scale (Griffiths et al., 2008). Sixty-four percent of the volunteers reported that the psilocybin experience had significantly increased their sense of well-being and/or life satisfaction, and the magnitude of these effects did not decrease over time and were similar to the ratings after the 2-month follow-up. Correlation and regression analysis indicated a central role of the mystical experience from the original session day and were used to understand the sustained ratings of spiritual significance and personal meaning from data obtained at the 14-month follow up (Griffiths et al, 2008). The pattern of participant responses on the various subscales of the questionnaires was considered to be empirical evidence of the nature of the psilocybin experience, and the 24 participants who rated the experience as being among the top 5



spiritual experiences of their lives also were asked to complete unstructured responses concerning their experiences so researchers could gain further insight from the data. The participants' own wording was used and included comments such as: *a sense of unity of all things, a separate "self" ceasing to exist, and a merging and/or encounter with ultimate reality* (Griffiths et al., 2008).

The Johns Hopkins psilocybin studies have replicated the original findings from the 1966 Good Friday Experiment using psilocybin conducted by Pahnke and Richards at the Marsh Chapel at Boston University (Goldsmith, 2011; Pahnke & Richards, 1966; Roberts, 2013). On Good Friday in 1966, in a religious setting, 10 divinity students received a high dose of psilocybin, and 10 students received a placebo. Participants who received the psilocybin reported mystical experiences. Furthermore, these responses of mystical experiences were similar to Doblin's (1991) follow-up interviews with the original participants of the 1966 Good Friday experiment. Twenty-five years after the original study, participants still reported that their Good Friday psilocybin experience was one of the most spiritual and meaningful experiences of their lives. Doblin has emphasized that the Good Friday participants' spiritual understanding had persisted and deepened over time, and their psilocybin experience overall had created a permanent shift in their worldview (Doblin, 1991; Roberts, 2013).

A total of three double-blind studies on psilocybin and placebo have been completed with healthy volunteers, and the evidence has shown that psilocybin can induce mystical-type experiences in most participants, identical to those that occur naturally (Griffiths, 2016). Furthermore, from a scientific perspective, these results have been shown to be reliable and dose dependent, which begs the question of science to

investigate the causes and consequences of these effects in more depth (Griffiths, 2016). Thus, researchers have used these findings to continue their research on psilocybin with cancer patients who are suffering from existential anxiety.

### **Death and Dying**

**Psilocybin and cancer research.** According to Grof (2000), over the last 30 years, our knowledge about death and dying has rapidly increased. This upsurge is due to the systematic research into NDEs, a transpersonal psychology focus on the psychological confrontation of death, and recent contemporary research with psychedelics in a therapeutic context. The pioneering work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross brought to the attention of the medical profession the emotional and psychological needs of terminally ill patients and the importance of providing them with adequate support (Fenwick et al., 2007). Patients with advanced cancer have been helped with psychedelic therapy (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2016; Grob, Danforth, Chopra et al, 2011; Grob et al., 2013). Current permissible research—in three separate studies at New York University, Johns Hopkins University, and the Harbor-UCLA Medical Center—has shown that psychedelic therapy can be successful in lowering the excessive anxiety caused by a cancer diagnosis (Grob et al., 2013). Fifty-one cancer patients with life threatening diagnoses at Johns Hopkins University, who met clinical criteria for depression or anxiety, were randomly assigned to receive either a high dose of psilocybin or a placebo in a double-blind study. The results indicated that the participants who received the high dose of psilocybin showed statistically significant results, with a 92% improvement in depression symptoms at the 5-week mark, which were sustained by 50% of the participants at 6 months, with 70% reporting symptoms in the normal range (Griffiths, 2016). Similar results were found for

symptoms of anxiety. According to Griffith (2016), to date, effects yielding such significant statistical results such as these are unprecedented in psychiatry, especially considering that the effects were generated from a single dose of a substance.

At the Harbor-UCLA Medical Center, Grob and colleagues administered 0.2 mg. of psilocybin in a double blind, placebo controlled study of 12 adults with advanced stage cancer and anxiety, with patients acting as their own control (Grob, Danforth, Chopra et al., 2011). The participants were screened to meet inclusion criteria, which included a diagnosis of advanced stage cancer, but they also were required to be functional enough to meet screening requirements and preparation for psilocybin sessions, and they needed to be able to participate in two all-day sessions—one using placebo and one using the active drug, spaced several weeks apart. Each volunteer also participated in follow-up sessions to integrate the psilocybin session and collection of data for 6 months following the study. The following psychological assessments were measured the day before the psilocybin session: Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), Profile of Mood States (POMS), and State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI). These assessments were repeated on the day of psilocybin session with the 5-Dimension Altered states of Consciousness profile (5D-ASC) and a brief psychiatric rating scale to assess symptoms of hostility, suspiciousness, hallucinations, and grandiosity. The BDI, POMS, and STAI were reassessed at 1 day after the session, at 2 weeks, and once monthly for 6 months (Grob et al., 2011).

The purpose of this research study was to establish safety for a hallucinogen treatment model for patients with advanced-stage cancer and anxiety. Although the dosage chosen was considerably lower than previous uses of research doses of hallucinogens with terminally ill patients, it was still believed capable of inducing a

therapeutic benefit while maintaining patient safety (Grob et al., 2011). The results indicated that although past researchers reported more pronounced therapeutic effects with a higher-dose model, the lower-dose model used in this study produced a reduction in the STAI trait anxiety that reached significance at both the 1- and 3-month mark. Participants' mood measured via POM scores also showed improvement for 2 weeks after the psilocybin treatment, and although the improvement did not reach statistical significance, it showed a trend towards a positive outcome. Another positive outcome was that several patients reported a reduction in their pain levels in the 2 weeks following the psilocybin session. Overall, the participants reported that the psilocybin sessions were a valuable experience—they reduced their anxiety, increased their sense of well-being, and enabled them to withstand the psychological stresses of their medical condition (Grob et al., 2011).

Death anxiety is common in patients with advanced cancer, and so greater attention is needed in our contemporary approach with patients in palliative care (Fenwick et al., 2007). In recent years, a focus has been growing concerning the prevalence of psychological distress, specifically emotional and existential, that patients face at the end-of- life (Grob et al., 2011).

### **The Positive Side of Death Acceptance**

In 2014, a debate over end-of-life care at a Canadian Medical Association meeting turned to the lack of quality palliative care, and some of the physicians in attendance suggested that Canadians would not even be debating the issue of physician-assisted dying if they had access to better palliative care and hospice services (Goldman, 2014). A recent Royal Society Report on End-of-Life Care has indicated that most

Canadians die of progressive ill health and old age (Schuklenk, van Delden, Downie, McLean, Upshur, & Weinstock, 2011). Individuals are living longer, particularly over the age of 65, but also are accumulating more chronic diseases. This age group consumes the largest amount of healthcare resources, including physician visits, homecare resources, and pharmacotherapy. Seniors represent 12.7% of the population and account for approximately 30% (\$36.3 billion) of the total economic health-care burden (Schuklenk et al., 2011). The authors of the report estimate that 95% of Canadian deaths would benefit from palliative care, and yet as many as 70% of Canadians do not have access to palliative care and hospice because palliative care programs are unevenly distributed across Canada (Schuklenk et al., 2011). Furthermore, the report indicated that the number of seniors will double in the next 20 years, driven by the baby boom, which will increase the need not only for better access to palliative care, but also better training for physicians to communicate and discuss end-of-life issues, which includes the need for psychosocial support for dying individuals and their family members (Schuklenk et al., 2011). According to Atul Gawande (2014), “this experiment of making mortality a medical experience is just decades old. It is young. And the evidence is it is failing” (p. 9).

Evidence from the various psilocybin studies with advanced staged cancer patients demonstrates the promise of effective interventions for the psychospiritual crises often observed at the end of life (Grof & Danforth, 2013). Some patients who have access to hospice and/or palliative care are able to have fairly good relief of symptoms and suffering, which opens opportunities for making progress toward spiritual and psychological closure towards the end of life (Quill & Cassell, 2004). However, as death approaches, some individuals can experience the onset of extreme suffering, which can

seriously decrease their quality of life. If a person can no longer be helped through comprehensive palliative care services, the challenge becomes how to best help them to meet death in the least harmful way possible (Quill & Cassell, 2004). Spiritual and existential factors currently are considered to contribute to the quality of life in advanced cancer and end-of-life patients, and a patient's search for existential or spiritual meaning is often triggered by their diagnosis (Grob et al., 2011).

Although the experience gained from the spiritual transformation of a NDE, and more specifically a psychedelic treatment, may not influence the outcome of an individual's illness, these experiences may bring important psychological benefits for a patient as they approach death. The use of psychedelics as an end-of-life therapy has shown a potential to reduce the fear of dying, including an overall reduction in physical pain, an increased sense of well-being and quality of life, and improved family relations (Chopra, 2006; Garcia-Romeu et al, 2016; Goldsmith, 2011; Grob & Danforth, 2013; Grob et al., 2013). These promising results make psychedelics as an end-of-life therapy an important area for further study, especially considering the ethical issues of denying a patient who is dying the freedom to direct his or her treatment, and given the recent June 2016 Supreme Court of Canada ruling giving Canadians the right to choose physician-assisted dying (*Carter v. Canada*, 2015).

The Supreme Court of Canada's decision was based on the premise that the prohibition on physician-assisted dying deprived claimants seeking this type of assistance of their right to life, liberty, and security of the person under section 7 of the *Charter*, (*Carter v. Canada*, 2015), if they were found to be suffering from a grievous and irreversible medical condition causing enduring and intolerable suffering, as per sections

241(b) and 14 of the *Criminal Code* (*Carter v. Canada*, 2015). The Court deemed the prohibition as denying some individuals of life, since it had the effect of forcing those who had reached the point where their suffering was intolerable to end their own lives prematurely. The rights to liberty and security of an individual were considered a serious matter in regards to an individual's dignity and autonomy when responding to a medical crisis and illness that caused undue pain and suffering and threatened their physical well-being (*Carter v. Canada*, 2015).

Recently, a new movement called *Therapeutic Psilocybin for Canadians* was launched by a team of professionals and lawyers who have applied for a medical exemption for the right to use psilocybin with patients suffering end-of-life distress (Tobin, 2018). Based on the decision that Canadian courts already have decided that limiting medicinal access to an illegal drug like cannabis violates Canadians' constitutional rights, as well as the evidence from the research done with psilocybin and terminally ill patients at John Hopkins University, the team has applied under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, and to Health Canada for the right to use psilocybin as a reasonable medical choice and more effective treatment for dying patients (Tobin, 2018).

The Supreme Court of Canada considered factors that cause an individual intolerable suffering, which could potentially affect their quality of life, to be one of the defining criteria in the legalization of physician-assisted dying (*Carter v. Canada*, 2015). However, other factors concerning the suffering associated with life-threatening illnesses include problems such as treatment, quality of life, facing the problem, and counselling

for the patient who is suffering and their families, especially with respect to end-of-life emotional and spiritual suffering.

People who are suffering from serious illness have more important priorities than prolonging their lives. According to Gawande (2014), surveys have revealed that people are mainly concerned with avoiding suffering, staying mentally aware, not being a burden on others, having an opportunity to repair relationships with family and friends, and having the sense that their life is complete. People are also concerned with understanding their life as having meaning and purpose, and feeling that they are part of something bigger than themselves, whether that be their family, community, or society. This knowing helps to make death meaningful and solves the paradox of our ordinary existence (Gawande, 2014). This sense of meaning could come from something small such as caring for a pet, but what is important is the value that people assign to what gives their lives meaning. This search for meaning in something bigger than ourselves relates to Maslow's concept of self-transcendence, which is situated above self-actualization on his hierarchy of needs, and suggests the innate desire within ourselves to help others achieve their potential (Gawande, 2014; Roberts, 2013).

### **Suffering**

Arguments for and against physician-assisted dying often, at their core, have the real fact that people suffer, whether from certain terminal illnesses or diseases that cause severe impairment (Cassell, 2004). Generally, *suffering* can be defined as a state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of an individual (Cassell, 2004). On one side of the argument is the goal of medical treatment to relieve human suffering, which includes the hospice and palliative care programs that responded to the



failure of hospitals for the terminally ill and dying to relieve the suffering of patients. The other side of the argument claims that good palliative care and properly trained physicians can alleviate all suffering, which usually is considered to be pain (Cassell, 2004). However, according to Cassel (2004), not enough adequate palliative is available, and furthermore, physicians experienced in palliative care also acknowledge that not all pain can be alleviated. They argue that not all types of pain and suffering can be relieved and that the belief that all pain can be alleviated is ignorance of what suffering is and how it comes about for an individual (Cassell, 2004).

The Royal Society Report (2011) indicated that some treatments given to dying patients are not only costly, but also yield little benefit for the patient (Schuklenk, van Delden, Downie, McLean, Upshur, & Weinstock, 2011). The association between pain and physical damage or injury is variable, and pain and suffering have emotional aspects (Sarzi-Puttini et al., 2012). For example, positive emotional states may reduce pain, whereas anxiety may increase pain perception (Cassel, 2004). The standard biomedical approach to pain management tends to focus on disease versus illness, cure versus care, and the mind and body as separate entities. This view may benefit from a stronger recognition and understanding of a patient's emotional states and how they process pain. A revised view would provide a comprehensive, client-focused treatment plan that addressed all factors that could influence a patient's pain, including biological, psychological, and social factors, especially at the end-of-life (Sarzi-Puttini et al., 2012). Pain continues to be a difficult problem for those in palliative care, especially for those who are nearing the end-of-life (Wilson et al., 2007). More alarming is the rate of suicide, which increases in people over the age of 70, and which is twice as high among

advanced-stage cancer and end-stage cancer populations, compared to the general population (Grob et al., 2013; Imhof, 1994).

Whatever the origin of suffering, and whether it is due to the damage of disease or pain, or the side effects of pain management, the personal loss of wholeness is the hallmark of suffering (Cassell, 2004). Existential suffering or the spiritual pain of terminal patients often is described as “the extinction of the being and meaning of the self, due to the approach of death” (Grob et al., 2013, p. 296).

More importantly, pain is subjective and is related to the individual nature of a person. Once suffering begins, only the person who is suffering knows how awful their own suffering is. In other words, suffering is personal and can involve many dimensions of a person—what afflicts one part affects the whole. Symptoms of any disease or illness are not simple facts of nature, since they can manifest differently in people, and every individual perceives and places personal meaning on their disease or illness based on their own life experience (Cassell, 2004). Experience confirms or modifies an individual’s personal meaning, and meanings are learned over a lifetime. Although many people share the same meanings of words, such as *cancer*, for example, the meanings of things are always personal and subjective. So, two people may experience the “same” thing, but have completely different reactions, which suggests that suffering is always individual and based on a person’s perception, sense of meaning, and experience (Cassell, 2004).

An individual facing end-of-life can have many personal experiences and physical symptoms that contribute to the outcome of a diagnosis of a serious illness, including its treatment until they reach death. Understanding the emotions a patient is experiencing

during the dying process, and how this process works and can be managed, are important concerns for counsellors to consider when trying to prevent the spiritual and existential distresses associated with death and dying. The nondualist perspective makes an important distinction between pain and suffering. *Pain* is a reaction to something that occurs instantly in the moment, whereas *suffering* is the projection of this pain out of the reality of now into the past or future, which involves the story the ego creates around this pain (Liquorman, 2012). In other words, suffering comes from the feelings about what is happening or should not be happening or the stories our minds create about what should be or not liking what is (Liquorman, 2012). As counsellors, we can help our clients to come to terms with *what is*, which can help them to awaken to what is actually happening in the moment, and although this can be painful at times, it can be free from suffering (Liquorman, 2012).

The issue of medical-aid-in-dying has revealed social concerns regarding death and dying in general, including the ability to openly discuss death, conceptions of death, after-death, and dying itself. According to Gawande (2014), participants in a 2-year study on concurrent care for patients with terminal illness and a life expectancy of less than a year were allowed to receive hospice services without having to forgo other treatments. The results of the study indicated that the enrolled patients were much more likely to use hospice—the increase was from 26% to 70%. Also, surprisingly, visits to emergency dropped to half, compared to the control group, and the use of hospitals and the ICU dropped by more than two-thirds. More importantly, the study indicated that 6 months after patients had died, their families were less likely to experience persistent major depression. The study results also indicated that family members reported that those

patients who had been able to have discussions with their doctors about their end-of-life preferences were able to spare their families anguish; and family members also reported their loved ones died more peacefully and in control of their situation (Gawande, 2014).

### **A New Model of Dying**

The phenomena of NDEs include a body of research involving thousands of empirical observations that have established conclusively that some aspects of human consciousness cannot be reasonably reduced to materialistic explanations (Greyson, 2010; Parnia & Fenwick, 2002; van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, & Elfferich, 2001).

However, the recent up-rise of reported NDEs represents a body of material that has more far-reaching concerns than scientifically proving whether NDEs are true or not.

Anecdotal evidence regarding end-of-life experiences (ELEs) also have been reported at the end-of-life, and are considered to be regularly occurring phenomena that are an important part of the dying process, which include deathbed visions, something leaving the body, deathbed coincidences, and hallucinations and dreams (Fenwick et al., 2007).

According to Fenwick (2007), many common subjective similarities exist that require further exploration of NDEs and ELEs as regularly occurring cultural phenomena. He suggests that if we take a phenomenological view of these two sets of experiences, a new model of dying could be articulated, and he speculates that these experiences may be a continuum or a part of a single process (Fenwick et al., 2007). By understanding these experiences, we can begin to shift our current cultural attitudes towards death, which has many implications for those dying in Western societies who may lack the support they need for this transition (Grof, 2000). Due to the inexplicable nature of NDEs, many physicians have ignored this medical phenomenon during a medical crisis, and thus

patients receive no support, nor are these NDEs described in their medical records, despite the profound impact on patients' psychological and physical well-being (Grof, 2000; van Lommel, 2013). A better understanding of the significance of these subjective experiences will enable medical professionals to help patients make meaning of these transformative experiences and integrate them into their lives in a meaningful way.

Similarly, contemporary research is exploring the use of psychedelics through modern clinical trials to assess their therapeutic uses as tools to ease existential anxiety in terminally ill patients, especially since they have been found to trigger spiritual experiences similar to NDEs (Chopra et al., 2011; Garcia-Romeu et al., 2016; Goldsmith, 2011; Grob et al., 2013; Grob & Danforth, 2013). The mystical transformations of the NDE and the psychedelic journey have potential implications for promoting death acceptance, especially in regards to end-of-life care. Therefore, greater research and empirical attention should be given to these phenomena, since they have the potential to provide insights into what might be expected at death, since they can possibly add to our understanding of the psychology of death, and since they may help to reduce people's fears around death and dying.

### **Implications for Counsellors**

Although death anxiety is considered important, it is understudied in palliative care (Cassel, 2004; Grob & Danforth, 2013). Thus, palliative care requires self-reported measurements for patients with advanced cancer so to better understand their death anxiety and help guide their treatment interventions (Tong et al., 2016). Contemporary scholars working in palliative care and who also work closely with the dying have been offering practical and compassionate ways of thinking about death and dying that brings

hope and meaning to life's final chapter (Assante, 2012; Chopra, 2006; Dowling-Singh, 1998). The death, dying, and beyond explorations of patients' real experiences, combined with the wisdom of Eastern traditions and practical scientific evidence, are important contributions to our understanding of current hospice attitudes towards death and dying (Assante, 2012; Dowling-Singh, 1998; Grob & Danforth, 2013). Helping patients to have a good death is a major challenge, not only for those involved in healthcare, but also especially for counsellors offering psychospiritual or bereavement support, since recent studies in the United Kingdom have indicated that too many patients die an undignified death with uncontrollable symptoms (Ellershaw & Ward, 2003).

Therefore, understanding society's current attitudes and beliefs about death and dying is important for counsellors. Existential anxiety is a universal phenomenon that increases with a greater intensity and urgency at the end-of-life (Grob & Danforth, 2013). Coming to terms with our own unconscious fears about dying is necessary to provide adequate social, psychological, philosophical, and spiritual support for those who are dying (Grob & Halifax, 1977).

As the physical body approaches death, individuals often are overwhelmed with both psychological and physical pain, and it is easy for them to lose sight of the meaning and purpose that previously defined their lives (Grob & Danforth, 2013). An exploration of the spiritual needs of those who are dying can potentially help them to rise above their present circumstances and engage positively with their surroundings and the people around them (Grob & Danforth, 2013). The transcendental experiences of individuals who have had NDEs and/or psychedelic experiences resemble the subject-object collapse of nondual awakening in which experiencers suddenly realize they have been identifying

with an illusory self and now have a true understanding of their true nature or essence (Nixon & Theriault, 2012; Wilber, 2016). As counsellors, we can use these transformative experiences and their reflection to counsel and support those who are dying. This knowledge can help our clients to entertain the possibility that their self-identity expands beyond their ordinary conceptual thinking, and that they are more than their mind or ego self-awareness; and this knowledge also can help our clients to indirectly experience a transpersonal reality that is related to the spiritual dimension of human life and consciousness (Valle & Mohs, 2006). According to Osho (2000), the search for the bull is the search for eternal energy, and the realization that this energy knows no death is the understanding that the ego is part of death and when the ego disappears, death disappears as well (p. 273).

### **Linking the Evidence**

Even if the evidence for the survival of consciousness after death is considered inconclusive by scientific standards, the evidence from historical and contemporary NDEs and from the wisdom of shamanism and psychedelic experiences worldwide suggest that the survival of consciousness is not impossible in principle. Premodern humanity believed in the concept of life after death until the ascent of modern science in the West and the corresponding decline of religious sensibility made these ideas absurd and banished them from modern consciousness (Grof, 2000; Nasr, 1989; Ring, 1990). The idea of life after death no longer fits with our postmodern secular worldview, yet ironically, the science of modern consciousness research and the scientific study of NDEs and modern rigorous psychedelic research may restore the legitimacy of the concept of

life after death once again (Greyson, 2010; Grof, 2000; Parnia, 2014; van Lommel, 2013).

Most reported NDEs appear to support the many philosophical and religious theories of the ancient wisdom traditions with respect to what is anticipated in life after death, such as the evolution and eternal nature of our soul and the existence of afterlife dimensions. The idea that the mind, consciousness, and spirituality exist outside the physical realm is found within the ancient wisdoms traditions and sacred knowledge of the perennial philosophy. The fact that psilocybin can induce mystical-type experiences in most people, virtually identical to those of the mystics within religious literature, also begs the question whether we are biologically wired to experience these salient and sacred encounters with ultimate reality, as many of the world's wisdom traditions suggest (Griffiths, 2016; Richards, 2017). The phenomenological accounts of NDEs and the knowledge gained from psychedelic research enable us to consider the nature of consciousness, and the interconnectedness of all people, things, and experiences as the perennial philosophy of the world's wisdom traditions suggest (Griffiths, 2016). Based on his many sessions with patients experiencing high doses of psychedelics, Richards (2017) has suggested that when everyday consciousness was transcended and mystical experiences were occurring, it was common for his participants to report phenomena that entailed different perspectives on time and space, experiences that called into question some of the most basic assumptions underlying their views of consensual reality, how they defined themselves, and how they oriented themselves in the world (p. 326).

According to Rinpoche (1990), the most important concern is not what survives after death, but the type of consciousness that survives. He elaborates further by claiming



that Western science has neglected the more important issue of understanding and investigating the nature of mind and consciousness. Science has focused on the projection of the mind, rather than on what the mind projects, and this failure in understanding mind and consciousness is symptomatic of the West's poor understanding of the nature of consciousness and therefore death and dying (Rinpoche, 1990, p. 193).

According to Dugdale (2010), modern society is ill-equipped to deal with dying. She has identified four factors that contribute to this problem: 1) rapid increases in medical technology have obscured the distinction between life and death; 2) this unclear distinction leads to our unwavering faith in medical technology, which prevents us from facing the reality of death (it is not a medical problem); 3) the secularization of Western culture has marginalized the role of religion and thus the preparation for our death, and 4) the medical profession has become the new interface between life and death, and its professionals are insufficiently trained at discussing end-of-life issues. These factors in combination cause confusion and shock, and when death nears, often family and patients struggle to cope. Dugdale (2010) has discussed this pressing bioethical concern of our modern aging population and the need to create a framework for dying well or a modern day version of the *art of dying* (p. 2) fashioned after the *Ars moriendi* of the Middle Ages, a societal and ecclesiastical response to dying in the midst of the widespread death caused by the plague. In response to massive death tolls and frequent epidemics, the Church responded with advice, procedures, protocols, and prayers for the layperson on how to die well known as the *Ars moriendi* (Dugdale, 2010; Imhof, 1994). This advice came in two versions, a longer written text published in 1415, and a shorter illustrated version that circulated throughout Europe to ensure that dying individuals had access to the "right

way to die,” which could be learned so she/he did not have to fear dying, especially when a priest was not available. The advice from these early manuals was carried over into non-Catholic traditions and became the protocol for many later generations—advice that the process of dying was a time to draw on the spirit and the principles of the *Ars moriendi*. Over time, the Church began to emphasize living well rather than dying well, and so these deathbed rituals slowly lost their appeal as death became something to fear again (Dugdale, 2010; Imhof, 1994).

### **Summary**

Our fears regarding death are represented in our massive denial of death. Assante (2012) has argued that many of our secular institutions—government, education, medicine, pharmaceutical corporations, and the news and entertainment industries—don’t just produce this fear, they also exploit it (p. 167). We cultivate a society that values youth and health, which greatly influences our treatment of the dying and the lack of psychological and spiritual support for those who are dying. People who are dying need love and care, which must include the possibility of spiritual care because spiritual knowledge can help us understand and face death (Rinpoche, 1993). Grof (2000) also has suggested that various forms of meditation, experiential psychotherapy, psychedelic sessions, NDEs, and spontaneous non-ordinary states of consciousness have been shown to provide direct experience of the various phenomena described in eschatological mythologies and the mystical traditions of perennial philosophy worldviews, which can inform us about approaching death.

This researcher’s examination of the literature has found unifying threads within the mystical experiences of NDEs and psychedelic experiences. Many common themes

can be found within these transcendental experiences, including unity and oneness; transcendence of space and time; dissolution of the ego; a consciousness that exists beyond space and time; noetic qualities, including intuitive emotions and knowledge, such as the immortality of one's soul; and a reduced fear of death. James (1936) claimed that our normal waking consciousness is but one type of consciousness, and all around it, hidden by the filmiest of screens, lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different from normal consciousness, which have some sort of metaphysical significance (p. 388).

My own experiences and those described in the literature suggest that a major commonality between these two sets of transcendental states is profound change for those having these mystical experiences. This change seems to be initiated by the salient and emotional memories generated by the experience, whether it be an NDE or a psychedelic experience. The transcendental experience is carried forward by the experiential memories, which appear to be the therapeutic factor that induces change (Richards, 2017). Those who have experienced a NDE often have reported a reduced fear of death, dissolution of the ego, an increased sense of well-being, stronger feelings of love and joy, and an appreciation for life. Healthy participants, who have had similar experiences with psychedelics, also have reported increases in the appreciation of life, a dissolution of the ego, and a sense of unity; and many have rated their psychedelic experience as one of the most spiritual and meaningful experiences in their lives (Griffiths et al., 2006). If the psychedelic experience was related to death and dying (i.e., psychedelic therapy), fears and anxieties around death were reduced, feelings of unity were increased, the ego was dissolved, and feelings of well-being within interpersonal relations were increased (Grob

& Danforth, 2013). According to Osho (2000), real life never dies; only the ego is part of death, and those who consciously learn to drop the ego can conquer death (p. 273).

In summary, the findings in the literature have pointed to the importance of creating a framework for teaching an aging population to prepare for death. Many intuitive insights can be gained from these mystical and spiritual experiences, particularly for those facing death. They can help individuals to reduce their fear of dying by providing faith in a reality of something “more” than oneself, and they can provide intuitive knowing, security, and an appreciation for love, which makes it possible for a dying person to live the remainder of their time more fully and with less anxiety (Richards, 2017). The implications for counsellors is about using this knowledge to help clients find peace and acceptance in the death process and to aid them to find meaning in their lives.

## Chapter 3: Research Methods

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the transformation of the fear of death, specifically through the mystical nature of psilocybin, LSD, and the near-death experience (NDE), since a need exists to understand the lived experience of these transformational experiences. Thus, this study used a blended, qualitative approach—precisely a transpersonal, hermeneutic, phenomenological inquiry—to understand these mystical experiences, these transpersonal shifts in consciousness. Such shifts have been shown to occur through the altered states of consciousness experienced during NDEs and while using psychedelic substances. Therefore, exploring these subjective inner experiences will help to further our understanding of the complex meanings of these transpersonal shifts that may reduce the fear of death. This chapter explores the phenomenon studied, and explains the research methodology that provided the framework for the research design. The data collection, participant selection, and analysis procedures also are described.

### **Transforming the Fear of Death: Aspects of the Phenomenon**

This study draws attention to the significance of the transformation of the fear of death encountered through mystical states of consciousness (NDEs and psychedelic experiences). A recognition of the factors that influence our fears about death and dying has potential therapeutic implications. According to Grof and Halifax (1977), a profound symbolic encounter with death under supportive conditions and the right environment can have beneficial consequences and be instrumental in overcoming the negative concepts of death, and in transforming our fears associated with death (p. 220). Psychedelic research

and the phenomenology of the NDE have provided valuable insights into the inner cartography of altered states of consciousness. These experiences call into question the most basic assumptions regarding consensus reality, and are providing progress towards our understanding of the full nature of consciousness (Grof & Halifax, 1977; Grof, 2000; Putnam, 2016; Richards, 2017).

We know very little about many unique states of consciousness (Grof, 2000; Richards, 2017). Experiences during altered states of consciousness are not what we normally perceive in our everyday world of waking consciousness. The experiential content encountered during a NDE and through psychedelic substances provide variations of altered states of consciousness. These states appear to exist along a continuum, beginning with mild alterations of perception and deepening further into transpersonal realms of unitive mystical consciousness that are experienced as profoundly sacred and transformational (Cortright, 1997; Grof & Halifax, 1977; Grof, 2000; Richards, 2017).

The transpersonal or transcendent aspects of any given experience have been known to manifest through an identifiable vehicle or form such as meditation, dreams, emotional or physical pain, a NDE, or psychedelic drugs (Grof & Halifax, 1977; Grof, 2000; Richards, 2017; Valle & Mohs, 2006). Different types of transpersonal experiences have specific consequences with respect to a situation an individual might be facing or their concepts of death (Grof & Halifax, 1977; Richards, 2017). A symbolic encounter with death during a psychedelic trip or a NDE entail profound experiences. This intensity is especially true for those individuals who experience ego death and rebirth before entering transpersonal realms of consciousness, especially if these transpersonal experiences reach consciousness awareness and are integrated into the psyche (Grof &

Halifax, 1977; Griffiths, Richards, Johnson, McCann, & Jesse, 2008; Richards, 2017). These transcendent experiences can result in mystical phenomena that produce a self-transformation as they transform the experiencer's fear of death. They also suggest that experiencers are in contact with transcendental realms of awareness beyond the everyday ego that are unitive-mystical dimensions of consciousness normally considered to be sacred or beyond our definition of consensus reality (Grof, 2000; Putnam, 2016; Richards, 2017).

A review of the literature also suggests that NDE and psychedelic experience, specifically by means of LSD and psilocybin, reveal emerging patterns or common elements of experience (Goldsmith, 2011; Greyson, 2006). The NDE and psychedelic drugs such as LSD and psilocybin act as vehicles, or containers, for individuals to experience the transpersonal dimension of reality. Once that experience occurs, the descriptions provided by experiencers have many common themes or elements, including a sense of cosmic unity or oneness; a transcendence of time and space; intense emotional states (deeply felt positive mood); a sense of knowing often described as sudden insights with a heightened sense of spiritual understanding, ineffability, paradoxicality, and self-transformation, and most notably the loss of the fear of death as the experiencer comes to realize the impermanence of physical existence and gains insight into her/his eternal spiritual nature (Goldsmith, 2011; Greyson, 2006; Grof & Halifax, 1977; Grof, 2000; Griffiths et al., 2006; Pahnke & Richards, 1966).

Conventional science, with its roots in positivism, seeks to explain human nature through a linear temporal perspective that adopts a rational and empirical approach in order to achieve an objective description of the nature of mind via a quantitative analysis

of behaviour (Davis, 2009; Grof, 2000; Richards, 2017; Valle & Mohs, 2006). However, this approach is not sufficient to capture the complexity of the many distinctive states of consciousness that can be accessed by the psychedelic experience or the NDE (Davis, 2009; Grof, 2000; Richards, 2017; Valle & Mohs, 2006). Many significant questions regarding the essence of these distinctive states of consciousness cannot be resolved by an appeal to traditional forms of logic and inquiry (Lavery, 2003). Science, according to this view, requires phenomena to be quantified, controlled, and repeated. It is difficult to observe the phenomena of consciousness with the senses or by qualities and dimensions that can be agreed to by more than one observer (Davis; 2009; Richards, 2017; Valle & Mohs, 2006). Traditional science correlates the phenomena encountered in our everyday consciousness with neuronal and biochemical activity, whereas subjective consciousness can be described only by the person experiencing it, and therefore, phenomenology and hermeneutics becomes the relevant approach to accessing this experience (Pollan, 2018; Richards, 2017).

The experiential content of the altered states of consciousness encountered in mystical states are dimensions of mind beyond our everyday self or ego, which represent deeper dimensions of a human being (Cortright, 1997; Grof, 2000; Richards, 2017). An examination of these types of phenomena cannot be achieved through traditional scientific methods, since these levels of awareness are subjective and focused on inner experience, and so require an integration of research approaches. Therefore, a blending of qualitative methodologies is more appropriate for studying these realms of consciousness, since generally qualitative approaches tend to focus on the subjective in-depth



descriptions and meanings humans attribute to their life-world experience (Davis, 2009; Sloan, 2014).

In this light, as the researcher of the present study, I used a philosophical research framework that could capture the transcendental essence of these transformative experiences of consciousness. This framework enabled my study participants to express the richness of their feelings and the meaning of their lived experience, while potentially providing a deeper understanding of the transformation of the fear of death related to these experiences, which often are considered ineffable or more than words can say (Amos, 2016; Valle & Mohs, 2006). The present study used a transpersonal hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry to better understand the intensity and depth of these meaningful experiences (NDEs and psychedelic experiences), the transpersonal aspects of these phenomena, and how these experiences transformed the fear of death and/or became integrated into experiencers' lives.

### **Research Question**

The following research question was examined in the current research study: How do the mystical experiences of NDEs and psychedelics, specifically psilocybin and LSD, transform the fear of death? The blended qualitative approach of a transpersonal hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry was essential for capturing the ontological and epistemological understanding of individuals' transformative experiences. Also, a blended methodology made it possible to explore how individuals attributed meaning to their inner experiences and a sense of the spiritual (Davis, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1983; Valle & Mohs, 2006).

## **Philosophical Research Framework**

**Philosophical framework.** Psychedelic research and the phenomenology of the NDE have provided valuable insights into the nature of the mind, and thus have deepened our understanding of the nature of consciousness, which has created a collision between science and spirituality as these experiences force us to question our current view of reality (Grof & Halifax, 1977; Putnam, 2016; Richards, 2017). According to Kuhn (1996), an interest in these types of transformational phenomena indicate that we are in the midst of a paradigm shift, a shift that will change the horizon of the future and harness the full potential of body, mind, consciousness, and spirit (Richards, 2017; Roberts, 2013). Knowledge of this shift is inaccessible by traditional science and its measuring tools, but it can be accessed by qualitative methodologies.

Qualitative methodologies seek to understand humanity in a reality that is complex, socially constructed, and constantly in flux (Sloan, 2014). Lived human experience is more complex than a singular description can capture, especially when considering difficult-to-quantify qualities or states, such as love, happiness, meaning, or Maslow's peak experiences, and which are difficult to measure with quantitative or empirical methods (Davis, 2009; Sloan, 2014). The tenants of traditional science and positivism can validate only phenomena (such as height or weight) that can be measured, quantified, or verified by logical-empirical methodologies. As such, the limits of traditional science exclude many aspects of human behaviour, including intangibles such as emotions and feelings, states of consciousness, or other hard-to-define psychological values and experiences (Davis, 2009; Sloan, 2014). Human sciences, on the other hand,

focus on the humanistic, existential, and transpersonal aspects of human behaviour and draw primarily on qualitative and phenomenological methods (Davis, 2009).

Within psychology, the study of human science has its philosophical roots in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and holism, which includes transpersonal considerations (Davis, 2009). Transpersonal psychology specifically posits that psychological development extends to include higher states of consciousness, which can continue throughout life and do not stop with the maturation of the adult ego or rational competency (Cortright, 1997; Kaspro & Scotton, 1999; Wilber, 2016). Carl Jung was among the first to examine spiritual experiences, proposing that transcendent experiences lie within, were accessible as a means for growth and psychological well-being, and often made use of nonverbal experience and the language of symbolic imagery (Grof, 2008; Jung, 1996).

Phenomenology, a philosophical movement founded by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) that rejected the scientific ideal of positivism, can be a methodology or a range of research approaches (Amos, 2016; Kafle, 2011; Sloan, 2014). This flexibility has resulted in many diverse perspectives regarding the central tenets of phenomenology and the application of the phenomenological method (Finlay, 2009). Generally, as it is applied to research, *phenomenology* is the study of the essence of phenomena, including the study of lived experience or the life world (Finlay, 2009; van Manen, 1997). Phenomenology offers a researcher the potential to trace the essence of a phenomenon (Kafle, 2011). However, an encounter with transcendent experiences involves a quality of illumination that entails a very careful interpretation and exploration of the meaning of this experience

and any resulting transformation. Thus, an understanding of this illumination requires a different school of phenomenology, specifically hermeneutic phenomenology.

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) coined the term *hermeneutic phenomenology* based on his rejection of understanding a phenomenon through its essence; instead, he emphasized the importance of the interpretation of a phenomenon (Kafle, 2011). Briefly, *hermeneutics* refers to the interpretation of phenomena with respect to the bigger picture or contexts in which they are found, so to understand human experience, including motivations, value systems, beliefs, culture, and states of consciousness (Davis, 2009). Experience cannot be reduced to a collection of thoughts or behaviors; rather, experience must be viewed as a whole. An important aspect of hermeneutic understanding requires a researcher to focus on the interplay between the parts and whole of an experience (Davis, 2009; Kafle, 2011). Hermeneutic research is a lived experience for researchers, and it acknowledges that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In other words, as a researcher attunes her/himself towards the ontological nature of a phenomenon, he/she acknowledges that she/he cannot understand the whole as just being the sum of its parts (Davis, 2009; Kafle, 2011). A practical way of utilizing hermeneutics is by using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) developed by Johnathan Smith, which draws on theoretical ideas from phenomenology and hermeneutics and emphasizes an engagement with idiographic accounts (Amos, 2016).

Given the transcendental nature of psychedelic experiences and NDEs, it follows that utilizing the components of a blended qualitative approach, (transpersonal hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry) enabled this researcher to achieve a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon of the transformation of the fear of death and

its meaning and effects on experiencers' lives. Combining transpersonal and hermeneutic research methods increased the opportunity to honor and appreciate the depth and richness of these exceptional aspects of human experience, since conventional forms of research could not adequately address these transpersonal topics or the transformative nature of these experiences (Anderson & Braud, 2011). The strengths and weaknesses of each research approach are discussed in the following section.

### **Transpersonal Research**

A transpersonal approach to the research process enabled an interpretation and analysis that could encompass the most sensitive and sacred experiences without distorting them (Anderson, 2015). Transpersonal research methods emphasize making sense of a research topic or what we can know about a topic by using a variety of different sources. This approach included exploring the literature—of various disciplines such as the human sciences, science, and the humanities, among others—to access the knowledge of wisdom traditions, indigenous cultures, and shamanism that is rich in transpersonal content (Braud, 1988). A transpersonal approach to research can relate to aspects of phenomena beyond ourselves, to the “something else” that defies our current understanding because we may have not have experienced it personally or seen it with our own eyes. Thus, the transpersonal researcher has an opportunity to explore new ways of knowing, being, and doing that invite transformation beyond our current understanding of ourselves, and others, and that transcend conventional ways of being in the world (Anderson, 2015; Braud, 1988).

According to Anderson (2015), transpersonal research invites the transformation of a researcher's understanding of themselves and their research topic by exploring

beyond what they can see and/or hear through an examination of what lies outside of their developmental awareness. Wilber (1983) has claimed that for anything to be considered real or valid, it must adhere to three strands of knowing. Traditional science follows these three strands of knowing that are the heart of the scientific method. The first strand, *instrumental injunction*, implies that if you want to know something about a topic, you must do this (i.e., study the brain to understand how it works); the second strand, *direct apprehension*, describes an immediate understanding of the topic that occurs, (i.e., a gain in understanding of the part of the brain under investigation); and the third strand, *communal confirmation or rejection*, occurs when those in the community who have completed the injunction and achieved understanding validate or reject the knowledge (Wilber, 1983).

Wilber also has described *three eyes of knowing* to explain how we can examine different realms of reality with each of these eyes. The *eye of flesh* is empirical in nature and deals with matter or the material characteristics of an investigation; the *eye of mind* is abstract and deals with ideas and concepts, and subjective and intersubjective knowing; and the *eye of contemplation* examines higher spiritual concepts or experiences that are mystical in nature (Wilber, 1983). If we want to understand the transformation of the fear of death with an injunction that looks through the eye of flesh (i.e., brain scan), this approach would not give us all the information we need. Transpersonal research suggests that we need to engage in an injunction that looks through the eye of contemplation (i.e., altered states) to enable an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon that can include kinesthetic information, feelings, intuition, bodily knowing, images, direct knowing, and

so on, so to validate and understand the deeper meaning of these transcendental experiences (Wilber, 1983; Braud, 1988).

As a researcher, my understanding of human nature incorporates a transpersonal lens that recognizes the integration of body, mind, soul, and spirit, and includes the importance of both the spiritual and psychological aspects of human consciousness (Cortright, 1997). Most wisdom traditions, including perennial philosophy, hold the view that a hierarchy exists in the Cosmos that is known as *The Great Chain of Being*, which extends from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit (Cortright, 1997; Wilber, 2016). According to Smith (1976), perennial philosophy recognizes four dimensions of our identity—body, mind, soul (the final locus of individuality), and spirit (which is *Atman*, that is *Brahman*/Buddha-nature). Humans also can approach and understand consensus reality from a body and mind perspective only, and thus miss these transpersonal or spiritual aspects of self, including the phenomena encountered during altered states of consciousness while experiencing a NDE or using psychedelic substances. According to Anderson and Braud (2011), experience-related questions are the most relevant for transpersonal researchers when investigating meaningful transpersonal experiences, since these questions have the potential to provide rich, thick, and deep descriptions.

Transpersonal research offers the possibility of exploring the therapeutic potential of altered states of consciousness that facilitate connections with levels of the psyche often not available through everyday rational or cognitive approaches (Cortright, 1997; Grof, 2008). Valle (1989) has suggested that transpersonal research can address the deep, expansive, and profound experiences that characterize the transpersonal or higher facets of human experience, which include spiritual experiences involving trans-egoic states of

mind that are beyond the everyday states of waking consciousness and our egoic mind for which the existing scientific paradigm has no adequate explanations. The experience that is generated by NDEs and psychedelics is unique in that it often leaves the experiencer feeling as if he/she has been permanently transformed (Pollan, 2018). The elements common to NDEs and psychedelic experiences, believed to be mystical in nature, enable their experiencer an opportunity for an immediate and essential encounter between subject and object, which identifies reality with presence or what Valle (1989) terms the *trans-intentional awareness of mind*—a consciousness without an object or a subject. Trans-intentional awareness includes sensory and supersensory experiences and represents a way of being in which participants perceive themselves as separate from time, space, and reality. It also provides participants with a perspective that affirms a type of intuitive knowing or knowledge that the ego is not the ground of human awareness, but rather only a manifestation of a greater transpersonal self or pure consciousness without a subject or object (Valle, 1989).

The hallmark of mystical experiences encountered during NDEs and psychedelic experiences is trans-egoic states (Kasprov & Scotton, 1999), which include stepping out of one's self, joining with something beyond or outside one's normal ego boundary states, and accessing transrational modes of knowing and connectedness (Cortright, 1997; Greyson, 2006; Grof, 2000; Valle, 1989). Since the phenomena of these common elements of NDEs and psychedelic experiences are beyond conceptual thinking, a transpersonal research approach is required that recognizes the value of investigating these transpersonal dimensions of being so to further our knowledge and possibly increase our psychological well-being (Cortright, 1997; Grof, 2008; Valle, 1989).



An important part of the present research study was my ability, as a researcher, to make authentic connections with my participants and to find the words that captured their experiential accounts. Thus, I emphasized the transpersonal/nondual aspects of this relationship. Blackstone (2006) has suggested that a transpersonal/nondual realization impacts our relational understanding because it changes the way we experience and relate with other people. Nondual realization has the capacity to deepen our encounters with others. When we experience nondual consciousness pervading everything in our environment, including our relationships with other people, we are able to encounter other people at a deeper level, not just from the surface, because nondual consciousness gives us a deep-felt sense of the other (Blackstone, 2006).

Nondual consciousness is a field that influences, mutually interpenetrates, and provides a facilitating medium for a participant's inner unfolding (Cortright, 1997). Thus, nondual consciousness opens up a qualitative, felt sense of the internal depth of a participant, whose own being feels as if it is unified or continuous with the essence of the researcher who is conveying and interpreting their experience (Blackstone, 2006). In other words, if a researcher is able to be present, authentic, and immersed in each moment by being fully conscious and involved in the conversation, a research interview is being co-created, and each individual involved can potentially experience this transpersonal reality.

Although transpersonal research enabled me to cultivate an understanding of my participants' experiences that was beyond our everyday mental and sensory understandings, this approach created a significant tension, since I also needed to offer an interpretation that honored the personal lived experiences of my participants. Therefore, I

integrated hermeneutic phenomenology into the research strategy as the second component of the blended research methodology so to facilitate a deeper understanding of the experiential dimensions of the phenomena being examined (Amos, 2016).

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenological Research**

According to Lavery (2003), it is important to clarify the difference between phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology, and to understand how these different philosophical perspectives impact research methodologies. Husserl created phenomenology because he believed that human consciousness had value, and therefore, should be an object of scientific inquiry. His philosophical approach became known as *descriptive phenomenology*, which was an attempt to describe the essence of an experience. In contrast, Heidegger moved beyond Husserl's focus on description to a hermeneutic or interpretive approach, which focused on the deeper meaning embedded within the human experience (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Husserl established his phenomenology as a philosophy to challenge the empirical and positivist science worldview, and he campaigned for a new science that would focus on individuals' lived experience (Amos, 2016; Lavery, 2003). The main focus for Husserl was the study of phenomena as they appeared in consciousness, which was a movement away from the Cartesian dualism of reality as being something "out there" or separate from the individual (Lavery, 2003). Husserl criticized psychology for its bias towards behaviorism, which prioritized the objective and observable over the subjective and psychic with respect to human living subjects. He argued that human subjects are not automatically reacting to external stimuli, but rather are reacting to their own perceptions of what the stimuli means (Amos, 2016; Lavery, 2003). From a philosophical

perspective, Husserl saw phenomenology as a means to explore deeper into reality, and he wanted to create a science of phenomena with respect to how objects are experienced as they appear in consciousness (Lavery, 2003). Husserl's phenomenology was known as *descriptive* because a researcher could bracket the phenomena being investigated away from his or her own interpretation to give a clear account of the essence of the phenomenon in its own terms (Amos, 2016; Lavery, 2003).

Heidegger developed his own strand of phenomenology, or *hermeneutic phenomenology*, which sometimes is referred to as *interpretive phenomenology*. He claimed that a researcher cannot investigate things and stay neutral, as Husserl proposed, because humans determine reality through their conscious interpretation of it (Lavery, 2003; Sloan, 2014). Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes the use of language and the interpretation of a person's "meaning making"—in other words, how we attribute meaning to the phenomena we encounter (Lavery, 2003). Our personal involvement in the world is constructed through our experience, and meaning is created through this relationship, which is based on our history, background, and interactions with others; and our lived world experience is influenced by our perceptions of our interactions with the world, especially as they are constructed through our use of language (Amos, 2016; Lavery, 2003; Sloan, 2014). We always are interpreting our experiences.

Moustakas (1990) has pointed out that hermeneutics refers to how a phenomenon is interpreted in lived experience, and the aim of a hermeneutic researcher is to understand the meaning of the experience or attune to the phenomena. The hermeneutic phenomenologist does more than just seek the descriptive categories from the narrative of

research participants' experiences; rather, he/she focuses on identifying an individual's meanings and how these meanings influence the choices an individual makes (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Heidegger has put emphasis on the idea of *co-constitutionality*, which refers to how a researcher and study participant interact together, in this case in an interview. The *interpretation* of people's meaning making process occurs through the act of getting to know one another, and *understanding* occurs through a blend of meanings that are fused together as part of the narrative process, which is central to any hermeneutic inquiry (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Gadamer (1976) proposed that understanding occurs through interpretation and that language was the universal medium that enabled understanding. As a researcher, I have provided an interpretive understanding of my participants' experiences, and thus, I needed to honor and appreciate the richness and depth of these exceptional experiences. An interpretive focus helped to clarify further the conditions of understanding itself by listening to the voices of the experiences that presently are considered controversial in the literature, especially the transformative experiences of psychedelic substances and the plausibility of NDEs. By giving a voice to these exceptional experiences, deeper meanings may be revealed. Hermeneutic phenomenology makes clear that understanding and interpretation are bound together in an ever-evolving process. This approach supports the creation of rich and deep accounts of a phenomenon through intuition, and by focusing on uncovering the deeper meanings within participants' accounts (Kafle, 2011). This approach helped my participants to make sense of their individual experiences of transpersonal realities (Braud, 1988).

The present study argues that using a complementary or blended, qualitative approach was necessary to assess experiences of meaning, including those difficult-to-quantify inner private human experiences that are encountered in altered states of consciousness, such as an experience of the mystical and the sacred, or feelings of unity and awe (Anderson & Braud, 2011; Davis, 2009). When trying to validate these inner experiences and spiritual phenomena that individuals encounter during the mystical nature of NDEs and psychedelic experiences, we are limited by our cognitive structures and linguistic preferences (Davis, 2009; Richards, 2017).

### **Blended Qualitative Methodology**

The modern fixation on rational, quantifiable modes of thought has alienated us profoundly from sensorial and other forms of knowing (Wilde & Murray, 2010). A blended qualitative methodology comprised of two approaches was necessary in the current study because the essence and depth of the phenomena encountered in transpersonal dimensions of reality cannot be captured by a transpersonal or hermeneutic research approach alone. Blending several methods together enabled me to consider those aspects of altered states of consciousness that are hidden behind what James (1936) described as the “filmiest of screens” away from our normal everyday waking consciousness (Cortright, 1997). In other words, it was important to reconsider the ways that we come to know something, and thereby what we know through our lived experience by placing ourselves in an integral worldview that includes and values constructs such as the unconscious, transpersonal, feelings, and imaginal and emergent ways of knowing (Davidson, 2013; Wilber, 2016).

This emphasis on other ways of knowing is especially important for a wide range of phenomena encountered during the NDE and while using psychedelic substances. More recently, researchers have used the term *anomalous experience* to account for uncommon experiences that, although experienced by a majority of the population, tend to deviate from ordinary experiences or the usually accepted explanations of consensus reality (Putman, 2016; Wilde & Murray, 2010). These anomalous experiences include phenomena from NDEs, altered states of consciousness, mystical or spiritual experiences, out-of-body experiences, and so on (Wilde & Murray, 2010). With respect to anomalous experience, what is important for both the participant and researcher is the emergence of the experience into the participant's consciousness. As a qualitative researcher, it was important for me to consider how an individual interprets his/her world, both individually and socially, by attempting to view my participants' lived experiences through their eyes, while facilitating a deeper understanding of the phenomena at hand (Amos, 2016; Wilde & Murray, 2010).

Therefore, by utilizing a blended qualitative approach that combined aspects of transpersonal and hermeneutic phenomenology research approaches, I was able to explore participants' being in the world and focus on a deeper understanding of these phenomena through an interpretation of individuals' meaning making processes (Amos, 2016). A reflection on experiences—including those that transcend the natural world—from which we make meaning, is central to any transpersonal hermeneutic inquiry.

### **Research Methodology**

To guide the procedural steps of the current research study, I utilized the methodological framework of an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)—which

is based on the tenants of phenomenological hermeneutics—and transpersonal considerations. Developed by Jonathan Smith, an IPA is concerned with investigating human lived experience and provides researchers with a rich framework for investigating the relationship between human consciousness and a phenomenon itself (Amos, 2016; Wilde & Murray, 2010). An IPA is well suited to addressing the complexities and subtleties of lived human experience, especially critical life events such as NDEs and the mystical experiences encountered using psychedelics, including the transformation of the fear of death and dying. According to Wilde and Murray (2010), an IPA assumes that a person's experiences can be accessed and understood by exploring the meanings he/she assigns to these experiences (p. 3).

### **Selection of Research Participants**

The following section describes the recruitment and selection of participants for this current study.

**Selection of participants:** I considered the participants I recruited for this study as active participants, since they had meaningful and personal experience with the phenomena that they were willing to share. Furthermore, this endeavor required equality between my participants and myself, and also a considerable time commitment, mutual purpose, and intention (Smith, 1994).

**Sampling:** I used homogeneous sampling (i.e., recruitment of a specific subgroup with defining characteristics) and extreme case sampling (i.e., particularly enlightening cases) to recruit participants who had experienced a mystical or transcendent NDE and/or psychedelic experience using psilocybin and/or LSD, or who had both experiences

(Creswell, 2014). Once recruitment had begun, I also used opportunistic sampling (i.e., took advantage of unfolding events) to help me find participants (Creswell, 2014).

I aimed to recruit two to six individuals who had mystical and transcendental experiences from either a NDE and/or psychedelics, specifically psilocybin and/or LSD. I hoped to interview at least one participant who had a mystical experience from using psilocybin and/or LSD, and/or one participant who had a similar experience from a NDE, and continue with a total sample size (2-6) from both categories limiting the study to ten participants. I did not want more than ten because I wanted to be able to engage deeply with each participants' account of their experience and the phenomenon being explored.

An IPA does not require a specific sample size. Also, a distinctive feature of an IPA is its commitment to a detailed interpretative account, and its value is the light it can shed within a broader context because a reader can recognize their own experience in the description (Davis, 2009; Smith, Flowers, & Osborn, 1997).

### **Recruitment**

I recruited my participants by posting an online recruitment script on my personal Facebook page and by posting recruitment posters across the University of Lethbridge campus and in a local business in the city of Lethbridge. Based on the recruitment information, potential participants emailed me to express their interest. I used these email responses to contact those who had expressed an interest in the study or those who had been suggested for the study. Seven people expressed interest, and I sent emails to them to schedule a screening call. Appendix A is a sample of the online script, Appendix B is a sample of the recruitment poster, and Appendix C is a sample of the email utilized for recruitment.



## Inclusion Criteria

I used the following inclusion criteria (see Appendix D) in the initial screening process:

- Individuals over 18 years of age
- Have experienced a NDE
- Experience was transcendent in nature (a sense of being out of the body, an altered perception of time, enhanced awareness, etc.)
- Experience was transformative (i.e., it changed your life/worldview in significant ways)

AND/OR

- Have used psilocybin and/or LSD
- Have had a mystical or transcendent experience from using psilocybin and/or LSD (a sense of ego dissolution or feelings of cosmic unity)
- Experience was transformative (i.e., it changed your life/worldview in significant ways)
- Individuals are motivated to share experience and are able to articulate it
- Individuals are able to provide consent for themselves
- Individuals are not in an emotional crisis

To support the evidence in the literature, the NDE or psychedelic experience must have been a transformative experience for the participant—must have had a significant impact on their lives. The experience must meet some of the characteristics of a mystical experience: unity, a strong sense of the interconnectedness of all people and things, sacredness, reverence or awe, noetic quality, a sense of encountering ultimate reality,

transcendence of time and space, deeply felt positive mood, and ineffability (the experience cannot be described adequately) (James, 2014; Pahnke & Richards, 1966). Participants must be able to articulate and identify the abstract nature of their experience in English because I, as an English only speaker, was conducting all the interviews. Participants also must be willing and motivated to participate actively in the process and share the nature of their transformational experiences. Participants should not be currently in an emotional crisis. Gender, race, ethnicity, employment status, and religious values were not considered as inclusion criteria in this study.

### **The Initial Screening Process**

I used the telephone contact to screen all seven interested potential participants (Appendix D) who found out about the study from the various recruitment strategies (Appendix A & B) and had the email response sent back (Appendix C) to set up the screening call. During the initial screening process over the telephone, I introduced myself and explained my role as a graduate student at the University of Lethbridge, and my current interest in exploring the transformation of experiences of death through mystical encounters during NDEs and psychedelic journeys, specifically those using psilocybin and/or LSD.

Then, I explained the objectives of the study, including ethical considerations, the data collection process, and that this study would require approximately 3–4 hours' time in total, which would include this screening process and an initial interview process that would require approximately 60–190 minutes. I explained that I would be interviewing the potential participants myself—either in person or via Skype, depending on their geographic location—and that I required the interview to be taped as an audio recording.

I also explained that I would be personally transcribing all of the material, as data for use in the study, which I would keep in a locked drawer on campus or at my home. I explained that the interview would occur after the initial screening interview was over, and if potential participants met all of the inclusion criteria. After transcribing the interviews, I explained I would follow-up with each participant to ensure that the information collected was accurate. I also explained that a consent to participate was required and must be signed before the first interview. I also explained how participants' identity would be protected. All potential participants understood the purpose of the screening call, and I collected demographic information at this time. I then explained that each participant needed to meet an inclusion criteria. I used the following questions to start the screening interview (Appendix D):

- Are you 18 years old or over?
- Where do you live?
- Have you ever had a near-death experience?
- Was it transcendent? (a sense of being out of the body, an altered perception of time, enhanced awareness, communicating with a being of light, or feelings of cosmic unity)
- Would you describe this experience as transformative? (i.e., it made you change your life in significant ways, or reevaluate your worldviews)

AND/OR

- Have you ever used psilocybin and/or LSD?

- Have you had a mystical or transcendental experience from using psilocybin and/or LSD? (a sense of being out of the body, an altered perception of time, enhanced awareness, ego dissolution, or feelings of cosmic unity)
- Would you describe this experience as transformative? (i.e., it made you change your life in significant ways, or reevaluate your worldviews)
- Are you willing to share and explore these transformational experiences?
- Are you currently in a state of emotional crisis?
- Discussing these types of experiences might cause some discomfort or bring up intense memories or emotions for you. Do you believe you are able to share this story?

Since all seven potential participants met the screening criteria, I invited them to participate in the research project, and all seven accepted. Each participant chose a pseudonym to protect their anonymity, and a time was set up for the semi-structured interview session at a later date, either in person or via Skype. An eighth participant contacted me via email, and I responded back via email. I explained I would contact them after my initial rounds of interviews, if I needed more participants. See Appendix D for a full list of the screening criteria questions.

### **Research Site**

If their geographic location did not allow participants to participate in a face-to-face interview in Lethbridge with myself, the interviews were carried out via Skype. For those participants scheduled for Skype interviews, I emailed them letters of consent (Appendix E) prior to the interview. These participants were required to read, sign, scan, and email the signed letter of consent back to me before the Skype interview. For those

participants scheduled for a face-to-face interview, a private office located at the University of Lethbridge was used, and letters of consent were signed in person.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I was the primary researcher, and I conducted the semi-structured interviews with my participant(s). Letters of consent (Appendix E) were distributed prior to the interview. This letter fully explained the roles of the researcher and active participants as collaborators in this study; and the process of how the research would be conducted, including how the information would be recorded, analyzed, and interpreted. Participants were provided with the length of time required to participate, and the ethical considerations of the study, including any risks and benefits to the participant. Participants were informed of their rights regarding anonymity and confidentiality, including where the completed data results would be stored (i.e., the data would be stored on a password-protected computer at the University of Lethbridge/home, with restricted access, or on a password-protected USB flash drive; and any printed material would be stored in a locked file drawer with limited access); the right to use a pseudonym; the right to withdraw at any time, without penalty, whereupon their data would be destroyed; and the right to access copies of the transcribed data. Participants were informed of risks that included potential triggering of emotional or psychological discomfort regarding the discussion of illegal substances, and they were provided with instructions for referral to local mental health services. Participants also were informed about who would have access to the raw data (the researcher and supervisor) and when the data would be destroyed. In addition, participants were informed about the dissemination of the results.

In these letters of consent, I described my personal interest in the study—mainly to explore and understand the lived experience and meaning behind the mystical experiences encountered during a NDE and/or while using psychedelics. I explained how I wanted to try to understand the transformative nature of these experiences, and how they might reduce the fear of death. I also explained the importance of establishing trust and understanding through our collaborative process as we explored these exceptional experiences together.

### **Data Collection**

I will now discuss the methods used for data collection.

**Interview protocol.** I conducted the semi-structured interviews in person (if the participant was located in Lethbridge) or via Skype. The interviews were qualitative in nature and thus all-inclusive, flexible, and based on open-ended questions so that a rich and thick description could be obtained from the participants' experiences in their own words. I began by introducing myself and establishing our working relationship. For the face-to-face interviews, I first reviewed the letter of consent and had the participants sign it before beginning the interview (See Appendix E).

In a first meeting with a participant, a researcher has an opportunity to gain a lot of information: unconscious, implicit, and non-verbal information, as well as conscious, explicit, and verbal information (Gilbert & Orlans, 2011, p. 123). Due to the intensity of my participants' experiences, the healing power of the empathetic attunement and resonance between myself and them could not be overstated with respect to building a trusting bond within our working relationship (Hunter, 2012). My counselling skills were important for establishing a rapport and trust with my participants, especially my ability

to be heart-centered, authentic, and real, which showed me how powerful empathic resonance is and what it meant for my participants to be heard and understood (Corey, 2013; Hunter, 2012).

In an interpretative phenomenological inquiry, participant interviews are recorded, transcribed, and referred to as *transcripts* (Amos, 2016). My goal as a researcher was to be thoroughly present and to understand my participants' experiences and feelings as sensitively and accurately as they were revealed in their own words (Cory, 2013). The information I collected from these interviews was the raw data that I analyzed and interpreted for clusters of themes and sub-themes as they emerged from the listening and re-reading (several times) of the transcripts. I was looking for key elements such as the relationship between language and experience, and any meanings/influences attributed to these experiences (Amos, 2016). Appendix F is a sample of the interview questions I used.

### **Interview Questions**

1. Which mystical experience, NDE or psychedelic, did you have?
2. Describe in your own words the nature of your experience that best represents what happened.
3. How do these experiences relate to the experience of death, if at all?
4. How has this experience changed your life, or how are you living your life differently?
5. How would you share this information regarding the transformation of death with others? (if evidence of the transformation of death is found)

### Prompts

- When did you experience that? (chronology)
- What aspects of the experience stood out the most for you? Why?
- What was most important to you?
- What was happening for you at this time? (context)
- How would you describe this experience as transformational?
- How have these mystical experiences changed or influenced your life?

### Interview Process

As a counsellor, this researcher understands that similar to the psychotherapeutic relationship, the research relationship also is co-created at conscious, explicit, and verbal levels; and also at non-conscious, implicit, non-verbal levels of experience (Gilbert & Orlans, 2011). Thus, it was important to be present, authentic, and real and give honest responses to my participants in the moment. This approach enabled me to focus my full attention on my participants' experiences, and it fostered genuine encounters, and initiated joint explorations of their world and worldviews. However, to do this, I needed to foster an atmosphere of congruency in which participants felt that I was being sincere and real (Cory, 2013). I established this atmosphere through my opening skills, paraphrasing, and reflection of meaning to show that I was really listening to them (Young, 2013).

According to Blackstone (2006), nondual realization deepens our capacity for contact, which enabled me to encounter my participants at a deeper level because of a deep-felt sense of the other person. As a counsellor, this realization refines my ability as a researcher to experience and respond with a receptive stillness and silence to each



interview, which enables me to remain open to the stimuli arising in each moment by being truly present and responding authentically to each moment, without manipulating these moments with thoughts, and thus retaining the richness of individual accounts (Amos, 2016). This realization enabled me to create a warm and non-judgmental atmosphere in which my participants felt safe and in which they could openly explore their thoughts and feelings regarding their experience (Cory, 2013).

The interviews, ranging from 45 to 110 minutes, were recorded for later transcription. The atmosphere was comfortable and relaxed. The questions were composed of the open-ended research questions, along with many prompts that arose naturally in the moment. By tuning in and paying close attention, I was able to use reflective listening and ask the right questions at the right time, and so gained a wealth of information from the participants' narratives, which allowed powerful themes to emerge.

### **Verification Procedures**

As the primary researcher, I interviewed each participant personally in person or via Skype. I audio taped all of the interviews, and I personally transcribed each of them. I ensured accuracy and reliability through member checking by emailing each participant a copy of their personal transcript. In the email, I asked the participants to review the transcripts to ensure the accuracy of their lived experience (Creswell, 2014). I asked each participant to confirm the accuracy of the transcription via email. Once they had reviewed the transcripts, they could delete any identifying information. All the participants confirmed their transcripts, except for one who requested the removal of an overlooked piece of identifying information. I also emailed the participants a copy of the initial analysis of clusters of themes I found to keep them informed and to check their feelings

about these initial themes. All seven participants confirmed the initial themes. I also employed triangulation strategies by comparing participant responses to one another for similarity and consistency across all the transcripts (Creswell, 2014).

### **Researcher's Role and Biases**

The intention for this study was influenced by my own experiences and worldviews, as indicated in the previous discussions of my role as an implicated researcher. However, as suggested by Braud and Anderson (2011), meaningful experiences can spark interest for a research topic, and personal transformation often leads to a path of inquiry. According to the hermeneutic phenomenological approach, a researcher's interest in the information in the literature often leads her/him to a realization that an area needs to be explored more deeply, which also makes the inquiry meaningful (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Therefore, my own experiences, and thus, my own biases sparked my interest to further understand the depth of these transformative experiences. As a transpersonal researcher, it was necessary to immerse myself within my participants' lived experiences of the phenomena being studied. Also, since I was utilizing a phenomenological approach in my research, it was important for me to be aware that my own existence is shaped by the interpretation of my experiences, which makes me inseparable from the phenomena I was examining (Valle, 1989). By fully familiarizing myself with my participants' accounts of their NDEs and psychedelic experiences, I could determine whether their narratives revealed that their fear of death had been transformed, paying particular attention to my pre-understanding of all the parts, while simultaneously allowing my experience to enhance the interpretation of the whole (Anderson, 2015; Davis, 2009; Kafle, 2011).

## Data Analysis and Interpretation

We will now move to a discussion of my process for the data analysis and interpretation.

**Analysis of data.** The main goal of the current study was to explore the transformation of the fear of death by conducting participant interviews concerning transformative experiences they encountered during NDEs and psychedelic journeys. By utilizing an IPA, my goal was to extrapolate the subjective meaning of these mystical and lifechanging experiences from the participant's point of view. After audio recording all the interviews, I began the transcription. Throughout this process, I continued to actively collaborate with the participants to ensure that I had captured the accurate meanings of their mystical and transcendental experiences, first by ensuring the transcripts were accurate, and after analysis by sending them a copy of the themes I had found.

As I attempted to make sense of my interpretations of the participants' experiences, they also were also trying to make sense of their own experiences; this double meaning making is known as a *double hermeneutic* (Amos, 2016). I interpreted the participant's interviews by using a blend of their words and my own in a unified presentation that captured the intensity and meaning of their experiences, in a way that was faithful to participants' experiences (Creswell, 2014; Davis, 2009).

To find any emerging themes within the interview material, I used the verified transcripts and the following six steps of data analysis within an IPA:

- IPA 1: Attunement—Listen to the recordings and gain familiarity with the interview as a whole before reading and rereading the first transcript.

- IPA 2: Immersion and Initial Noting—Underline words or phrases in the transcript that stand out and record initial exploratory comments.
- IPA 3: Identify Themes—Create concise phrases from initial notes and record emergent themes within each transcript.
- IPA 4: Search for Connections Across Emergent Themes—Seek to find deeper meanings and incorporate emergent themes into structures of meaning within each transcript.
- IPA 5: Repeat Steps 1–4 with remaining transcripts.
- IPA 6: Look for Patterns Across Transcripts Within the Study—Look for common and unique patterns, and redevelop themes as appropriate.

To capture the depth of meaning of my participants' experiences, I utilized Gendlin's 1981 concept (as cited in Amos, 2016) of relying on the felt sense within my body to determine whether I had accurately named the deeper meaning or feelings described by my participants. Accessing this implicit knowledge or the implicit dimension of experience enabled me to rely on my intuition. I am naturally in tune with my body, and I used this natural tendency as a guide to listen to the inner feelings in my body, especially with respect to my relationships with my participants. My intuition gives me insight into, or a sense of how, a person is feeling and the emotions behind their stories before I reflectively articulate it back to the person and label it through language (Amos, 2016). Using therapeutic empathy, we can experience the same emotional feelings as our participants as Gendlin articulated in his 1981 concept of *embodied interpretation* (as cited in Amos, 2016). Embodied interpretation helped me to put myself in my participants' shoes, and enabled the use of therapeutic empathy (Cory, 2013).

My aim was to communicate the facts, emotions, and spiritual dimensions of what my participants were telling me, or not telling me. As I looked for words to describe the unique dimensions of their experiences, while simultaneously staying attuned to their transcripts, I was able to move back and forth between the data searching for the deeper meanings within the transcripts, in order to capture my phrases and themes (Amos, 2016; Todres & Galvin, 2008). This approach enabled me to read my participants' emotional states through reading my own body's response to their stories and the language they used. Thus, I was able to experience some of what my participants were experiencing, and the act of incorporating a bodily felt sense in the meaning making process helped to capture an implicit understanding of the lived experience of the phenomena under investigation (Amos, 2016).

This process was not linear but rather a back-and-forth engagement that included being present with each of the participants' narratives. I worked daily on one participant's narrative, and started each day with a 10 minute meditation and clearing of my mind. Then, I read the transcript from beginning to end before starting the interpretation. This process required me to slow down and pay attention to the actual text, and attend to my own body's felt sense of the meaning within it. This process also required me to notice the difference between the meanings conveyed in the participants' words and what I noticed within my own body (Amos, 2016; Todres & Galvin, 2008).

During the second and/or third reading of the transcript, I underlined or highlighted any words that stood out, and recorded any of my initial feelings once again. Before I moved on to identifying themes, I read the whole transcript again and my initial feelings and noted thoughts so to gain an appreciation of my own bodily understanding of

the whole and parts within the transcript (Amos, 2016; Todres & Galvin, 2008). I repeated this process for each of the participants before recording any initial themes. This process enabled me to rest between the readings of the participants' narratives, and thus, enable a natural interpretation to unfold. For example, giving up control over a forced interpretation enabled a natural intelligence to be revealed. By allowing myself to "sleep on it," answers came to me through my dreams, journaling process, and synchronicities (i.e., conversations or meditation, etc.).

Once I was ready to start identifying themes, I reread all of the transcripts from beginning to end, and then wrote two to three pages of concise phrases or words that came to me for all of the transcripts. I already had found that all of my participants had experiences that had three clear distinct parts. This finding became crystal clear again after I reread all the transcripts in one sitting. I then separated each interview into the three parts and began to create initial themes. As I focused on my own bodily sense and what resonated with me, I recorded the initial themes and sub-themes. Initially, I used a whiteboard to map out 16 themes and their corresponding sub-themes, which fell within the three common parts of the participants' experience. I wrote each theme and sub-theme down on small pieces of paper and spread them out in piles to ensure that I had a cohesive picture of what I was seeing in the data. I had three main themes for part one, three main themes for part two, and ten main themes for part three. Then, I developed a table on my computer into which I organized all the themes and sub-themes.

Using the main themes and the corresponding sub-themes, I went back to the transcripts and marked the quotes that I wanted to use within each of the three parts. Listening to my intuition and writing from the heart enabled the data to emerge as words,

sentences, and paragraphs. Moving back and forth, I was able to determine whether I was heading in the right direction or if I needed to move something. For example, I took my emotions (such as excitement, joy, or dread) and/or my bodily wisdom (like goosebumps or a sinking feeling in my stomach) as indications I was headed in the right or wrong direction with respect to my writing and placement of themes and sub-themes (Anderson & Braud, 2011). As I wrote each section, I checked in with how I felt about the parts to ensure that they fit with the whole picture. As I finished each section, I slept on it and asked for guidance in my dreams. I began each day by reading what I had written the day before. I moved quotes around, and I changed some of the key words in my sub-themes as I had a deeper sense of the emerging whole. Once the analysis was complete, and I felt that all the parts fell into a unified whole, I moved on to an in-depth interpretation of the 3 parts and the 16 main themes.

### **Interpretation**

Although the initial analysis enabled me to cultivate an understanding of my participants' experiences that were beyond our everyday mental and sensory understanding, this process engendered a significant tension, since I needed to offer a deeper interpretation that honored my participants' personal lived experiences (Amos, 2016). My challenge was to find words that were faithful to my participants' experiences and that would capture the authenticity of the phenomenon being studied (Todres & Galvin, 2008). As I moved through each section, I added more depth and richness to my initial data analysis by relating my understanding back to the information in my literature review. This approach required listening to my own body felt-sense as a form of understanding and knowing that could help me to find the right words based on my own

experiential practice of listening to my intuition and focusing on my body's sense of the implicit meanings of my participants' words in the moment (Todres & Galvin, 2008).

After deepening my understanding of the experiential dimensions of the phenomenon under study, I changed theme one in part one, theme one in part two, and theme six in part three, and also the first sub-theme in theme eight (Amos, 2016). Theme six related to the transformation of the fear of death, and I resisted naming it so because it felt too obvious, even though it was apparent throughout the participants' experiences that this transformation had occurred. After some reflection, I changed this theme to *the transformation of the fear of death* because not only did the transformation of the fear of death occur, but also the overall transformation of my participants' being was due to these exceptional experiences. The movement back-and-forth between the participants' words and their felt intricacy in my body became the meaning behind their experience. These parts, articulated through the themes and the sub-themes were all expressed as the interpreted whole through my choice of language (Todres & Galvin, 2008).

### **Validity and Reliability**

The focus of an IPA relies on building a relationship between a researcher and participant so to facilitate an understanding that the individual has of their world and their attempts to make meaning from their experiences (Amos, 2016). This relationship provides a supportive structure in which a participant has the opportunity to openly explore and share his/her experience, including any feelings or emotions that arose from their lived experience. I created a supportive atmosphere for my participants that was linked to validity and accuracy, since it created authenticity and trust in our relationship, which enabled accuracy and credibility to flow between myself and each participant



(Creswell, 2014). This accuracy and credibility occurred as our relationship developed throughout the interview process. This process is known as *member checking*, and I consistently checked in with each participant to ensure the accuracy of the information as it was collected, and after it was collected, including checking in with the interpretations made from the developing themes (Creswell, 2014). I also supported validity by using triangulation—I compared the narratives from each participant to one another for consistency and similarities (Creswell, 2014).

I also addressed reliability by providing detailed step-by-step descriptions of the methodological procedures to participants and by ensuring that each participant had a common understanding of the questions being asked and how their information was going to be used and interpreted (Creswell, 2014). In addition, I addressed reliability by considering researcher's bias as an implicated researcher.

### **Significance of Findings**

As the researcher of this study, I posit that death gives our life meaning. Death is one of the few universals that all human beings experience, yet avoidance, denial, and fear remain prominent when considering the issues surrounding the nature of death and dying (Assante, 2012). According to Grof and Halifax (1977), existential analysis reveals that “life is existence toward death,” and they argue that existential anxiety or the awareness of death is a constant source of tension for most, yet it has the potential to provide deeper meaning to one's existence and an appreciation for time (p. 208).

The potential findings from this study are likely to be of great interest to the participants, the general public, and any professionals who work with those who are dying (Grob & Danforth, 2013; Grof, 2000). As discussed in the literature, the memories

of the transformation of the fear of death from a NDE or the intuitive insights gained from using psilocybin or LSD appear to be a powerful therapeutic resource for their experiencers (Grob, Danforth, Chopra, et al., 2011; Richards, 2016). The hope is that by exploring these rich phenomena, we will be able to utilize and understand further the psychological and spiritual knowledge gained from these transformational experiences, and integrate it into the counselling process. This information may provide mental health practitioners and counselors new ways of understanding and approaching working with terminal clients. Through the facilitation of these experiences, we may be able to help make death and dying a profound psychospiritual event for our future clients.

### **Summary**

This chapter summarized the IPA, the methodology that was used to address the study research question. What kinds of life altering or spiritual experiences do the NDE and psychedelics, specifically psilocybin and LSD, have in common, and what are the potential possibilities for these experiences to transform the fear of death? This chapter also discussed the rationale for using a blended qualitative approach, specifically a transpersonal hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, which is the framework and method for the study design. It also reviewed the data collection and analysis procedures, and the ethical considerations and rights of participants. The themes that were revealed through this process are discussed in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 4: Themes of the Participants' Near Death Experiences and Experiential Psychedelics**

This chapter provides the thematic analysis of the participants' lived experiences, a description of the structure of the thematic analysis, a detailed analysis of the common themes found within each of the three parts of the participants' narratives, and a brief introduction to the research participants. As previously discussed, I am an implicated researcher utilizing a blended research methodology—a transpersonal, hermeneutic, phenomenological inquiry. An important aspect of transpersonal research enabled me to engage with my participants' most sacred and exceptional human experiences, which also were informed by my own personal experiences (Anderson, 2015). Important to phenomenological research is how my own understanding of existence is likewise cultivated through my own experience and interpretation of it, and thus, I am inseparable from the phenomena I study (Valle, 1989). Moreover, my personal understanding speaks to the lived experience of the hermeneutic researcher. In other words, during interpretation, paying attention to how the parts affect the whole (Davis, 2009; Kafle, 2011). With respect to the thematic analysis, it was important for me to be aware of my biases or pre-understandings of all the parts while simultaneously allowing my own understandings to enhance the process and interpretation of the parts that made up the whole (Davis, 2009; Kafle, 2011). By utilizing an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), I was able to remain connected to my participants' accounts of their lived experience, and pursue the deeper intersubjective meanings within their narratives by moving back-and-forth between their words to look for an emotional recognition of a

meaning that was deeply personal, and authentic for participants' experiences (Amos, 2016; Todres & Galvin, 2008).

### **Participants**

The group of participants I recruited for this study included 6 males and 1 female, ranging in ages from 20 to 66 years old. All were Canadian and lived in Alberta and/or British Columbia. Their level of education ranged from trades, college, or university Bachelor's degrees, and two identified as being retired from the workforce. Two of the participants reported having a near death experience (NDE), and one of them reported that they had two NDEs. Three of the participants reported having mystical experiences using psychedelics—two had these experiences with both LSD and psilocybin, and one had this experience only when using psilocybin. One of the participants reported that they had a mystical experience while having a NDE and also while using both psychedelics, LSD and psilocybin, and the last participant reported a “nearing death experience.” Five of the participants' exceptional experiences with psychedelics occurred in the last 2 years (i.e., 2017 or 2018), whereas the other two participants' NDEs had occurred in the last 10–30 years (i.e., 2008 or 1988). In addition, during each of their interviews, three of the participants described more than one exceptional experience with psychedelics.

Dave is 40 years old and lives in Calgary. He decided to use psilocybin as a therapeutic tool to aid his own growth and recovery from some of the anxiety and depression symptoms that he had been experiencing over the last few years of his life. With a specific purpose and intention in mind, he did some minor research before proceeding. His intention was to induce a mystical experience in hopes of healing some of the past circumstances of his life and bringing about a new perspective.

Delia is 66 years old and is currently retired, although she spends a lot of her time volunteering, which keeps her busy. She experienced two NDEs during her lifetime, both of which dramatically impacted her life in positive ways. Both experiences enabled her to realize her gifts—mainly psychic abilities—which sent her life path in a new direction, and she has been doing psychic readings for people for many years.

Johnny is in his 60s and currently is retired after working in a rail yard for the majority of his life. He was diagnosed with cancer after he retired and nearly died while waiting for a liver transplant. His whole perspective on life has changed since he received his new liver and recovered from his cancer diagnosis.

Marlow is 40 years old and currently is working on a second degree at the University of Lethbridge. He experienced a NDE when he was a teenager, and he believes this experience was the catalyst for his awakening. This experience led him on a lifelong journey of learning, and eventually to psychedelics (both psilocybin and LSD), which also have helped him to grow and heal as he continues to embody the awakening that began so long ago.

Sam is 20 years old, and he had his first psychedelic experience at the age of 17. This experience with psilocybin helped him to realize that there was more to himself than the mind-body. He has done some research into psychedelics and has used both psilocybin and LSD as therapeutic tools to explore his own connection to his spirit and his spiritual development.

Tim is in his 60s and is a retired firefighter. He has suffered from sleep apnea throughout his life, and in 1988, he experienced a NDE while sleeping. Although this experience occurred a long time ago, he can still remember it vividly and the profound

feelings that accompanied it. This experience had a significant impact on him, and he has researched the topic at length throughout his life, so he was thrilled to be able to participate in the present study.

Wolfe is 29 years old, and he experienced a mystical experience while using LSD at a music festival. This spiritual awakening led to enormous changes in his life that included quitting his job, moving, and many other positive aftereffects that continue till today.

### **Structure of the Thematic Analysis**

I deliberately structured the thematic analysis to provide a logical and chronological narrative that would emerge from the research questions and the semi-structured interviews. Since it naturally revealed itself in three distinct parts, I split it into three parts. “Part 1: The Experience Itself” involves the participants’ lived experiences of altered states of consciousness encountered during a near-death experience or while using psychedelics that were the catalyst for having a transformative exceptional experience. “Part 2: Illumination of the Experience” details the unfolding of the participants’ deeper understanding of their lived experience of a near-death experience or while using psychedelics. “Part 3: The Gifts and Lessons Learned” comprises the subsequent transformational effects of these experiences in the participants’ lives, especially as they relate to the transformation of the fear of death.

#### **Part 1: The Experience Itself**

As found within the literature, participants claimed that these experiences were ineffable, and so words could not accurately capture them. Through these experiences of altered states of consciousness, participants were able to experience a truly objective state

of awareness by leaving their subjective, differentiated ego awareness behind, which enabled them to begin to see their lives in a completely new light. Three main themes were revealed in participants' experiences of using psychedelics and having NDEs. "Theme 1: Allies for Awakening" describes participants' previous state of mind and their environment, which led to their experience and includes what the participants noticed most about their experience. "Theme 2: Magical Mystery Tour" describes the deeper characteristics of the experience and includes participants' overwhelming emotions and thoughts as their experiences unfolded. "Theme 3: Sacramental View of Reality" describes the transpersonal dimensions of these experiences that include the deep and expansive qualities described by the participants. Table 1 outlines the themes and sub-themes that were found.

Table 1

*Themes of Part 1: The Experience Itself*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
1 Allies for Awakening	Voyagers set and setting
	Guided towards wholeness
	Purpose and intention
2 Magical Mystery Tour	Pure experience
	No longer anchored in a simple location
	Dizzying stream of consciousness
3 Sacramental View of Reality	Infinite in its significance
	Encounter with energy
	Sparked my appetite for spiritual growth

**Theme 1: Allies for Awakening**

The theme *allies for awakening* came from the participants' understanding that these exceptional experiences were catalysts that contributed to their personal growth and transformation. All of the participants shared in the recognition that "help" appeared when a need arose to learn or move forward, whether this was emotionally and/or mentally from one's fixed patterns or beliefs. The overarching idea behind this theme was the beginning of a realization of a profound power working within the participants' lives. This power, often described as circumstance, appeared to be greater than the egoic self, and it worked in mysterious ways to help participants discover its depth, which was greater than their preconceived notions of self. This concept of *allies* could be felt in the participants' underlying narratives of this theme, and how they ascribed meaning to their exceptional experiences as seen in the three sub-themes that were revealed: *voyagers set and setting*, *guided towards wholeness*, and *purpose and intention*.

***Voyagers set and setting.*** These altered states of consciousness can be best understood by examining the set or setting that proceeded or accompanied the catalyst that triggered the transformation of consciousness (Metzner, 2017). The concept of a *greater power* often manifested in some kind of dramatic or traumatic life event. Participants described events that were occurring within their lives, or their environments, and their subsequent state of mind as one of the strongest influences in facilitating their experiences. For example, Marlow shared that at "around the age of 12 the psychological events of sexual abuse began to unfold from childhood sexual abuse and through that there was a lot of risky behaviour that I became engaged in."

Experiences that challenge our assumptions about life and reality may open us to new worldviews or ways of experiencing our lives. For instance, Wolfe claimed that:



I definitely, uhm was very addicted and had gone down the wrong road... I started doing cocaine a lot in Vancouver...when kind of the darkest times of my life were...and I needed a change, but I didn't know what it was.

Paying attention to our own personal experiences, such as suffering, may lead to subtle or dramatic shifts in our understanding of who we are. Johnny claimed that: "I was sick and got diagnosed with cancer... so you know you're near or close to death when these things are happening." Painful and frightening experiences can help to alter one's path and can broaden our understanding of who we are. Delia explained, "I was in a small hospital... unfortunately there was a mishap, and I was hemorrhaging." Tim shared, "I knew right away what had happened. I suffered from sleep apnea and stopped breathing all of the time." A crisis in health, suffering, or an unexpected encounter with the unknown have the potential to initiate a shift in one's perspective (Schlitz, 2015).

Not all catalysts for transformation were brought about by suffering. For example, Sam had a conscious intention to directly experiment with psychedelics, resulting in his experience of growth through his personal experience with altered states of consciousness while using psychedelics:

Yeah, so at that time, I had taken two other psilocybin trips previously... and this had kind of opened the door to just philosophy in general. I was at such an age, I was at the age of 16 where I had first discovered philosophy, but I didn't have any depth, and then by age 17, I started to get some depth in regards to my first trip.

In the process of self-inquiry and exploration, Dave discovered how psychedelics could support him on his journey of healing. Dave claimed, "I'm ready to sort of experience what I haven't seen... but, I do have an outcome that I want." Participants

often reflected how their state of mind and their environments triggered the felt-sense that they were being guided to take some action, or something was needed to move them forward, or change something that needed fixing. The underlying feelings of being guided remained, whether they purposely chose their actions or whether they felt they were being guided by circumstances that were more powerful than they ever could imagine.

***Guided towards wholeness.*** In shifting their attention to the aspects of their lives that they previously ignored, participants found themselves on new paths of understanding regarding life, death, and their current view of reality, which offered them new insight, meaning, and purpose. Participants often felt propelled or guided into further explorations of these initial insights. For example, Wolfe shared, “And something whispered to me, something whispered to me, it was at a music festival of all things.” Participants shared accounts of personally taking an action that was characterized by underlying factors, such as looking for answers or seeking relief from pain and/or past circumstances. Sam recalled taking psychedelics because he was looking for answers regarding his relationships with his self and others:

I did it [psilocybin] with a close friend of mine in a more responsible and safe environment... So I went in to this with basically the idea that I want to enhance the relationship with the person that I'm taking it with, and I want to enhance the relationship with myself.

Life circumstances that were beyond a participant's control often led to painful experiences that disrupted their life and sent them in a new direction. For example, Marlow shared his past experience of trauma and pain:

My childhood was really... it felt like there wasn't a lot of emotional availability or like my parents weren't available... And so the pain that I was feeling, I wasn't able to share with anybody... I had some experiences with substances, and I wasn't trying to overdose, but I took a bunch of pills just to numb the pain.

Marlow's life events and choices led to his NDE, which in turn altered his path and eventually led to his own personal growth and healing. Having an awareness that things needed to shift also led to Dave's life-altering decision to take psilocybin. He described how he had been working to reconcile things from his past, but not making any progress:

I have been working *extensively* over the past 3 or 4 years to mentally heal some stuff that had happened in my childhood and from a very high demand religious upbringing, and there were some things I had been trying to reconcile, and I just had this feeling as if I were hitting a wall. I thought this [taking psilocybin] would be a good way to do that... so I think I got very deliberate about it.

Those who experienced a NDE expressed a desire to understand or stay connected to the extraordinary glimpse of what they had just experienced. For example, Delia recalled her NDE experience, "I had an opportunity to leave, and you know that would be the end of that, or I could stay, and at the time, I was like curious about what was going on here, so maybe leaving would be okay." Tim shared, "I knew I was dying. I knew what was happening, but it didn't bother me. I just wanted to keep going." Thus, both Delia and Tim expressed that they did not want to leave their NDE experience, even if they knew that they were dying. These out-of-body experiences opened them to new ideas about their lives and deaths, and gave them feelings of awe, wonder, and curiosity.

Participants' sense of being intuitively guided to heal themselves and grow often led to a specific purpose and intention to use psychedelics, or somehow triggered an exceptional experience as reported by those who had NDEs.

***Purpose and intention.*** Those participants who were not thrust into the mystical states of consciousness brought about by NDEs seemed to be drawn to the power of psychedelic substances, which also are powerful catalysts for personal insight and growth. This finding led to two other striking qualities that many of the participants who used psychedelics experienced—purpose and intention. For example, Dave set out to try to initiate a mystical experience by using psychedelics that would give him insights to help him heal from some of the things he had experienced in his life. He shared the following:

I would say that it was, it was a very intentional sort of set and setting, and the purpose was to specifically try and generate one of these... I set this purposeful planning intention and where I wanted to do this seriously... a first real serious intentional journey like this... trying to create a place where I could really let go and not have anything from the outside to distract me from the experience... so mindset was preparing for the prior 2 days... I had fasted, and I had gone on a motorcycle trip, so I was very much alone, and I was staying in a space where I knew that I wouldn't have anything to do, there was no TV, no internet there... So the mindset was what I brought with *me*... to getting my head into a space to say I'm going to embark on this particular experience.

Sam recalled setting an intention while taking psilocybin to determine what his next steps in life might entail. He expressed the concept of *intention* in the following way:

I decided at the time to take some psilocybin just because I felt that it would be a good way to spend the night, and hopefully, I would gain some insight on what I was supposed to be doing next.

On another occasion he claimed, “I consumed psilocybin mushrooms inside of a tea with a friend of mine in a close and safe and responsible environment.” Wolfe also believed that his state of mind and the environment that he was in played a huge role in facilitating a mystical experience while using LSD. Wolfe explained the importance of purpose and intention for his LSD experiences:

Set and setting were so key for any trip and that’s why I generally only did LSD with friends and at places like music festivals because it’s a set and setting... I also like to be in nature, I’ve always been connected to the forest... so this last year I’ve done it while doing hikes... to try and push my boundaries to see where I can get, both physically and mentally... I went up to the mountain on LSD and did yoga at the top of the mountain.

Wolfe believed that devoting special attention to the set and setting, such as connecting with nature and surrounding himself with people he trusted, were key factors for his powerful psychedelic experiences, which led him to experiential learning regarding his self.

Marlow had many psychedelic experiences that were profound and transformative. As he began to understand these powerful allies, he recalled that having a

guide during a psychedelic experience was instrumental to his own learning. This intention was accompanied by creating a ritual to begin his psychedelic experience.

Marlow explained how the intent and purpose for one of his LSD trips came about:

So luckily I have a really good friend, and he called me up and said hey Marlow, why don't I sit for you? I said okay, so I took a couple of hits of LSD, very ceremonial, all by myself. He just sat as an outside observer... I went camping by this little creek, and I lit a little fire, very symbolic.

Whatever the reasons for their experiences, the participants also shared similar ideas of being on a journey of pure experience that manifested in the next theme—the *Magical Mystery Tour*.

## **Theme 2: Magical Mystery Tour**

A magical mystery tour encompasses all of the components of a journey that took the participants' physical being on a voyage to a broader reality. This theme was depicted in participants' reflections of being on an exploratory trip of substance-induced changes of consciousness or on the altered states of consciousness encountered during a NDE, and the many multidimensional effects that they experienced. Participants often described these experiences as a *tour of awareness* that consisted of travelling through a personal and subjective experience of inner space or non-ordinary reality.

***Pure experience.*** This sub-theme had strong undercurrents of objectivity in that the participants' experience was both real and known. This theme was revealed through the participants' body language, mannerisms, and emotions as they described their experiences. Common to the participants' descriptions was the feeling of being on a voyage characterized by sensations of not only having the experience, but also being the

experience. Moreover, even though words often could not explain their experience, I could see from their body language that their memory of what had happened was very real. Studies have found that these memories are richer in detail and seem more real than memories of real life events (Parnia, 2014; Greyson, 2006; Grof, 2000). For example, Dave claimed, “Yeah, it’s like describe your experience, like that is really difficult to do.” Johnny also said, “Well uhmm... this is ahh, hard to explain.” Wolfe simply said, “No words for it.” Tim responded, “Do you understand? I don’t know if I’m explaining myself correctly here?” Ordinary language could not reveal the magnitude of these exceptional experiences or the profound transformations that occurred.

Both the psychedelic experiences and the NDEs revealed an engagement with multitudes of different levels of awareness and secret domains of psychic activity, which enabled participants to experience an ultimate journey (Metzner, 2017). Sam succinctly explained, “We both felt incredibly safe, almost as if we were surrounded by an aura or something... and it was almost like the outside world had disappeared, and we were experiencing an experience that was outside of the world.”

These journeys amplified the participants’ lens of perception and gave them a different way of interpreting and understanding their world. For example, Marlow claimed, “So as the LSD kicked in it felt like... I felt like I was on the stage of the world.” These exceptional experiences also gave participants an opportunity to look at their own assumptions and beliefs. Dave recalled, “I was able to see myself and these experiences from an outside perspective where I could observe these things being felt as the experience was happening, but I was a neutral observer in them.” These exceptional

experiences also gave participants more than a change in perspective; they also involved different ways of understanding what is possible. For instance, Wolfe shared:

It was absolutely beautiful, I loved it, the vibe, the environment, and the people.

The amount of love was amazing. I didn't understand how drugs could be so bad when I was finding all of this love and light in them.

Direct experiences such as a NDE enabled participants to personally experience a realm of existence beyond the physical world. Delia pointed out that "it felt like being on a cloud. I was so light, so happy... I was like floating on a cloud." These intense experiences often led to feelings of taking off or leaving the body, losing track of space and/or time, or no longer being anchored in a simple location.

*No longer anchored in simple location.* Although the words often were difficult to find to explain what was happening, the participants' body language often told the story. I watched as participants replayed the movie of experience in their heads through their body language—for example, they raised their hands upwards as they described sensations of transcending the usual boundaries of the body, and when trying to describe their experience of space or time, their faces often expressed confusion. Time is bound in our consciousness; it is a construct of our memory and imagination (DeKorne, 2011). Tim described his experience: "I just wanted to keep going towards the light... I just felt like I had just started about four or five steps [not really sure]... how long I wasn't breathing, I don't know."

Participants often described a vast increase in their mental and visual perceptions. They had sensations of their consciousness expanding, which enabled them to perceive the more subtle aspects of their internal and external reality. For example, Sam shared:



I remember taking some psilocybin and closing my eyes and seeing some visions, and it was quite comfortable, and the trip started at around 5:00 or 6:00... although I'm not sure because time is quite hard to comprehend with some of these things.

The idea of being on an exploratory journey also was evident in participants' accounts of their NDE. For example, Marlow shared:

As I took these pills, I sat on the couch and as they kicked in, a vision began to show up for me as the room faded out. And after a while the vision became clear that the couch I was sitting on slid out from the wall... and the next awareness I had was in a hospital room, and my awareness was looking down at my body, and it felt like I was perceiving from about 15 feet or maybe 20 feet in the air... It was strange because there was a felt sense of proximity that was a lot closer than where I was perceiving from. It felt like I was a lot nearer to my body as it lay on the hospital bed. I watched doctors come and go. I watched the paddles being taken off... that was the first moment that I kind of had this awareness of seeing my body below me, and I saw people shuffling. It didn't really make sense to me. Not that it didn't make sense, there was no need to understand.

As these participant descriptions indicate, feelings of dissociation often involved a profound disconnection from time-space reality that was accompanied by a sense of floating free from their bodily reference point. Wolfe described something similar happening during his LSD experience:

I went up to the mountain on LSD and did yoga... I was able to go completely out of my body, and my spirit was out of my body, and I was flying in the clouds for 10 or 20 minutes... It was very powerful.

These exceptional experiences gave participants a sense of being outside of their normal body, either floating above it or being able to look down at the physical body as if it belonged to someone else. Dave described this sensation: “So the experience was very much like seeing myself from a neutral observing third party perspective.”

Out-of-body experiences often are part of NDEs and include the ability to view the body from above and recount in detail what is happening in the scene below. Delia and Tim both experienced NDEs, and both could recall leaving their bodies and returning to their bodies. For example, Delia shared:

She reached over me and hit a red button above my head... and that’s when I left... I remember looking down at myself from up in a corner. It was like there was a plate in the middle of my belly and a rope through it that was pulling me backwards up to the corner of the hospital room. It was to the right of the hospital bed in the corner, and I can remember looking down and thinking wow.

These experiences were characterized by feelings of vast expansion, but also included strong sensations of being disconnected from the sensory awareness of their physical body and environment. For instance, Tim shared:

I was dreaming, and the dream was taking place in the control room of the firehall... and from what I can remember, all of a sudden from out of nowhere this light appeared, and I could feel myself being dragged out of the... like out of the dream and out of the firehall.

Delia and Tim had similar experiences of returning to their bodies. They both described their experience as being a hard brute force impact back into their bodies. Delia shared:

When I got slammed back in, it was like such a hard hit to my chest, it was like oh, and I was back in my body, and I remember looking up to see what was going on in that corner.

Tim described a similar experience:

It felt like I had been dropped from about 3 feet on the bed, like kerplunk... then all of the pressures and everything that had ever bothered me all came back, and they came down and physically hit my chest... is what it felt like when it happened, that I hit the bed and all my feelings, all my concerns, and all my stresses and everything all came back and just came straight down on my chest like boom... I could feel it hit my chest.

The experience of not being anchored in a simple location had underlying qualities of being a witness observer or feelings of detachment and having a sense of the disembodied awareness that flooded consciousness, as is described in the next sub-theme.

***Dizzying stream of consciousness.*** This sub-theme includes participants' descriptions of receiving downloads of information that appeared to be telepathic transmissions of guidance and/or spiritual teachings. Participants often explained how their experience was like a shortcut to a higher reality that gave them access to a special way of knowing that often was just intuitively known or communicated telepathically. Participants described how answers to questions came before they even could be asked,

and they felt as if they had access to parts of their brains and inner wisdom not normally accessible. For example, Sam shared his insights:

Through this experience, we were connected to a part of our brains that was not normally operating... I remember just closing my eyes and seeing some visions and starting to wrap myself in a journey... and we were able to receive insights probably philosophically and even psychologically that were quite deep and meaningful to our spiritual development... I wouldn't say it was downloaded... that sounds almost a bit artificial to the experience. The experience was very natural feeling.

The NDEs gave participants the sense of crossing a threshold or in-between space, and having access to instant knowledge, which was accompanied by feelings of being guided while entering into a tunnel with a brilliant light at the end. Tim recalled:

All I can remember is telling them to stop worrying about it because it doesn't mean anything, and I was trying to explain to them that all of the hassles we had didn't mean anything... it was just a waste of time.

For Tim, this insight was a relief that brought him immense peace: "All of these pressures that we have or created and the arguments and the stresses, it just didn't mean anything. It was just forget them and go enjoy yourself."

Participants also recalled a sense of being in a different timestream and seeing the body from above, and meeting with spiritual beings. For example, Delia explained:

I remember hearing voices and thinking it was really kind of funny that I was hearing when I wasn't in my body... I'm hearing these voices and having a

conversation without words coming out of my mouth about what I wanted to do next.

Participants also described a heightened access to previously unimagined realms of reality that were very powerful and life-changing. Marlow described this sensation:

So as the LSD began to kick in... I felt like... throughout the night I brought each of my personas forward. Yeah, all my costumes, all my gigs, fucking everything, all of them, all of them, and watched them and watched this like happen, and watched them all just like... fucking disintegrate, just crumble and deconstruct over and over again... All of them.

Marlow's peak experience indicates the level of paradoxes he experienced. He had a sense of being whole while simultaneously overcoming the deconstruction of his body and mind. He had a sense of leaving ordinary reality and experiencing a transcendental reality in which his personal identity and ego disappeared, but he also felt as if he had expanded, and his being included the entire universe. These experiences of telepathic communication and downloading of information led participants to express many transpersonal aspects of their experiences as are reflected in the next theme.

### **Theme 3: A Sacramental View of Reality**

This theme had underlying tones of sacredness and awe that were connected to the spiritual dimension of life and consciousness. It was obvious that talking about the deeper aspects of their experiences evoked intense emotions in participants because they often were moved to tears while describing them. Participants realized that these exceptional experiences had changed their perceptions of existence and consciousness. They had awakened their consciousness and given them a glimpse of their eternal nature.

As these experiences offered them a new realization of the continuation of their consciousness, they began to consider the possibility of their existence after their physical demise.

*Infinite in its significance.* This sub-theme was connected to intense emotions such as euphoria, joy, and peace. I could feel the intensity of these experiences in the interplay of energy between myself and participants, which gave me a deep-felt sense of their experiences. This connection and interplay of energy between myself and participants required me to attune to the internal space of vibrational energy between us, which enabled the interview process to be naturally trans-created in a mutual space of subject/subject unity or in what Blackstone (2006) refers to as the *Transsubjective field*. In other words, this unified field of consciousness is ultimate reality, the common essence of our experience, which enabled an intense transfer of energy for both the participants and myself. Being connected, even if only momentarily, to participants' accounts of their brief glimpses into the infinite was truly inspiring, and it enabled me to get a deep-felt sense of their experiences. More importantly, I could feel the deeper meaning behind what it meant for participants to be able to see past their normally limited point of view to these sacramental views of reality.

The structure and nature of our language often was inadequate to describe the transcendental nature of participants' experiences. For example, Dave claimed:

The words just don't come to describe it... what I would say is probably the overwhelming characteristic... as that experience occurred... really finding a strong sense that what I thought was me was not me... a sense that I was in amongst something that was greater than myself, but not tangible enough to really

describe any of its characteristics other than just feeling something surrounding me... I had a very vivid image or sensation of being in the womb... I don't know if it was a memory of what I had done or a metaphorical rebirth, but this sense of a clean slate and starting over, that I was in a place where I was safe. Whatever I was feeling or experiencing was... it was going to be okay... and it was probably the most peaceful feeling that I've ever had in my life.

According to Grof (2010), Dave's experience of being in the womb is associated with fetal imagery containing insights of cosmic relevance. Dave's experiences of peace and tranquility, combined with his feelings of sacredness, represent the relationship between the mother and fetus and the ideal conditions of pregnancy, which symbolically offered him feelings of protection and safety for all of his needs (Grof, 2010).

These intense experiences evoked intense emotions and involved visions and insights that were as real as those encountered in normal waking states. Participants were later able to reflect on these experiences to discern their meaning and relevance. Marlow also was impacted by his experience of transcending the usual boundaries of his body and mind:

There's nothing to hold on to! Nothing... but the moment that I saw none of those things are me. I see that those things live and die all of the time and that all of the appearances have a beginning and an end. That everything is temporary and I can see my awareness is beyond my body and mind and that it's highly likely that it's eternal.

Psychedelic experiences enabled participants to deepen their perspectives about consciousness and their own unique existence. Sam described this profound effect: "This

is why it was more of a mystical experience... because the spirituality that this opened me up to, it connects you to a newer part of yourself.” Participants had a sense that these experiences opened them up to the mystery of their own mortality and how death connects us to all of life. Delia explained her encounter:

I don't know there's not even anything that can describe it... it was almost euphoric. The feeling of coming home and familiar and safe and ending struggles etc., with no indication of who or how I would feel that... there is a remembering of a kind of sadness at not leaving as well as gratitude for surviving... but the feeling of contentment, the feeling that everything's okay, everything is really light was the most profound feeling that I have ever had.

The combination of accepting that they did not have control over their own death and that they were grateful for the life they already had were key factors contributing to participants' deep feelings of peace. Tim also similarly recalled intense emotions that were nothing like he had ever felt before:

As I was talking to them, I was being pulled out of the firehall, and then I could see a path, and at the end was this bright light... and I was starting up this road or path... it was great. I mean absolutely great, just euphoria. It was like all that weight was gone, and I wasn't worried about anything. I just didn't care about anything, it was just lightness... it felt like I was kind of floating, I guess, and I had no weight whatsoever... it was the feeling of all the stress and the pressures and everything that had left me... it was like, it just felt as if you could take a big breath and say, “Oh boy that's good.” I haven't felt that good in years... to have



that feeling, I was enjoying it so much, it was such strong feeling of peace, it was just peaceful, and I didn't want to come back.

Participants often described their transformational experiences as a hero's journey (Grof, 2010; Schlitz, 2015), which began by leaving familiar ground (i.e., by way of a NDE or psychedelic experience); then, they were transformed through a series of extraordinary ordeals and returned fundamentally changed. Wolfe described a journey of awakening that resulted in a mystical experience that he did not have the words to explain how or why it had occurred:

Every year at Shambala, I would do acid, and at the very end of the festival, on the last day or night, something would happen to me, and I didn't understand it or how to explain it... I would lock eyes with someone that really drastically changed my life, or I would meet someone, or something would happen internally... no words for it... I figured out "everything." I understood everything... I understood my path... I just got a glimpse of it, and this time it was crystal clear... when I talk about my path, I mean the spiritual path that I was supposed to walk on.

These experiences of epiphany enabled participants to travel an experiential terrain that resulted in life-altering changes to their sense of personal identity, relationship to others, and how they saw their reality. Often, they described an encounter with energy or something more beyond our rational minds as depicted in the next sub-theme.

***Encounter with energy.*** Participants often described encounters with energy, which they referred to as something not normally perceived in our ordinary states of

consciousness, such as sensing a perpetual energetic movement that seemed to surround people and objects. In addition, they described an awareness of patterns not normally perceived, and an ability to reflect and understand the deeper meanings associated with objects and the contexts in which they were perceiving them (Metzner, 2017). For example, Marlow shared, “and around me appeared everyone I knew, and people I didn’t know... and they were in a circle around me... and the circle spun.”

Participants were forced to examine their deepest assumptions about what is real or true. Their experiences with some kind of energy also involved the feeling that they were communicating with somebody. Delia explained her encounter, “Realizing that there was a pull behind me, that there was sort of foggy images that looked like human form, but I can’t tell who these are or if they are... it was white more than gray... it was pretty foggy.”

This contact with energy made me think of being hit with a bolt of lightning that created transient moments of awakening or enlightening insight. Wolfe recalled:

I made eye contact with her, I saw her, and I gained all this energy... I had an inexplicable feeling, I was higher than I have been the entire festival, and I hadn’t done more drugs. I was pumped, I couldn’t understand where all this energy was coming from.

These encounters with energy often led to feelings of doubt and skepticism about what was real. For example, Johnny described his encounter with energy or incorporeal visitors as both real and also validated:

I started to see shadows or I call them shadow people... every time I would be looking around, I would think there was somebody there, there was somebody

watching me, and sometimes I would see more than one, like three or four... because I wasn't sure what I actually saw but there was something there... Yeah like entities or something in the room. I thought like maybe my mom or my sister or something, you know family members are coming to check on me... One time my dog she turned around and started barking even though nothing was there... and she was barking and barking like there was something there... and she had never done this before. It was kind of like there was people there you know.

Johnny's account of his experience raises an issue of epistemology, or how we know what we know. Moreover, his experiences with the shadow people shifted his worldview—he was opened to a new ontological view of his reality or personal understanding of what actually exists or what he considers real and meaningful for himself. Tim also shared a similar experience: “I got the impression vaguely in my mind that there was something beside me guiding me, but I have no idea what it was because I was so busy looking ahead.”

Becoming open to a perspective that included direct knowing and subjective experience enabled participants to shift their worldview, mainly opening them up to a world that lies beyond the physical and material. Sam similarly shared:

It was almost as if not a formed person or essence or God or anything like that, but I would almost describe it like a spirit of some sort was guiding us through an experience and telling us stories that enabled us to learn and enhance our spiritual development.

Although the transcendental nature of participants' experiences often was beyond words, it also was characterized by overwhelming feelings and internal shifts that they

revealed in their discussions about searching for a spiritual connection and answers to explain what had happened.

*Sparked my appetite for spiritual growth.* Such ineffable insights enabled participants to shift their perceptions of reality and to believe in a power or something more that was greater than themselves. Although they could not be sure what this power was, they had a certainty that their experiences were real and that something more than their egoic self existed. Participants also had a sense of connecting with *cosmic consciousness*, which is known by many different names, such as *Brahman*, *Buddha*, or *Tao*, amongst others, and many referred to this power as unity consciousness, energy, soul, spirit, or God. Moreover, participants shared that their experiences moved them to seek answers and reestablish the authentic connection with their inner selves that had been made during these experiences. For instance, Marlow shared his initial overwhelming feelings regarding his NDE, “It was something unprocessed... it turned into something that became a wound, something that became blocked or locked in my body because I didn’t have people around me to help me move that experience forward.” On the other hand, it also put him on a path of seeking knowledge and truth:

I have a sense of... it made me call bullshit about my religion... it planted seeds of something more mysterious than any of the religious or spiritual teachings that I ever understood or heard, up until that point... and it planted seeds of something experientially bigger than anything that I had any concept of or been given... I do recognize that I spent a handful of years around that time trying to find the keepers of knowledge, the people who had the keys... and people who appeared to have the answers to things.

These experiences over several decades have informed Marlow's self-understanding, and they have led him to shift his beliefs about the world. They challenged his worldview and led him to expand what he knew to be true about life, and the possible survival of his spirit or consciousness following bodily death. Although his NDE was traumatic at the time, integrating this exceptional experience into his personal meaning system expanded his sense of purpose and possibility. Wolfe also was deeply moved by his psychedelic experience, and he acknowledged that many things exist that we don't know but to which we could be open. He explained that in an instant, everything changed for him, even if he didn't know how or why:

It was a really profound moment and yeah that was it, I understood it as soon as I made eye contact with her... was the moment that it changed... I knew I was on my path, I knew how to stay on my path, I understood that my whole life I've been on this path and that I was finally here... there was no gray area, it was just the moment that I got it... once you connect to yourself, that's it, it's 100% life changing, and the next year has been the most amazing of my entire life.

Having a mystical experience while on psilocybin enabled Sam to experience what he described as a state of unity, or wholeness, or interconnectedness that radically shifted his view of reality. During his psilocybin trip, Sam realized that something profound had changed within. He explained his own search for fostering that connection:

Near the end of the trip on psilocybin, I had gone to talk with my friend and I had asked him if I could go to church with him tomorrow, something I'd never fathomed doing. Again, I wasn't very spiritual, I wasn't very religious... but I think that the reason I went to church is that I felt very spiritual and

transformative, and I just wanted to grow in that experience outside of the drugs and outside of talking to my friends, specifically about the trip. This felt like the best way to do it.

Trying to make sense of such exceptional experiences can be difficult when they fall outside the standard worldview of our dominant Western culture. The spiritual aspects of a psychedelic experience do not need to assume an orthodox religious form because they often can transcend all secular and archetypal symbolism (Grof, 2010). This type of spirituality focuses on participants' direct experiences, such as confronting the awe and wonder of nature or the mysteries of life and consciousness (Grof, 2010). Sam's spiritual feelings were ignited by his mystical experience, and he was searching for an external way to help him stay connected to his own divine nature and the sacred dimensions of reality he had just experienced. Tim also wanted to remain connected to the feelings of peace he had experienced during his NDE, and he went looking for answers to explain it:

Yeah it got me thinking about it after it happened... because all I had was a few minutes [maybe] and what would have happened when I reached that light, I have no idea... but as a result of it, I have come up with some theories and gone looking for answers to a lot of questions that I had in my head.

Tim's NDE moved him to find new information that would help him to refashion his understanding of life and death. Eventually, he found the idea that energy can never be destroyed, which helped him to make sense of his experience and the nature of death, thus beginning a transformation of his worldview. Delia's NDE opened her to profound spiritual insights that also influenced her to seek understanding. Delia recalled, "I

remember the process of figuring out what actually happened... and I've been doing work to figure it out... some aspects of it were a real eye-opener in that regard.”

Following his “nearing death experience,” Johnny began to explore the intricacies of his worldview and tried to find ways that would help make it more meaningful:

I was talking to a friend of mine, and I said, “Maybe I’m going to give church a whirl. I haven’t been to church since I was 7-years old”... I thought that maybe I would search for where I’m trying to go.

Mysterious powers or circumstances—allies for awakening—intervened in my study participants’ lives. In turn, these allies affected the set and setting that also played important roles in facilitating participants’ experiences of altered states of consciousness, which manifested through their exceptional experiences during a NDE or while using psychedelics. The next Part examines participants’ accounts of how they perceived these altered states of consciousness and the specific qualities that were most meaningful and illuminating.

## **Part 2: Illumination of the Experience**

Once participants had time to process what had happened during their experiences, they realized that these experiences had a greater depth. Part 2 has three main themes and examines participants’ accounts and perceptions of the various altered states of consciousness they encountered during a NDE and/or while using psychedelics. “Theme 1: The Meaning of It All” is comprised of some of the most meaningful insights and illuminations of these altered states of consciousness experiences. “Theme 2: Clear Away the Past and Enhance the Present” delves deeper into the insights gained. “Theme 3: Tapping Into the Energy of Now” examines the commonality of synchronicities and

the meaning of intuition and purpose for participants. Table 2 outlines these themes and their sub-themes.

Table 2

*Themes of Part 2: Illumination of the Experience*

<b>Part</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
2 Illumination Of the Experience	1 The Meaning of It All	Illumination of self
		Emergent ways of knowing
		We are all connected
		Trust what you receive
	2 Clear Away the Past and Enhance the Present	Overcoming fragmentation of the body and mind
		I'm okay just as I am
		It is what it is
		Synchronicity doesn't just happen
	3 Tapping Into the Energy of Now	Trust your intuitive nudges
		Ignite your passion and purpose

**Theme 1: The Meaning of It All**

Part 2 focuses on participants' overwhelming sense of transformation, which includes transformation of the self, transformation of personal identity, and transformation of a personal worldview. From the interviews, I had an impression that participants were forced to look deeply within themselves with an open mind and an honest curiosity to understand the nature of their exceptional experiences. In so doing, they opened themselves up to vulnerability, while, at the same time, learning that a greater power within themselves actually was doing the looking (Liquorman, 2012). Many participants realized that this inner self was something much larger than they had



ever imagined—it was bigger than their physical self or their ego. They claimed that these exceptional experiences forced them to look for the meaning and purpose of their experiences, which resulted in an awareness that existence is a field of possibilities and life is cyclical in nature. As participants learned to trust this higher power, they began to understand that it had played a significant role in their change of circumstances and beliefs about reality, thus propelling them in new directions or ways of thinking as described in the following sub-theme.

***Illumination of self.*** These experiences created a space in which participants were able to ask some very fundamental questions about themselves and their ideas regarding their reality, which ultimately led them to become aware of the delusions they had been living previously (Liquorman, 2012). Participants often described being able to see clearly for the first time, to see themselves and things in their lives differently. Wolfe succinctly claimed, “I don’t even remember who I was.” These experiences were akin to removing the blinders from the eyes, which illuminated the self and expanded their awareness. For example, Dave shared:

The experience was that a lot of the things that I had wrapped up in my own head around the circumstances of my life, certain anxiety and depression symptoms that I was feeling... it shifted them dramatically into a much different perspective. In these experiences, the preconceived and unconsciously held thoughts of who I am, or whatever it is I call “me” were dissolved or released.

A mystical encounter during an NDE often can be ignored, depending on a person’s circumstances and their environment. Marlow experienced his NDE during his youth and was initially afraid of it, and because he had no one to talk to about it, he was

unable to process it. Experiences like a NDE that transcend the physical senses can be perceived as unreal, which creates doubt and uncertainty for those who experience them. Honest reflection can bring insight to these experiences, which can transform our beliefs about our physical manifestation. Marlow expanded on this: “I was never able to process it [the NDE], and in saying that, it feels like that this experience is a continuation of a deeper embodiment of that awareness.” This kind of insight can turn a traumatic experience of a NDE into a gift. For example, Marlow claimed:

Having the awareness of not being strictly mind and body, that the awareness is beyond mind and body as well, that the mind-body is within and often a vehicle. But it continues to become a deeper embodied experience, whereas initially it felt almost like conceptualization.

These experiences enabled participants to glimpse a level of reality that was previously inaccessible, which expanded the lens of their perception of how they saw and understood themselves. I had a felt-sense that participants were no longer on auto-pilot and that these experiences enabled them to understand how they were previously disconnected from their true selves. For instance, Sam gained some deep insights into how he saw himself after his experience with psychedelics:

I think before this, I acted almost like a biological robot in a way where I would have these pleasures and urges and this desire to be happy, but the ways in which I achieved these felt very mechanical and orderly, and I wasn't able to make the connection or decipher the meanings behind the things that I was doing. After this trip on psilocybin, I gained a deeper appreciation for myself as a being, and just

how crazy it is for me to be on this earth and living and to be able to talk and interact and have emotions.

These experiences were portals to a fresh worldview that gave participants new ways of navigating the world around them, which enabled them to pay attention to the messages they had received during their experiences. Wolfe described the impact of his mystical experience and what it meant for him:

The last year I've spent figuring out what this... what my awakening meant and what it means for me, what I'm supposed to do with it because it's kind of like big power being on your path and knowing... I don't know, it changed my whole life.

More importantly, participants began to understand the impact of these awakening experiences, and as a result of examining them more closely, they sought new meaning and purpose within their lives. Delia shared:

I felt more empowered about my beliefs, that I was going to be alright and that on this human journey, all kinds of things are going to happen, and I had some power in it... I had some say in it.

As participants became more reflective, their assumptions about life changed as they looked deeply at themselves and their journey. For example, Johnny's "nearing death experience" forced him to look more deeply into his "stuck" places by looking at his beliefs to see if he could remove the blocks and expand his worldview:

Since the transplant, a lot of things have changed... I think since my transplant what has changed is my whole thinking about life... I believe there's more to it just than you know we're here and we hit the dirt... I believe that the entity as a whole is probably like you know transcends into another body.

Finding the deeper meaning in life and facing their mortality gave participants an ability to see life and death in a new light. Through their experiences, emergent ways of knowing also manifested for participants, which helped to expand their understanding of the illumination of these experiences, and thus, themselves.

***Emergent ways of knowing.*** Participants described a common characteristic of their experiences as the ability to tap into Jung's conception of the *collective unconscious*. Although this seemingly imaginal, and purely subjective realm, was only accessible through these altered states of consciousness, participants also felt it was ontologically real. These exceptional experiences enabled participants to speculate that consciousness extends beyond the body, since their encounters with these other realms were communications with some kind of energy. In addition, participants discussed access to intuitive ways of knowing and understanding, for example, Delia talked about having a conversation without words during her NDE and the transrational modes of knowing that she received:

That I actually had a choice and there was this incredible free will, and also an understanding of things that I can't really explain... things that I can't even put questions to... that connection, the answers coming to you, to questions that I couldn't even formulate.

These answers to questions gave participants information about the structure of the universe, which deepened their awareness that they needed to explore these transformative experiences to uncover the deeper meanings within them. Participants' lived experiences were mind-expanding, which led them to an awareness that reality is known from personal experience, thus igniting diverse ways of exploring these intuitive

insights and revelations as a means to help heal their fragmented lives. Marlow was deeply impacted by his experience, and he reflected on it with deep emotions:

What's really funny is that the answer comes through the experience... it's been awhile to understand this, and it still seems to unfold like a psychedelic experience. It's not just the peak experience where you have the most understanding and you get a big download of information; it seems like the download continued to unfold and the illuminations continue to happen and trickle out from that critical moment.

As Wolfe began to examine the messages that he received, he realized that he was beginning to internalize these new understandings about himself and his journey in positive ways. Wolfe explained, "Everything just clicked during that moment and during those 2 hours... everything went like check, check, check... my whole life... I figured it out." Paying attention to these transformative experiences was key for participants' understanding of the deep epiphanies that they were receiving from these expanded states. Sam described his access to knowledge and what he gleaned from it:

A psilocybin trip is as if your being taken on a journey, so the journey is very natural... and I had gone through almost a storytelling experience... and this was the trip where I really started to understand what philosophy was about, and I was really understanding the importance of spiritual development... before that I had been a very unspiritual person... I don't think I would have been able to see it with 20 years of philosophical knowledge wrapped up in books. I do quite believe that this either had been told to me by someone or some spirit, or that I had gained access to a new part of my brain.

An understanding of their relationship with the seen and unseen realms of existence gave participants new possibilities for living a life filled with meaning. During his NDE, Tim recalled just intuitively knowing information and telling others “to stop worrying because it doesn’t mean anything, and I was trying to explain to them that all of the hassles we had didn’t mean anything... it was just a waste of time.” This message came from a different realm of existence, and it offered Tim a new way of being and seeing his current reality. These emergent ways of knowing led to many deep and powerful insights, including the notion of *interconnectedness*.

***We are all connected.*** Participants often described a heightened sense of connectedness with the unifying source of all that is. This awareness went beyond conceptualization because it came from a direct experience of another dimension of reality, which enabled participants to *feel* that connection. This concept of *connectedness* was true for participants, since their overwhelming felt-sense of understanding it was clearly expressed to me through the emotions beneath their words as they described what it meant to them. For example, Sam described overwhelming feelings of connectedness to all that is while walking the quiet streets of Nepal during a solo acid trip:

I felt safe that there was no one else around to just walk up and down the streets of Nepal and look at the abject poverty... and kind of surround myself in the nature of the city, and I saw nature right within the city in all its complexities. It was quite cool. I think the mystical experience occurred because I was able to dive into a particular topic, which was the experience of *me* and how I affected society... as I was walking through, I felt very connected to the society, even

though I hadn't been born into it, I felt very connected to Nepal... it was powerful.

As participants became more conscious of this awareness, they awakened to the realization of their connection with all of existence. Delia shared, "Everything is okay and that everything is connected and there is a plan. And you have free will, and you can make choices within this plan." By accepting this newfound truth about her life, Delia gained more awareness, which enabled her to more fully live her current life with a newfound purpose. The trauma of her NDE had shifted into a positive experience that gave her a broader sense of what is possible beyond her physical embodiment.

Wolfe believed that this new sense of connection enabled him to slow down and pay attention to what was happening for others within his environment. Wolfe claimed, "When you walk around and you don't rush, you start running into souls and people that need your help in that moment." His experience enabled him to see how being rushed and not taking the time to truly connect with others could shape the energy of what was happening around him. He shared, "I would start noticing that, and see my life change and how the energies in my life would change by taking that time in that moment to make that connection."

Mystical states of consciousness cause shifts in perception of reality, which enable a deeper understanding of how existence is part of an interconnected whole that knows no boundaries. Dave also was struck by the interconnectedness of all things:

We have a tree in our backyard that got diseased, and we had to take it out... we cut the tree down and got the tree stump dug out, and now there's these suckers growing everywhere. So I was sitting one day and I was watching these suckers,

and I don't know but it just clicked for me that when these suckers grow out of the ground, they look like self-contained individual plants... they're not because if you look underneath the surface they are all connected to the same root-structure; they're just different manifestations of that tree trying to grow or experience itself again.

Dave's experience enabled him to see his reality in a different light. By looking at nature and trees more clearly, Dave could fully appreciate and understand the interconnectedness of everything and everyone, including himself. Participants' openness to this perspective of interconnectedness came from their direct subjective experiences, which enabled them to sense the importance of being connected to all that is. Marlow also was significantly impacted by the concepts of *interconnectedness* and *no separation*:

In this moment, to be able to come back to the freedoms that arise out of that embodied knowing, that awareness of being beyond my body... the awareness of knowing the interconnectedness of the part that is Marlow and the part of the whole, and that there is no separation between the part that is Marlow and the part that is the whole... it's so strange seeing the interconnectedness of each moment, and it really has... all of this has been a culmination of helping me find that freedom of seeing the interconnectedness of each moment, and it's not always there but just trusting it.

Participants' personal experience of interconnectedness during these exceptional experiences led them to express trust in what they had received, thus validating their experiences in powerful ways.



*Trust what you receive.* By listening to participants' accounts of their inner spiritual experiences, I was able to help them make sense of these experiences. Due to the transcendental nature of these experiences, participants often felt that they were dismissed or that they needed their experiences to be validated in some way. For example, Marlow explained his feelings regarding his NDE: "I quickly found out that because of my youth... because it was related to a drug overdose... it felt like I was dismissed." Marlow further described similar feelings with respect to his psychedelic experiences:

The majority of my psychedelic experiences were fairly similar where there was a lot of dismissal by others and society, and so myself dismissing my experiences... and so... it really took a long time until I learned to trust myself, it took a long time to trust my experience.

By reflecting on these direct experiences, Marlow began to trust them:

I am describing in a general way how these peak experiences got validated and also how the near death experience was central to it all, the core of showing me... the inevitable was available to me in each moment, and trusting that the inevitable was inseparable from each moment.

By trusting in the process, participants began to trust themselves. For example, Sam talked about trusting the most vivid sense of confidence that he took away from his LSD experience:

The LSD experience gave me a lot of confidence and that confidence has stuck around until today where I felt very sure of myself and above my earthly form in which I was able to be very content with what was happening.

This appreciation for self was strengthened by the deep feelings that Sam encountered, and he claimed that “the emotions that came up felt incredibly natural, more natural than they had ever been.”

By trusting the messages they had received, participants were able to make subtle and dramatic changes in their lives. For example, Wolfe described trusting what he was supposed to do next in his life and how he had no doubt: “I knew in that moment I also found out, I also realized that I was supposed to move to the Kootenays, the Kootenays had been calling me my whole life.” Wolfe believed that his mystical encounter enabled him to see clearly the direction that he was supposed to go: “I ended up moving to the mainland with Sprout, we’re roommates now and I live with my best friend, this person [from the festival] who has woken me up somehow.” The recognition of their interconnectedness gave participants a larger framework to see themselves as part of the whole of existence.

Often, it took time and self-reflection for the meaning of these experiences to reveal themselves. Delia remembered questioning why it was that she didn’t know who or what the white fog was that she encountered during her first NDE:

I’d been doing work to figure out who that was... why it was that I wasn’t able to get a clear picture or that absolute knowing that when we cross, we can still make connections and that sort of thing in between worlds type of thing. Why wasn’t I given more information then? The answer that was given to me at the time is it would have freaked you out so bad... so you got what you needed at the time, and later in my life I got those answers.

Delia also expressed doubt regarding her second NDE experience and how she came to understand and trust it; albeit different from her first experience, it still had significance and meaning. During her second NDE experience, Delia suffered from carbon monoxide poisoning, and she was unaware of what had happened or where she was for 7 days. She shared:

He just kept saying to me, yeah you can't be alive... but the blood test showed that my oxygen was down and that my cells, my oxygen had been replaced, the little things in your cells that contain oxygen had been replaced by carbon monoxide... but to come back and not know what happened for 7 days... where the hell were you?

Delia recalled going into the house on the first day and having a weird conversation with herself—that it was okay to die. She explained:

I remember coming in the first day, and I remember the conversation in my head about yeah you can check out, now wouldn't be a bad time, everything is in order, and it wouldn't be too hard on anybody. And the next thing is I'm dying, or I died, or I'm dead, and went well scientifically you can't have lived through it. You have no proof that you didn't or you did, but in my mind, I was like okay I remember things from before, and I don't remember seeing the light... I just remember being gone for 7 days, and it was like in my mind, it was like when you install a new program on your computer, okay and you have to reboot everything.

Delia's deep-felt sense that her experience was real enabled her to trust what had happened even though it was impossible to validate:

And then the doctor later... you know how when they can't give you an answer to something, and you know that they're having a hard time, and part of him doesn't believe you and part of him is like here's the evidence... so I know that something really big happened with my brain in that 7 days... trusting it if you will.

Participants' experience with death or facing their own mortality was profoundly transformative for them. Johnny explained that after getting cancer and having a transplant, he learned to trust the energy and feelings he was experiencing. While at a round-up meeting, Johnny recalled how he trusted his feelings of connection with others:

We made eye contact, and it was a guy and that didn't matter... and we really actually connected... like he sensed or I could sense that he could sense something... like he was trying to see through me or something... yeah I felt so connected to it. It was amazing actually.

Trusting their experiences and what they meant gave participants clarity about the nature of their past, which in turn enhanced their understanding of their present circumstances as is depicted in the next theme.

## **Theme 2: Clear Away the Past and Enhance the Present**

This theme was powerful for participants, since it enabled them to understand the true nature of their being. As a counsellor and researcher who is approaching this study from a transpersonal perspective, I found that participants were describing this experience as a dismantling of their current identities. Once they encountered these mystical states of consciousness, they were able to ask themselves important questions regarding their sense of identity—mainly, who or what dies? These exceptional experiences gave

participants the ability to move from the exoteric to the esoteric (Schlitz, 2015). Due to their first-hand experiences with these altered states, participants could recognize the flimsiness of their identities. It was if they understood the separation that had occurred during their ego development, and how acting as a separate entity had caused them so much suffering and pain. Connecting to the essence of who they truly were during these altered states experiences brought about dramatic and life-altering changes.

*Overcoming fragmentation of the body and mind.* In light of these experiences, participants questioned whether they were the authors of their thoughts, feelings, or actions. They began to ask important questions—mainly, whether their ego was actually in charge or was there something more to their true selves. They described this sub-theme experience as a dismantling of their beliefs about the true nature of their identities. They gained powerful insights into themselves, which enabled them to pierce the illusion of what they believed their identities to be. Dave was particularly impacted:

The idea or sensation that my experiences are not the things that define who I am.

There are things that happen around me and to me, but they are not integral to the definition of who I am... and that distance of them being a kind of external thing.

Dave believed that his psilocybin experience gave him the clarity to see who he really was, and on reflection, he realized that this experience gave him the space to recognize that the components of his identity (i.e., religious affiliation) did not define who he was, nor did they survive death. He shared:

They [the components of his identity] are not fundamentally altering or affecting the mechanisms of my character, or my value, or my worth, and I can make decisions that might have been felt harder or impossible before... but it's possible

to make those and not diminish who I am as a person... that those things are not me, those things are being experienced by a person who identifies with being me, but it is not me, so there is no need to personalize them... to have them as integrated pieces of my character.

Dave was able to reconcile all of the parts of himself that he attributed to his belief regarding the whole of his identity. He realized that central to his authentic self was this new perspective that his true self was part of the universe and that his identity was not the individual pieces that he once believed was the whole of his identity. Marlow also gained similar insights from his NDE and from using psychedelics:

Initially, it felt almost as if just conceptualization—like a change of concept of the duality of the body—was smashed apart... because the experience has really shown me that who I think is Marlow is only a convenient bunch of memories that I offer up... that the false self falls away from the identities slowly, slowly after that vertical moment... but often, the embodiment might take years... but the awareness can be [snaps fingers] split second.

Marlow had recognized that many aspects of his identity were transient and ever-changing. He claimed: “This near-death and psychedelics have really shown me the flimsiness of identity, that who I am, there is very little there.” Being free from the constraints of his former beliefs regarding his identity and who he truly was enabled Marlow to reflect some more:

I was such a victim until my awareness, it’s just so funny, really was outside of my mind-body... it gave me freedom... that I’m not my mind or body... and it’s such an embodied knowing that I can return to this as comfort.

With these insights, Marlow's worldview slowly shifted to a deeper awareness of his authentic self, which in turn gave him immense comfort and peace.

Sam's encounter with these mystical states of consciousness gave him the ability to see the patterns within his own behaviour more clearly, and thus recognize his false selves. He described the integration of his various psychedelic experiences and the insights he had gained:

I think before, I was very guilty of what most people are guilty for—thinking about the past a little too much, feeling guilty for certain things and events... and then guilt can drive you into laziness, which can create even more guilt and create a negative feedback loop for months or weeks at a time that we can get ourselves stuck in.

I sensed that these experiences gave Sam a real sense of familiarity with his own being, which resulted in a transformation of his previous beliefs. He explained:

I think I was stuck in an age between 0–16 of ego disillusionment, in which my ego was just the primary accessor in everything that I was doing, and I see that come back quite a bit just because that's how our brains are programmed.

With this new insight, Sam recognized the distinction between his body, mind, and soul, and how his mental ego got in the way of connecting to his authentic self.

Wolfe's mystical experience gave him a felt-sense of immediate clarity, which in turn enabled him to experience a connection to his true self, as if, for the first time, he was seeing clearly who he really was. Wolfe described the many positive changes that came about because of his mystical experience:

It's almost like seeing into the future. You gain magical abilities as far as your previous self knew... it falls totally in place... the most obvious one is physical appearance. I haven't tried to lose weight or diet and workout more, [but] I literally quit drinking, and then I thought, oh I think I'm addicted to sugar, so I quit sugar. So, as I said, the most obvious is probably what you see, but the biggest change was mentally... we notice a change because we experience it.

An expanding sense of self and a recognition of who they really were helped the participants to connect to a larger and more transcendent reality. Tim's ideas also changed: "So now my thoughts go well this spirit or whatever that leaves the body is not what we think it is, it's just energy." With this insight, Tim found the meaning and purpose of his NDE, which gave him peaceful feelings regarding death and his own mortality.

Johnny came to value his true self and the difficult work that he needed to do to gain this awareness: "And realizing... that we mold ourselves into something, and we stay in that mold... and in my opinion, I've actually walked away from that mold... and that, I don't think, it's not easy to do." Johnny realized that he had been holding on to negative judgments about himself because he had not lived up to the strict criteria that his ego had created. He also realized that by comparing himself to some unrealistic ideal, he was not able to live authentically. Although this expansion of awareness still required work, I sensed that Johnny had gained some self-compassion for how far he had grown. He explained, "I've left where it's safe to be, and now it's scary and awkward... it's a lot of things actually, but it's also exciting." I believe these insights gave Johnny a real acceptance of his true self, flaws and all, and it sparked his enthusiasm for where his life



would take him next. Participants described how this new understanding not only aided them in processing their experiences, but also gave them a felt sense that they were enough just as they were.

*I'm okay just as I am.* As participants slowly processed and integrated their altered states experiences, they described a similar striking quality manifesting in their lives—the sense that they were okay just as they were. Wolfe simply said, “This is me, and I’m awesome.” Participants’ acceptance of themselves and their life circumstances helped to dissolve any fixed identities that may have limited them in the past. For example, Johnny claimed, “I just feel way more at ease with myself and everything that’s happening; what’s happening is happening.”

Due to the significant impact of his psychedelic experience, Dave also expressed a similar shift in his worldview:

It impacted like relationships with my family, with my spouse, with my children. All these things were impacted... and being able to separate, here’s who or what I am, from here’s the experiences that I’m having, and being able to have that perspective gave me the space after the experience was over to look at them a little bit more objectively and say... Oh I didn’t consider it that before, maybe these things aren’t quite as big of a deal as I thought they were.

This experience enabled Dave to gain more insights about himself, and invited an open-minded curiosity about his previous beliefs, which was evident in his new perspective:

Or I can see a little better where the source of these feelings are coming from and then [they can] help me to address the source of these problems, not just trying to

treat the symptoms themselves, which is what I had been doing for years... it freed up a huge chunk of my brain and emotional capacity afterwards.

With this self-reflection, Dave shifted some of his previously held ideas, such as his personal beliefs about how he processed his emotions, and how he dealt with his problems.

Delia's encounters with two NDEs gave her a new perspective and awareness regarding death and her own mortality, which, in turn, motivated her to reprioritize her life goals and gain an expanded sense of self-worth. Delia shared, "It gave me more confidence in my beliefs that I was going to be okay... and in my mental capacities if you will." Marlow came to appreciate the depth of his human experience, which opened a doorway into his own transformation: "Seeing through this vertical through each moment that all of my journey has just been this interconnected play... delightful and how can I apply this in an external way where I... there's nothing fucking wrong!" These insights opened the door to participants' gaining a new understanding of themselves and others.

Sam's personal encounter with a world beyond the physical led him down a path of self-transformation that has shaped his worldview in positive ways. He was deeply impacted by his experience and used a metaphor to explain his change of perspective:

I feel like psilocybin has, and to put it visually because it's a hard thing to describe... I see myself as a cloud and when you look up at the sky, you don't see a cloud and say, "Oh look that cloud doesn't look quite right. That cloud looks flawed." It's a cloud... it's perfect as a piece of nature, and I see myself like that.

Sam was able to see that he was a part of the whole of existence and that he was okay just as he was. These feelings of being enough or okay also were augmented by

descriptions of acceptance with things as they are in this moment as discussed in the next sub-theme.

*It is what it is.* These peak experiences gave participants a sense that life on earth is impermanent, which allowed them to simply be present and value living in the now. With this insight came a real acceptance of “it is what it is,” which permitted a new understanding of themselves and their reality. As they encountered these mystical states of consciousness, participants learned of a world beyond the physical and the material. The insights gained from seeing beyond the physical world played a powerful role in how they viewed their lives, including death and what might lie beyond. By accepting the truth about death, participants were able to live their lives with a new purpose. For example, Johnny’s “nearing death experience” enabled him to appreciate what constitutes a meaningful and significant life. He claimed, “So what’s happened has happened... and there’s no saying that it can’t be rectified in the future, but right now this is where it’s at.” Gaining an appreciation for now and accepting where he was in life was central to Johnny’s transformation.

Delia’s experience of a reality beyond her sense of self and ego helped her to reformulate her worldview and let go of emotional baggage that no longer served her. She shared, “Being able to let go of a whole bunch of stuff that wasn’t mine... it makes no difference.” Dave was struck by the clarity that he gleaned from his noetic experience and how this continued to illuminate his sense of self and being in the world. He recalled:

Coming out of that experience, there was such a stark sense of clarity, really overwhelmingly of the things that I had so wrapped myself up in just didn’t

matter... there was stuff that was resolved... there was a space between me and them that didn't exist before.

Due to this important insight, Dave changed his way of thinking, which in turn gave him a new perspective about how to deal with new things that came up. He recalled:

Whereas you know, stuff is right here in front of your face that's really hard to deal with, but just getting that "little bit of distance" made me realize that maybe things aren't necessarily as bad as I made them out to be, or they are manageable in a way in which I now feel like I have more of a toolset to deal with.

This new understanding and toolset gave Dave the feeling that none of these things mattered. He became aware that his behaviours did not affect his self-worth: "It's not that it has any inherent worth one way or another, it simply is. Being aware of 'what is' without necessarily ascribing meaning to it."

Wolfe's mystical experience transformed his personal beliefs about himself, which in turn led to significant healing regarding his perspective about what it means to be fully *him*. He shared how his understanding of his own being had changed dramatically:

Even things like... I had this dark demon on my back and in my head. I will give you an example. I'm super comfortable with my sexuality now. I'm bisexual, kind of pansexual actually, and I always thought this was some kind of dark side of me, and this was like I just sort of have to deal with this on my own... you know what I mean? It's this thing or this monster that I'm going to have to deal with, and once this experience happened even this corrected itself. It was just like acceptance—well I'm cool with whatever I want to do. Like literally, everything

in my life—physical, mental, any issue I was really having—corrected itself... it is what it is.

This profound sense of acceptance was key in helping Wolfe transform his views about all of the parts that made up the whole of his being. Marlow's self-reflection about his altered states experiences enabled him to explore his own deeper truths and find new paths of meaning. He shared how his insights have enabled him to accept things as they are:

And letting somehow the awareness awaken the body on a cellular level.

Somehow the awareness and expansion of understanding that, maybe not an understanding of the conceptual way, but out of this participation of all of each moment. The fullness of each moment, where there's no fight, there's nothing wrong.

As participants began to accept things internally, they also noticed energy surrounding them. With this awareness came feelings of being truly connected to their authentic self, which they described as having a deeper connection to their inner wisdom and intuition. This connection manifested with an increase in coincidences or synchronicities that occurred during their experiences or continued afterwards, which is examined in the next theme.

### **Theme 3: Tapping Into the Energy of Now**

This theme had undertones that strongly suggested that hidden forces exist within the universe that seem to operate free from our concepts of space-time causality, and that these forces also seemed to symbolically mirror participants' subjective experiences (Metzner, 2017). This finding was furthered supported by participants' accounts of being

able to tap into a universal flow of energy and trusting the intuitive nudges or signs that they had been given. They also began to realize that they could not control many factors in their lives, and surrendering to this insight led them to accepting a perspective of “going with the flow in this moment.”

*Synchronicity doesn't just happen.* Many of the participants expressed a belief in powerful hidden forces that appeared to influence the unfolding of events within their lives. Participants shared meaningful coincidences that caused them to pay attention and focus on the influential circumstances happening around them. For instance, Delia shared, “But in this chaos if you will, all kinds of other interesting people showed up around me. I flipped a switch, and I opened up to find out more... all kinds of interesting people with stories and interesting experiences and invitations.” Being open to the signs and messages that were appearing gave participants the opportunity to pursue new behaviours that supported learning and growth within their lives. Delia shared, “I started to find books about things... I would meet other people interested in metaphysical things... at the same time, people would show up, and they have never stopped showing up.”

By paying attention to these synchronicities, participants were able to observe their current worldview and gain a deeper appreciation of how it had influenced their idea of reality. Marlow shared:

Sometimes there's no understanding where I see people come through just the periphery orbit or almost come in, and it's like I bump into that person almost every time I'm travelling around here and there in Southern Alberta, and I don't

know them... seeing enough of the synchronicities so much in a day where it's not even synchronicity, it's just fucking this.

Marlow realized that the synchronicities in his life were so common that he felt that they really weren't synchronicities. This realization helped him to appreciate that what was happening was supposed to happen, and that it was out of his control.

Wolfe described two mind-blowing coincidences that played a huge role in his life and enabled him to see that these things were meant to happen. He shared, "Yes those coincidences, they are synchronicities that's what I like to call them, and you'll see them all over the place if you really stop and pay attention." Wolfe was referring to the following story: "I'm just driving, I don't need to rush, and as I slowed down, boom right there was a hitchhiker. I wouldn't have seen her if I did not slow down and miss that light." It seemed that the universe was orchestrating his need to meet someone, although this wouldn't be clear until later. Wolfe continued, "I picked her up, we traded names, and I gave her a stone and dropped her off and told her about Shambala." This incident made Wolfe realize that paying attention to his thoughts caused him to slow down, and he was able to help someone in need. The second random coincidence occurred almost a year later. He explained, "Actually, this year at Shambala I lost my friend and guess who shows up? I was like no friends, who am I going to hang out with now, and boom there she is [the hitchhiker]." Wolfe believed that both of these incidents happened for a reason, mainly that he was supposed to pick up this person, so they could reconnect later. Since then, they have become friends, and I had a sense that Wolfe understood that these seemingly random events happened because he was supposed to meet this person, since she has taught him many meaningful lessons about his life.

These synchronicities coincided with the participants' own deep-felt sense of being connected, and trusting their own intuition and the direction in which they were being guided.

*Trust your intuitive nudges.* Along with these instances of coincidences and meaningful circumstances, one of the most meaningful impacts of participants' altered states experiences was the trust they gained in their intuition. These intuitive feelings often coincided with the circumstances that brought them about. For example, if circumstance presented a new person or idea in a participant's life, then they claimed that they listened to what their intuition told them. Marlow reflected on an encounter from his NDE that continued to appear in his present day experience, and how he knew intuitively that he needed to pay attention to it:

It's so trippy that each moment informs that, each moment has informed that vertical moment that I became aware of as a 12-year old boy. Ram Das was even in that circle of people pointing at me, and I still feel hokey even saying his name because he's not my favorite, but for some reason, he keeps showing up, and showing up, and showing up.

I had a felt-sense that although Marlow wasn't sure why Ram Das kept showing up in his life in different ways, it was because he needed to look deeper into the reasons why Ram Das obviously had something to teach him. Delia's connection to her inner wisdom and intuition were powerful in shaping her transformation. Over time, her worldview slowly changed as she learned to listen and trust what she was receiving. She explained that she was significantly impacted and connected to her intuition after her first NDE:



Intuition-wise, it cranked up; it cranked it up to an incredible degree... yeah, I already had intuition to a fair level, but the confidence in it and the belief in it, and understanding how it worked. I can amp it up, or I can turn it down and that was real, and I kept getting proof over and over again.

Delia's confidence in her own abilities and trust in her intuition were significant to how she moved forward in her life. After experiencing a second NDE several years later, which was very different and initially caused her to doubt the experience, she recalled:

Okay, in that one [a second NDE], my intuition and all of that sensitivity skyrocketed. If I thought I had gained ground from the first experience and all of the learning and all of the other experiences, and all of the practice I had... this one was unbelievable.

By listening to the guidance of her own wisdom, Delia completely changed the direction of her life. It was obvious that having faith in her own intuition was very meaningful for her. Paying attention to intuition and coincidences led participants to trust in their purpose, which in turn ignited their passion.

***Ignite your passion and purpose.*** As their identity project was stripped away and their concept of being a false-self was revealed, a sense of enlightenment appeared for many of the participants. Their growing trust and faith in their own being and intuition inevitably led them to an experience of openness and a space for new ideas to filter in. An important component of these experiences was having a new sense of purpose and passion in their lives. For example, Sam shared:

After this trip on psilocybin, I just felt more connected to the world. I didn't feel as much of a biological robot sifting through it until I died. I felt as if I had a meaning and a purpose behind the things that I was doing and that was really uplifting and inspiring.

Sam had begun to realize the role of his ego in his life and experiences, which gave him a broader understanding of himself, his life, and that he was on the right track. Marlow's understanding of his life purpose also was also significant to him. He realized that, "I really want to go work hospice, I do. I want to go hold the hands of beings and just be present with them." Delia was able to use the memory of her second NDE to transform her sense of embodiment and her understanding of what was true for her:

I've had a lot of experiences with my intuition, and I've done a lot of courses to enhance that and work on it, but it's like okay, here's your radio and here's how you tune it and here's how you turn it up or turn it down... it was something much bigger... there was a reason, I'm here for a reason, I'm the match for a reason... Figuring out how to tap into that voice that I had for myself that I always had. I've been doing readings for people with or without cards and that just stepped up, and it just kept getting bolder and stronger, and bolder and stronger.

Delia's understanding of her purpose and her appreciation of the gift that she had been given by her two NDEs were instrumental in transforming her beliefs about reality, which shifted her worldview in profound ways. She used this newfound trust to quit her job, and she began to read for people on a full-time basis.

As indicated in the participants' statements, the illumination of the NDEs and the psychedelic experiences were powerful, and they shared many common elements. Once participants had some time to process their altered states experiences into their lives, it became clear to them that these experiences had given them many lessons and gifts. The next Part examines the participants' powerful transformations as a result of the many lessons and gifts of these exceptional experiences, and how they integrated them within their lives.

### **Part 3: The Gifts and Lessons Learned**

By focusing on 10 themes, this section examines the subsequent transformational effects brought about by participants' exceptional altered states experiences, especially as these transformations relate to the fear of death. "Theme 1: We Are Here to Learn Lessons" explores the participants' understanding that these experiences brought meaningful lessons to their lives. "Theme 2: Moving Towards Wholeness" examines how these lessons impacted participants as they began to process their experiences. "Theme 3: Missing the Point" expands on the ideas brought forward in some of the lessons learned. "Theme 4: Living Lessons Learned" describes the most meaningful lessons and gifts that participants received from their experiences. "Theme 5: Service to Others" elucidates how the participants are acting on the lessons and gifts they have learned. "Theme 6: Transformation of Death" discusses how the fear of death transformed for participants, and how this transformation has impacted their lives. "Theme 7: Encounter With Ultimate Reality" explores the process of transcendence generated by these exceptional experiences. "Theme 8: Medicine for the Soul" examines participants' thoughts regarding psychedelics as tools for spiritual growth. "Theme 9: Positive After-effects" describes

how participants' perceptions have remain altered. Last, "Theme 10: Sharing the Vision" discusses how participants could share with others the information or knowledge they gained from their exceptional experiences.

Table 3

*Themes of Part 3: The Gifts and Lessons Learned*

<b>Part</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
The Gifts and Lessons Learned	1 We Are Here to Learn Lessons	Universe supports expansion and growth Evolution of consciousness Lessons are eternal
	2 Moving Towards Wholeness	Living in the now Integration of body, mind, and soul Radical shifts in being
	3 Missing the Point	The writing is on the wall There is more to this
	4 Living Lessons Learned	The virtues of life Real world applications Looking in the mirror
	5 Service to Others	Leading by example Reaching our full potential
	6 Transformation of Death	Death is nothing to fear Death is transition Death of self
	7 Encounter with Ultimate Reality	Transformation of self Transpersonal realm surrounds us
	8 Medicine for the Soul	Mystical intervention Responsible use
	9 Positive After-effects	Appreciation for life Awareness is key
	10 Sharing the Vision	Opening the doors Passing the gifts

### **Theme 1: We Are Here to Learn Lessons**

Hermeneutic phenomenology posits that we listen to participants' accounts in such a way that we are able to carry forward the underlying meanings of their words. This theme brought about deep feelings of familiarity within my own being and lived experience, thus connecting me to my participants and our common humanity (Todres & Galvin, 2008). My bodily felt-sense of the recognition that life continues to bring lessons that we need to learn resonated deeply within me when participants described this awareness very clearly or even in roundabout ways. Furthermore, for the majority of participants, these "coincidences" or lessons were truly the basis for their healing, growth, and transformation. This theme had undercurrents of the expansion of consciousness, healing, and continuation as depicted in the following sub-themes.

*Universe supports expansion and growth.* These exceptional experiences awakened participants to expansive energy shifts within their consciousness. It was as if they had entered a doorway to a world of great curiosity, wonder, and fulfillment. On a deeper level, participants' experiences with the altered states of consciousness encountered during a NDE or while using LSD or psilocybin gave them a sense that they had tapped into information about reality they had not known previously or that they had learned important lessons that contributed immensely to their personal growth. Participants explained how this expansion gave them new insights and a deeper awareness, which enabled them to see the bigger picture of their lives. This expansion gave them a wider perspective on the small issues that previously they had obsessed about, and so they were able to seek the things that truly inspired them. For example, Delia recalled meeting a woman by chance who mentored her for about 5 years. She

shared, “She was teaching me how to get in touch with guides for example, the voice that I have heard my entire life from the time I was a little kid.” Delia’s NDEs helped her to find her purpose in this life, and she was able to use them as a learning process to tap into her gifts and then blossom going forward.

Preparation for his own death transformed Johnny’s life. Taking the time to explore what really mattered to him and what really made his life worth living became extremely important after his brush with death, especially in regards to his attitude about trying new things and having no regrets. He shared:

I was asked a little while ago to participate in a tai-chi class for cancer survivors, and so I went. I wasn’t going to, but then I thought about it and said I can do that, and it’s one of the best things I’ve ever done.

Johnny’s new courage to try things that he would not have considered before his cancer diagnosis helped him to gain a wider perspective on life, which ultimately turned out to be a gift that enabled him to live a fuller and more satisfying life. I could feel the gratitude and appreciation coming from his words when he shared, “It’s [tai-chi] really grounding actually, and I feel it.”

Moreover, participants’ experience with psychedelics seemed to trigger an inner radar of knowing about what needed to be healed. Wolfe was significantly impacted by his LSD trip: “I learned so many life lessons so quickly and intensely from that moment. This last year, I’ve been more uh... gained more knowledge and learned more lessons about me than I have in my entire life.” Wolfe’s experiences fall into the majority of those reported in the literature regarding set and setting, in that the inner psyche knows what needs to be healed and that people most often get what they need, not what they

want or expect (Metzner, 2015). I felt that Wolfe had a real sense of trust that everything was happening as it should because consciously or unconsciously he had created this learning experience.

This idea that the inner psyche heals what needs to be healed was very evident in Marlow's recalling of his LSD trip. He was very emotional when recounting his experience, and also very humbled by what he had learned:

I had some unfinished business with my buddy. He had stayed with me for a while, a couple of months, and we had an agreement of rent, and he paid like a couple of hundred bucks the first month, and the bare minimum of costs was at least \$600 per month... it felt like... there was no contribution.

Psychedelics are a known amplifier, so having these feelings at the time made Marlow feel as if his friend's actions were holding him back from his experience and that he needed to deal with his feelings about him. He felt as if:

I just didn't want this to be there, and you know I didn't want to judge him... or any of the million things that my mind wanted to go to, even like justifications, like it's okay, you don't owe me anything, like I needed to find some closure.

The mind can take over and get stuck on something, especially when on psychedelics, so Marlow pushed the issue further:

So it... seemed like all the stars aligned for that set and setting to occur. And here I was able to bring it forward and tell him how hurt I felt, how I felt angry and betrayed, and blah, blah, blah.

It was if his inner psyche was trying to teach him about the stories that our minds create, and how we hold on to them, and the damage they can cause us because once

Marlow shared his feelings with his friend, he immediately realized: “And you know once that was expressed, I saw how meaningless it was... It was several thousand dollars right? But at the same time fucking nothing! It’s gone!” Marlow realized the importance of relationships and that love is more important: “I love him, he’s like my brother and who gives a fuck! Pay it forward or don’t you know?” His experience gave him the profound lesson that the mind is both a beautiful thing and a dangerous thing:

But you know the hooks just kept coming, so I had the perfect moment, and he got really hurt for just a moment, and it was so nice to have my stance fall apart, my position fall apart, have nothing to... no leg to stand on from my position of—I think you did this.

He was able to transcend and rise above: “There was no I there... and there was nothing wrong.” This experience gave Marlow the opportunity to understand his own past hurts:

But to see him buy into that story was so fucking heartbreaking for me, for him to feel like a little boy, and it was hard for me too to be that little angry boy that was mad and felt owed because I knew I was just the 13-year old that felt slighted over something you know!

More importantly, this experience helped Marlow to heal, “To see that hurt little boy was such a mirror to me.” Seeing himself in his friend was a huge catalyst for healing that enabled Marlow to recognize his own compassion, empathy, and forgiveness: “Here was a grown man that I loved like a brother, a friend... my heart was going out to this little boy... and he said that’s love.” This powerful experience gave Marlow the ability to see through new eyes and have a new perspective:



It was humbling to watch all that just crumble and disintegrate and just be... because it seems like the awareness that I gained from this becomes available when I'm with others... just through being with them without expectations, without labels, without judging them, without needing to know the history of them or any other thing in relation to them, letting them be completely free in this moment.

By having this LSD experience, Marlow was able to transform his view of his self and how he related to others. He was able to let go of his expectations and judgments not only of his self, but also of others, and just "be," which is a strong indicator of a true expansion of his consciousness and personal growth.

Sam also had several intense experiences with psychedelics that were the catalysts for profound growth within his self, which resulted in the expansion of his consciousness and beliefs about himself. He recalled that his psychedelic experiences enabled him to look at creative ways of doing things and to be more gentle with himself. He shared, "There's less mistakes that I'm able to identify as myself or my doing, and if there is a mistake, I can see it as a way of improvement rather than just a way to look down at myself." These experiences gave Sam a real acceptance of who he is in the moment, including any mistakes or frictions he encounters, and how these are parts of the learning process and how he is okay with them. He shared, "I mean no day is perfect, but I've become much farther than I was before."

Delia was doing some personal work and learning hypnosis to heal things on a cellular level. During one of her workshops, she recalled having a powerful experience when she was asked to go back to a time where she... [you] were your fittest, your

strongest, and your healthiest, and it was not in this body, it was in another time and another body. This experience turned out to be a valuable lesson for her:

The experience was pretty profound, and it pushed me even further into reading the Michael Newton stuff about the process occurring between lives. So I wouldn't have been able to tolerate that had I not had that experience with carbon monoxide and being gone that long... I wouldn't have coped with that at all if I hadn't had those other experiences [NDEs] happen.

Delia's NDEs were novel ways of knowing her reality that transcended logic and reason, which caused her to explore new possibilities and experiences, for example, learning how to do hypnosis. These exceptional experiences began to shape the slow restructuring of her worldview, as she explained:

Whether it's real or whether it's something that the brain creates to get us through it, I can't say for sure. There's no way I can find that individual from that primitive time to verify that it actually was, and so that's problematic. Because you want the validation, you want the truth right? But the experience was so profound... it was the same kind of thing. I had answers to questions that I couldn't formulate... so now it was okay, now I have to learn a whole lot more about a whole bunch of things because people are going to have all kinds of weird experiences, and I got to be able to sit on their rock with them and have an understanding of it.

Delia's experiences with her own mortality helped her to make many life enhancing choices that ultimately led to new experiences and the expansion of her own consciousness, her own personal growth. This sub-theme had undercurrents that the

mistakes and failures the participants encountered were of great worth and offered them opportunities for growth. This great expansion opened participants to a new level of vision that helped to create the inner peace and wisdom that they needed to appreciate one of the life's greatest lessons—the importance of listening to the wisdom and guidance of our own inner self or soul. This experience of expansion was accompanied by feelings of self-compassion and forgiveness, which seemed to remind participants that we all are one and the same, thus leading to healing and growth. The idea that the universe supports our expansion and growth is closely intertwined with the next sub-theme—the evolution of consciousness. However, after moving back and forth between the participants' narratives, it felt more natural to keep these sub-themes—the universe supports expansion and growth, and the evolution of consciousness—separate, even though they are closely related.

*Evolution of consciousness.* According to Almaas (2001), the *soul* is an actual ontological presence that learns and acts throughout one's life. When participants talked about their connection to their *higher selves*, *souls*, and *consciousness*, they used these words interchangeably. This sub-theme describes how participants understood their experiences as both catalysts and amplifiers of their normally limited perception during everyday waking consciousness. Thus, these experiences enabled them to expand their range and clarity of perception, and thus consciousness itself, which in turn led to an understanding that their consciousness was always evolving and changing, and moving them forward to new modes of being. The greatest lesson participants learned from these experiences was not to resist the natural unfolding and expansion of consciousness. Much like the natural flow of a river, participants realized that there would be times when the

movement of consciousness slows, rushes, or pounds against the rocks. Learning to flow with the current, and not against it, was an important lesson of the evolution of consciousness.

Marlow reflected on both of his experiences (with a NDE and using psychedelics) as a means of expanding his consciousness and personal journey that led to furthering his self-discovery and inner self. He shared, “So you know through all of this, I mean in my childhood, my behaviour and the drugs that led to the near-death experience would have been described as uhm, problematic.” It was if his early death awareness gave him an early indication about how to live his life with meaning and purpose, even if he appeared to be going down the wrong path. He explained:

You know somebody who... ah is a troubled child, and it seems as if you were to follow that child it would look like I was a troubled child... and it would look like that I used substances abusively, illegal substances to cope with poor mental health, but really that poor mental health was spiritual emergence all along.

According to William James (2014), although our normal waking consciousness appears to filter and stop us from seeing what is beyond, certain circumstances exist that enable us to see what lies behind the veil or curtain. Through his psychedelic experiences, Marlow appeared to have had a glimpse beyond this veil, as he explained:

And that even the substance use was spiritual emergence and even with the substance use and the altered states of the substance abuse were vertical moments of awareness running through where I would appear as having higher selves coming through and been giving downloads of information in moments of being abbreviated.

Marlow's experience of these mystical states of consciousness expanded his range of consciousness, which gave him a curious sense of authority of knowing that what he had learned was true for him:

That was my journey and that those troubles that the child had were cultivating a deeper awareness of and understanding, cultivating a deeper understanding and compassion through things that initially took the form of dualities like racism, sexism, homophobia... and through my experiences both psychedelically and in relation to the near-death experience, I mean these constructs and labels would be destroyed... first it would seem like they would build and develop into a pattern of identity, but then they would be slowly destroyed.

For Marlow, both of these exceptional experiences (with a NDE and using psychedelics) contributed immensely to the evolution of his consciousness, particularly with respect to how he views his identity now. Through these experiences, he was able to recognize his resistance or how his river flow was pounding against the boulders, which gave him access to an inner wisdom that released him from his negative thoughts about his situation, and enabled him to grow and learn from it.

The idea that psychedelic plants are here to help us to become more ecologically aware and evolve our consciousness is supported by the psychedelic community (Brown, 2015). According to mycologist Paul Stamets, scientific evidence exists that psilocybin-containing mushrooms tend to grow in areas that have been disturbed by natural disasters, such as landslides, or in areas where humans have done a lot of clear cutting (Brown, 2015). Interestingly, in a similar way, Dave talked about the expansion of his consciousness and how he believed it was related to his psilocybin experience:

I read somewhere that there's an argument to be made that psilocybin spores are biologically modifying us [humanity] to spread themselves, like a parasitic relationship... that these experiences are causing us to help them grow and thrive in nature more... and that sort of stuck in my brain as one of those things that maybe be happening to help humanity... if maybe that's what's happening, then that's what's happening, and I don't really mind so much because if there's a good beneficial correlational relationship along the way and that's what's helping people, then I'm happy to have been co-opted for biology.

Participants innately understood that their experiences influenced their learning and growth. Their personal experience ultimately led them to an understanding that their expansion of consciousness was moving them towards spiritual growth and a deeper understanding of themselves. The next sub-theme examines the participants' understanding that the lessons we need to learn in a normal life cycle of being human also continue after that cycle ends.

***Lessons are eternal.*** Prominent throughout the participants' accounts was their awareness of a self-identifiable consciousness that continues after physical death and evolves. This idea became clear as participants described their belief that they were here to learn lessons and that these lessons continued not just during this lifetime but over many future lifetimes. For example, Johnny claimed, "Because you know the lessons we learn, if we didn't get them the first time, we will have to come back and learn these lessons again." They shared a felt-sense that we take on a human incarnation that enables us to continue our evolutionary progress in this physical time-space dimension of living, which supports the ongoing unfolding of our consciousness. Wolfe also shared something

very similar: “I figured out the last lesson this summer, and the last lesson is, there is no fucking last lesson. That’s life because it keeps going.” Delia said similar things about the connections she made between her NDEs and the lessons we learn in each lifetime:

The absolute knowledge that you know you’re going to do the best in each life, and there’s going to be stuff left over from previous lives that can kick your ass. But you’re going to learn from them, you’re going to continue to work to be a better person, and it was absolute, absolute knowledge that I was here for a purpose to make a difference in the world.

Delia’s NDEs enabled her to confront her existential issues and thus find new sources of meaning and purpose in her life. This inner knowing and belief that she was here for a reason led to a huge inner shift within her own being, which gave her a sense of peace and contentment.

Marlow also was significantly impacted by his awareness that the lessons we are here to learn are eternal. He was emotional when he shared: “Psychedelics showed me to allow myself to be taught, and to teach those around me, and to be a good student, and to be a good teacher, and to take the time to do that, even if it takes lifetimes, lifetimes.”

Through these experiences, Marlow became a more reflective human being:

I think that’s the journey of my life is that I never got through my addiction with treatment, I never learned my lessons through prison. It just reached a point where I hit rock bottom, and I got so tired of it, and I’d seen myself doing it enough times.

More importantly, Marlow understood that these lessons would continue in his next life if he did not learn them this time around:

And actually this is psychedelic, I could see myself doing it for eternity, for a lifetime, for multiple lifetimes. I could see this whether it was cigarette smoking... I had seen it enough times of this movement... I could see it for lifetimes.

Participants were moved by the concept of being here to learn lessons and even more so by the idea that we continue to reincarnate to learn the lessons that we did not grasp. Furthermore, these experiential experiences also helped to solidify their beliefs that consciousness could continue after physical death. These lessons helped participants to understand their mystical consciousness experiences and their movement towards wholeness.

### **Theme 2: Moving Towards Wholeness**

This theme definitely was influenced by my personal theoretical framework. My bias as a transpersonal counsellor is that I believe that at our core, we are body, mind, soul, and spirit and that we are guided intuitively to move towards wholeness, a process of integration that evolves the totality of our being (Metzner, 2017). I believe that we shape our consciousness and its subsequent evolution by growing and developing it while we are in the physical world. Our essential nature, which is spirit, develops towards wholeness when we recognize its presence, and when we live with an awareness of our true nature (Cortright, 1997). By learning to let go of our attachment to the material world, including our idea that we are only body and mind/ego, we learn the truth about our true essence and realize our own timeless nondual existence in relation to the whole of existence (Wilber, 2000).



As I listened to participants' accounts of these exceptional experiences, I could sense their movement towards an integration of their separate identities as they took the time to process and make sense of these experiences. I believe that somewhere deep down, perhaps even at an unconscious level, they felt that it was time to be genuinely happy and that they wanted a life worth living or more importantly, a life with meaning.

*Living in the now.* As we move towards wholeness, it is possible to experience mystical states of consciousness as described in participants' accounts. Importantly, participants' descriptions of experiences of unity and wholeness had been described previously as feelings of intense joy, euphoria, or inner peace. This concept of unity and wholeness unfolded in this sub-theme as participants discussed their ability to hold onto their feelings of stillness without being sidetracked by intrusive thoughts or perceptions in the present moment. This ability led to internal shifts that participants described as an awareness of being beyond the ego-mind and having feelings of being present-centered that included feelings of appreciation for the present moment. For instance, Wolfe explained how he connected with yoga: "So I got into yoga that year and because I was going through this awakening spiritually, I got very, very connected to it as well." I had a sense that Wolfe appreciated the connection to his true self while doing yoga, and more importantly, this opportunity to be still and quiet his mind enabled him to carry that feeling with him as he continued with his day.

When Johnny realized that he might die, he was forced to be in the present moment because he realized that he might not have much of a future. He succinctly explained: "Well we have a saying in the program, 'one day at a time,' and you know ironically, this is a massive statement. It's not really understood right? You say it, live

this but....” This statement really took on new meaning and weight for Johnny after his diagnosis with cancer and while he was waiting for a liver transplant. He began to appreciate the beauty of each moment: “You realize that’s all we really have, is right now.”

During his peak experience, Dave came into contact with his true essence because for a brief moment, he was able to drop the sense of his ego and all of the things that came with it. This experience had a huge impact on him as he recalled:

I think there’s a lot of stress and anxiety that was omnipresent in my head that isn’t there anymore, and I’m more mindful and present in the things that I’m doing. Definitely, I find it easier to you know focus on my breathing, or if I’m sitting and playing cards with my kids, I’m definitely more present in the moment and enjoying what’s happening right now, and it’s easier to do without getting distracted... it would be just a generally calmer sense if anything.

By releasing old thought patterns, Dave let go of things that he once felt extremely attached to, which enabled him to be more aware of new opportunities and experiences that appeared in his life. By choosing to let go, his life unfolded and grew to new heights and depths as he learned to trust in himself and the natural unfolding of the present moment. This experience enabled him to appreciate simply being present where he is in the moment, which connected him to his true self and the important people around him.

Marlow also came to a realization that by living in the moment, he was embracing his authentic self. He recalled, “I don’t think it’s made me better or helping anybody out of one given spot. It’s made me more comfortable with staying present and allowing

others to be there, which helps them to find freedom themselves.” By being true to his authentic self and staying in the moment, he was able to connect authentically with others around him. These feelings of presence and living in the now naturally flow into the next sub-theme.

*Integration of body, mind, and soul.* This sub-theme had underlying currents of healing and wellness as participants slowly began to integrate all of the pieces of themselves (body, mind, soul, and spirit) that they were beginning to recognize. Both the NDEs and psychedelic experiences were powerful catalysts for the participants to become more aware and to see more clearly how all their puzzle pieces were meant to fit together in harmony. Sam simply said, “All of them together [all his psychedelic experiences], I think I see myself with purpose that wouldn’t have been there otherwise.”

Wolfe also realized that the integration of his body, mind, and soul just fell into place. All of a sudden, he was making choices for his greater good, and he innately knew what to do, and he did it:

I take care of my physical body better, it just clicked, literally everything in my life clicked... it was not just oh where I’m supposed to be; it’s like oh I get it... the way I treat jobs, the way I treat other people in my life. A year ago, you would not recognize me. Not only physically, but you would not recognize who I was... I am just different. It’s crazy what I noticed because I’ve been fixed mentally... so I guess getting in touch with myself, I also got in touch with karma in a way.

I had the sense that Wolfe was truly connected to the idea of karma and what it meant for him. Although he could not see all of the connections of his past actions, he

innately understood how his immediate physical and mental actions connected him to his karma right here and now.

Marlow's NDE and psychedelic experiences enabled him to understand that life after death is a loss of identity because when you step out of physical reality, all physical reality ceases, since space-time is an illusion, and you're no longer a part of it. Marlow shared:

I put too much emphasis on the mind or too much emphasis on the body, but it's now that I've been able to see the falseness of the parts, those old parts of my mind-body that were dead and falling off. I can see what isn't truly the identity of Marlow and through seeing what truly isn't the identity of Marlow, because I don't know if we can ever truly see what is... but we can see what isn't and through peeling off what isn't has allowed me to get into this alignment of mind, body, and spirit, and see mind, body, and spirit as temples.

In a single day, we can experience the birth and death of all sorts of things, such as the birth and death of inspiration, hope, or frustration. All sorts of beginnings and endings with things and situations can occur. When you die physically, you cease to be physical in all of those manifestations. Marlow found that his awareness of relinquishing his identity was very powerful:

You begin to think that the mind is an enemy, but it was only to a place where these psychedelic experiences showed me that... it's just to get them in alignment. It's just to break up the old patterns and the old identifications so that once you see that your mind, body, and spirit are a temple for the self to know the whole of awareness.

For Marlow, both of these experiences (NDE and psychedelic experiences) were positive, and they helped him to gain a broader sense of what might be possible beyond his embodiment and to integrate all of his parts: “It’s only been the last handful, I don’t know, little while or past few months that I’ve felt like mind, body, and spirit were alignable.”

Participants realized that the rhythms and cycles of nature also were the rhythms and cycles of their body, mind, and spirit. Everyone experiences these continuous cycles and rhythms throughout their day and lifetime. By having altered states experiences, participants were able to understand how each cycle moved through them, but more importantly, they learned to accept and honor wherever they were at any given moment as they moved towards integrating their body, mind, and spirit. This integration of body, mind, and spirit led to radical shifts in participants’ being both internally and externally as discussed in the next sub-theme.

***Radical shifts in being.*** These experiences left lasting impressions on participants, especially with respect to shifting their current worldviews and personal understanding of their own human development and the mysteries of their own inner self or spirit. After facing his own mortality, Johnny was able resolve some of his issues, which led him to new understanding, growth, and well-being. He explained what his “nearing death experience” meant to him:

Then you ask yourself some hard questions about have I kind of done the things that I would like to do, you know the real big question, have I done any good? So trying not to take too much for granted and just set a good example for everybody

else out there that this happens to—to eat right, exercise, and take care of yourself, just try to think better and be better.

I got a sense that it was important for Johnny to lead by example, so he could inspire hope for those around him who were going through the same thing. Johnny's appreciation for his life inspired him to take positive action not only in his own life, but also to empower others around him.

Marlow talked about how his exceptional experiences shifted his current paradigm into one that enabled him to see the perfection in the interplay of parts and whole, of which he is an integral part:

I came to this world with nothing, and I'll leave with nothing. I'm behind mind and body... that whenever I feel the squeeze, it's just here is the part that is Marlow interacting with another part that is the whole... there's a perfection within that.

He realized that his beliefs were based on his experiences, and he has come to believe that there is nothing between him and these parts because he is connected and that all things are interconnected. He felt as if he is a part of the deepest level of creation, which is indivisible.

This feeling included time because time is an illusion. He explained, "I found taking a bit of time and noticing that interval between moments between a question and a response." Through having a NDE and psychedelic experiences, Marlow became more in tune with his self, and by noticing what was happening within his body and being aware of his mind and emotions, he became aligned with his true self and true reactions:

That by ensuring that alignment is occurring by dropping oneself into one's awareness and taking a look at what's going on within the mind, within the emotions, within the body, and being able to observe the mind, the emotions and the body and see what rises or falls, or see if something is coming in to be known.

In the light of these powerful insights, Marlow made radical shifts in his behaviour and changed his way of being in the world. By becoming more in-tune with his own needs and acting on them, he was able to determine whether he was using positive or negative energy with others. He explained, "It's helped me to avoid old patterns and so taking a moment to answer someone's question, taking a space."

Sometimes we make a decision from a place of inspiration because we feel it will bring us happiness, but then we discard it because we let negative or fearful thoughts change it. Sam talked about how his LSD trip brought about some profound changes in the way he saw himself:

I was always a very confident kid. I always felt attractive, good in sports, good in school when I applied myself, and I didn't have anything to fear in that aspect.

But I guess I've felt a little unsure of myself in my own body, and I've always felt limited just as far as my age and my experiences. I guess I just always felt as if there were some things that I would never be able to do.

Before taking LSD, Sam had not considered that his fear and negative thoughts might be the perfect advisor to make him aware of situations that could be harming him or possibly blocking him from personal fulfillment. After his LSD experience, he realized:

Then after my first experience with LSD, I felt that I was the only one limiting myself and that I could quite literally wake up tomorrow and do anything with my life. I felt that I could apply myself to anything or any situation, and do whatever I wanted.

Sam's realization that his fear was irrational was not only profound, but also life-altering because it was the power he needed to transform his life—he realized that he could *choose* to change his situation. Those momentary glimpses of being beyond his ego empowered him to truly see the limitless possibilities before him.

I had a strong impression that participants understood that when they got caught up in their mind and egos, they moved further away from their true essence or living in the moment, and they also understood how their personal suffering contributed to their personal growth and healing. For example, Dave simply said, “this experience has allowed me to refocus, re-center, and meditate.” These internal changes led to many external changes in how participants began to view the world around them.

### **Theme 3: Missing the Point**

The clarity and insights gained from their altered states experiences enabled participants to begin to focus on what was important and meaningful in their lives. This missing the point theme has underlying currents of freedom, liberation, and truth because participants began to have faith and trust in what their NDE and psychedelic experiences had shown them. More importantly, they began to realize that if they were having feelings, thoughts, or experiences that were not bringing them love, joy, or peace, they were responsible for changing or accepting them.



*The writing is on the wall.* As participants discussed how their priorities had changed after their altered states experiences, I had the felt-sense that after they connected with their inner self or soul, they had begun to appreciate what was truly meaningful in their lives. The energy of love, the fundamental energy and substance of the universe, came through in this sub-theme. As participants reflected on their experiences, I felt their being, their “isness,” their conscious awareness, fully awake and alive, in an authentic state of presence. Wolfe succinctly said, “Throughout my life, I thought you’d find happiness by getting the external things, and it’s not.” I had the sense that he no longer felt trapped, stressed, or worried about the material aspects of life because he was able to feel his emotions fully, which enabled him to make new choices and explore fresh ideas and perspectives.

Delia expressed that after her two NDEs, she was able to connect with her unconscious voice or inner wisdom, and trust what she was hearing, which brought her much joy. She shared what was most meaningful for her: “Being able to connect with others, rather than it being in the shadows, being able to have a conversation like you and I are having a conversation.”

Johnny realized an important truth that separates illusion from reality. This freedom came from finding how he really wanted to live his reality. He explained, “And then you reach a certain age that what you are striving for really isn’t life, you’re just striving for material gains or status or something, and you kind of miss the point.” Johnny had realized that the truth can be uncomfortable because it cuts through denial—“Like before you know it was like I’m going to get the big house, get the money, you know have the car and all that... and we’re going to retire, I’m going to go travelling, and all

these things”—but the truth can also save you from further disillusionment and pain in the future. Johnny’s “nearing death experience” made him realize his truth, and so he reprioritized what was important in his life:

All that stuff is off the table for me. You know it doesn’t mean much to me anymore. I’m just more concerned with trying to be a better person, trying to be more giving or caring, and just a better person than I was before.

As Johnny faced these difficulties, he experienced clarity and growth.

Furthermore, he felt he had more freedom to live his life the way he really believed it should be, and now he shares his life with other people who truly appreciate the beauty of life.

Marlow experienced freedom in his truth that all of life is a blessing or an opportunity for transformation. He explained how his experiences led him to an embodied knowing and recognition of freedom. I sensed that he was able to go back to this feeling of freedom because innately he understood and recognized that it was always there, was always within his own being. He explained further, “Yeah and so even in a simple way like financially, but really having financial freedom, finding freedom beyond materialism.” He was not burdened by his circumstances, and he accepted himself, but more importantly, he allowed himself to experience freedom, and he gave others their freedom. He shared, “And finding freedom beyond the requirements of another in a relationship or a self-other relationship, that it can be touched and let go, and yet still be this profound appreciation within each moment for unconditional love and reciprocity.” Being filled with such ease and joy gave Marlow an opportunity to experience the light-

filled freedom that his inner self or soul intended, and also attracted other light-filled souls to him.

Participants increasing clarity about what was important to them naturally led to a feeling that “there is more to this.”

*There is more to this.* As participants discussed their experiences, I could sense that many of them felt that they might not have had some of their insights without their altered states experiences or that it would have taken them much longer to come to their expanded awareness. These experiences helped them to see that there was something more to life beyond their rational minds and that they were gaining a deeper understanding of what this could be. The idea that something more existed beyond their everyday waking consciousness became a real possibility because they had subjectively experienced such a reality. In our normal waking consciousness, we usually aren't aware of the possibility that something may exist beyond our physical-material world, but these altered states experiences enabled participants to consider that a world of non-ordinary reality exists beyond the physical and material, which expanded their perspective to include trusting their direct knowing and subjective experience. For instance, Wolfe explored his feelings and thoughts regarding his spiritual awakening, “I've connected to my higher self, and I'm trusting who I really am—the physical, the mental have all been integrated into one whole.” Wolfe's peak experience enabled him to find authenticity, and more importantly, it helped him to live his truth. He asked, “How did it do it? It's such a good question because there's nothing in science that describes this. There's nothing, there's no proof of anything that we can ever describe.” Although proof of his actual experience is lacking, proof exists for the effects of his experience. Living

authentically is saying what you really think, doing what your heart truly feels called to do, and expressing how you truly feel, all with respect and kindness—and Wolfe clearly demonstrated all of these characteristics. He shared, “But as I said, we notice a change because we experience it. How does it do it? I have no fucking idea, but I know that it wouldn’t have happened for me without LSD.” From this perspective, his experience of a mystical state of consciousness is considered valid and real because of the insights he embodied after the experience, even though this experience transcended any easy explanation.

Johnny’s “nearing death experience” changed his worldview and how he saw things—he realized that life was no longer about working and trying to get ahead: “The point is just being alive itself and doing the things that make you feel good about being you and what you do and who you are and then being defined by that.” Also, being more of his true self allowed others to know the *real* Johnny.

Tim experienced several spontaneous encounters with the departed after his NDE. He was not expecting them to happen, nor was he longing for this to happen; however, these experiences also helped to change his perspective that there was something more to life beyond our rational minds. He explained what occurred during the first encounter:

There’s spirit or something, like when my wife passed away in 2006, she came back. I was downstairs here watching TV, and my cats were down there. My back was to the stairs, coming down into the basement, and I sensed somebody coming down those steps, but I never turned around to look.

The energy shifted during our interview, and I could feel the emotional depth and clear detail of what he was describing, which left little doubt that what he had experienced was real:

And I felt it go by me and then stop on my left hand side. And the two cats stood right up like a groundhog will stand on its back feet... with their eyes as round as saucers staring right past me to my left... it was energy or spirit or whatever we're going to call it... yeah they saw it!

It was obvious that this encounter was very meaningful for Tim and that the memory had only become more vivid and precious over time. He shared:

They were looking right past me to the left of me and right behind me. And that's where I felt this, whatever it was, there. I turned around to look and there was nothing there, but I figured I wouldn't be able to see it anyways.

Intuitively, Tim knew that it was his wife, which brought him immense comfort that she would visit him and to have his cats validate this extraordinary experience for him. Tim was deeply moved by this experience, and on another occasion, he recalled being in the basement and also sensing energy:

My brother-in-law passed away, and he was a heavy smoker of pipes. I was sitting here on my computer, and all of a sudden, that smell of his tobacco just about knocked me off the chair, and I called out his name and said "Where are you, I can smell your tobacco?"... It was very strong and lasted for about 10 seconds and then it was gone. It was as if he had just lit his pipe standing right beside me.

These two encounters with the departed, energy, or spirit happened after Tim had experienced his NDE, and they significantly impacted him, leaving him with a deeper

understanding that there was something more to his life than just the physical world. He shared his thoughts:

The one thing that I really picked up on from those experiences were the two cats. They saw that, you know? To see the reaction of those two cats, and they saw it! There was nothing there, but they saw something. They were looking right at it, they were looking right past me. So that says there's substance somewhere. I don't know why they can see it and we can't, but I felt it.

After these experiences and his NDE, Tim realized a new way of knowing his reality that transcended logic and reason. He recognized that there was more to this life than he previously had believed.

Marlow's glimpse beyond the veil during his NDE and psychedelic use gave him a sense that higher realms of consciousness exist:

I guess the psychedelics and the near-death and these altered states helped me understand them [his ASCs] with awareness, and it's not like getting them conceptually. I don't ever think or I don't know if I'll ever understand what the fuck's happening here.

These altered states enabled him to subjectively experience other dimensions of reality that offered him experiential learning about the nature of his reality. He explained, "I can see some of the laws play out of dualities, masculine-feminine, cause and effect, and this and that. But I think that there's just a lot of laws we don't understand." These peak experiences showed him that he could tap into these higher dimensions to learn about his nature and reality:

That's the one thing that psychedelics have shown me—that there's these higher laws that we can fucking tap into, like when I don't take someone name-calling me personally. When I let the person with hurt feelings' name-calling die, and all of a sudden, I've transcended that.

More importantly, he was able to absorb what he learned from these higher dimensions because his innate understanding of them showed up in his experience. He said, "Yeah, like here I'm in the world not of the world or I'm free of the binds that rule our world."

Participants' experiences of something more beyond their rational minds gave them a deeper understanding of a greater power or inner wisdom that was working within their lives. As this understanding grew, they talked about incorporating the many lessons they had learned into their lives so to integrate these new insights in a meaningful way as discussed in the next theme.

#### **Theme 4: Living Lessons Learned**

These exceptional experiences enabled participants to move from extrinsic goals, such as attaining success, to intrinsic values, such as compassion and service to others (Schlitz, 2015). According to Nasr (1989), *life* is the process whereby human beings shape their own souls through all their works, character traits, sacred knowledge, and virtues cultivated while living in a physical time-space reality. Nasr (1989) has suggested that: "Virtues are our way of participating in truth" (p. 312). As participants slowly began to integrate their experiences into their lives, it was evident that they had learned many lessons. As they talked about what was happening in their hearts and minds, they began to truly understand their strengths and weaknesses, and what they needed to do to live a

life true to their soul's purpose. They discussed in length how their values had shifted and what this meant to them, not only with respect to learning these lessons and integrating them into their lives, but also how important it was to do the work that would enable them to live these lessons in their lives in a meaningful way. The key components of this theme—living lessons learned—were values, archetypes, doing the work, and leading by example.

*The virtues of life.* My felt-sense of the participants' narratives was that an internal shift was happening that was connecting them to their true authentic self, which then shifted their values outwards towards others. This move from a *me* to *we* was key in building loving relationships that gave participants a sense of fulfillment and purpose (Schlitz, 2015). They became motivated by an awareness of their purpose, such as service to others, which was a catalyst for further transformations of the self to occur. They also described a real sense of their values shifting and a new awareness of the virtues of life. Many different feelings and emotions came through the participants' narratives as they described what it meant for them to be living the lessons they had learned from their NDEs or psychedelic experiences. For instance, I believe that Dave revealed courage when he discussed how his psilocybin experience helped him to immensely deal with some of the residual feelings he had with leaving the religion he had grown up with:

I know that my experience was such a huge boost in moving me forward in my recovery process, so I participate on Reddit, on support groups for people who are leaving this particular religion... which is a group of people who are kind of in my circumstances, where they have left this religion and share how these particular experiences [ psychedelics] and I share how mine have helped to



reframe my sense of identity after really having your sense of identity crumble down to nothing.

I got the sense that Dave's peak experience was so moving that it shattered his sense of who he believed he was, and thus motivated him to share this experience with others to see if it could help them in any way. This action, a true reflection of who Dave really is, was aligned with his new sense of values and lifestyle.

*Values* are personally held beliefs or qualities that are important to us, and they help to guide our behaviours and decisions. However, as a result of our life experiences, our values can change, and we may discard or add values based on our experiences. Sam recalled a story during his time at university when he was using psilocybin and hanging out with a girl that he liked at the time. She was not using psilocybin, but she had been drinking. They had been hanging out together when suddenly she was not feeling well. He was very moved by his experience, and he learned a powerful lesson that continues to impact him today:

I felt that I never loved someone as much as I loved her, and it could have been through her suffering, or it could have been just pure love. But before, I thought to be an illusion, I found love to be a very real thing, which kind of took me aback... I'm very grateful for that experience to have happened.

This powerful experience helped Sam to understand that the positive and negative are closely related. Through his experience of witnessing his friend suffer, he was able to understand unconditional love, a truly profound lesson and virtue to learn.

After their altered states experiences, Tim and Johnny both experienced much more patience and inner-calmness. Tim no longer sweats the small stuff: "I don't get as

excited anymore... because prior to that, I would probably fret and worry more about something for a whole long time.” I had the sense that Tim is less anxious and no longer needs to control a specific outcome—he is more apt to trust what is happening. Johnny similarly recalled, “Before, a lot of stuff I would get upset, and I don’t get upset anymore about stuff that used to rattle my head pretty good.” Now, Johnny is able to let things just naturally unfold and see where they take him. As he becomes more in tune with his own needs and desires, he naturally experiences less stress and suffering.

Wolfe discovered what hope and going with the flow of life meant. He shared what he had learned:

Everything in my life led up to that moment I connected with Sprout while I was on LSD, and I understood everything, and everything that has happened came in after that. That’s when my mind changed, that’s when something clicked, and it was that specific experience, and right when I had given up all hope.

Through this powerful experience, Wolfe recognized that hope is always there because it is inside of him, and he has the ability to tap into its positive effects at any time. He explained, “And hope which is a great lesson to take away as well. I’ve been in more recent days... it’s been stop trying to push things, stop looking for things, once you stop, that’s when the things pop up.” Wolfe realized that hope was a source of energy within himself and that by trusting his instincts, he was able to begin to see his life differently. He no longer needed to try and make things happen—he could just trust his intuition and follow the natural unfolding of energy where he found himself in any given moment.

Marlow expressed that he has tried to cultivate many virtues and lessons in his everyday life, which he continues to strive to develop:

And so within that personality changes of gratitude, of humility, of kindness, of generosity, of wisdom, of courage—things that I’m not really firm in yet. To get this in alignment does take courage and wisdom that I’m not that, I’m still on shaky ground, like a newborn.

So, he continues to honestly reflect on many important virtues to see whether they are a true reflection of who he is, and whether they are in alignment with his actions and lifestyle. The next sub-theme describes how participants experienced a deeper appreciation for the virtues of life, and how the many key lessons they learned showed up in their lives.

***Real world applications.*** Although external proof is lacking to explain or validate participants’ exceptional experiences, they were powerful and life-altering. To make sense of these experiences, many participants began to explore and find ways to understand their intuitive insights as they related to the real world. They described moments of clarity or downloads of information that they had received during their altered states experiences and that this information contained valuable lessons they could bring back and use in their everyday lives. For instance, Marlow shared the following about his psychedelic experiences: “Real world applications where then my children become my teachers, that the plants and animals become my teachers, or that the objects I interact with in such a way, that the labels of separation are no longer there.” In light of these beliefs, Marlow was able to ground his experience, and thus sustain his transformative insights, so he was able to integrate them into his everyday life.

Johnny's awareness of his death enabled him to make some positive psychological and behavioral changes, including a commitment to exercise and healthy eating (Schlitz, 2015). He came to a simple realization: "I actually take care of myself instead of letting others do it." He also has changed many of his habits now that he understands that time is precious: "I used to love to watch the news, and I don't watch the news at all, I just kind of quit. I hardly watch TV, I used to watch TV all the time, and I pretty well quit." I had an overall sense that he now realized that his happiness and peace of mind came from within, rather than from the external world, for example, from TV.

Wolfe was significantly impacted by his LSD experiences as he realized that he needed to work on and practice the lessons given if he wanted to integrate what he had learned. He shared, "I am figuring out for myself from doing acid and my acid experiences, and practicing these lessons within my life." Paying attention to our own personal experiences, including those encountered during expanded states of consciousness, may lead to dramatic shifts in our understanding of who we truly are (Schlitz, 2015). Wolfe explained, "So I started to learn these lessons, not to meddle in other people's affairs, take your time, to walk your path, and don't rush things." As he reflected on what he had experienced during his LSD trips, he was able to integrate what he had learned from the unseen realms of existence into his everyday world:

I would be able to pick these lessons out and apply them in my life... You have to practice, if you don't practice you can slip... it's been totally clear. Obviously I'm not saying that I'm perfect and I've slipped up lots, and I really had to learn a couple of lessons, not really in a hard way, like I've never screwed up a really good relationship with a person.

Wolfe had gained a deep understanding that there was a reason for things to be the way they are. He explained, “I’ve said, oh I fucked up, I know better than that. To learn that lesson the Universe kind of gets you, it takes practice, practice.” He realized that what he did to himself, he also did to others and that the universe put people, places, and things in his path to help him realize this lesson.

In living these lessons and applying them to their everyday lives, participants often were forced to look at their actions more deeply, which is described in the next sub-theme as *looking in the mirror*.

***Looking in the mirror.*** As this sub-theme became clear, I could see evidence that participants were examining their actions with others with a real sense of honesty by looking for patterns of how these actions were affecting others. I sensed that they were trying to determine how they related to others through their intentions, thoughts, and actions. More importantly, they were taking a true inventory of their reactions and the things they needed to change to have better relationships with others and themselves (Liquorman, 2012). For example, Wolfe shared:

There’s been times over the last year where I’ll see things... be opportunities that test my faith, and this is like everyday life, I mean, oh I can cut this corner and be screwing someone else over, even little things like stealing someone’s parking spot... and just little things like that.

His altered states experiences enabled him to reprioritize what was important to him, and thus to refocus his actions from *me* to *we* (Schlitz, 2015). He explained:

I will change those, and my life has gotten drastically better because of it... so yeah it keeps going and there’s more lessons. Soon as you think you’re done, it’s

like nope... and if I start to get cocky with it, things will occur to keep myself in check, get back on my path.

More importantly, Wolfe had realized that although his initial peak experience was amazing and life-altering, he was able to take the insights and lessons it gave him to make positive changes in his life. He innately understood that he need to accept all that is/was, which includes the good, the bad, and the ugly. He realized that the rapturous feelings that he had encountered during this experience were only one part of his existence and that they had showed him that he could not shut his eyes or heart to the negative parts of himself or his life:

And this is the hardest part. I think that was kind of the awakening or another big awakening on my journey is that finding out at the end, it's like oh, this is so amazing, and then it's like shit I've got to do some work to keep this up... otherwise, I'll fall off and affect others around me negatively.

Our experience is defined by our relationships with others, and nothing is as nourishing as a real connection and intimacy with others, including one's self (Liquorman, 2012). Marlow described just how important this connection is when he discovered the very essence of his life was in his relationships:

I mean to have my wife who's my beloved... she just woke me up. She showed me love... I thought it was her who showed me love, but I thought it was her that was love, but then I realized that's what's arising in me, that's my state, that's my vibration... that's me and my awareness is just the appearance of another woke up in me, the mirror of another woke me up to me.

This profound realization enabled him to see that he was a part of the unifying whole. He realized that at his core, he was love or consciousness and that he was mirroring this energy to his wife, which enabled him to understand that he was not separate. He explained: “This really helped me to try and be this unconditional love in all directions, fierce and whatever it looks like, right?” His psychedelic experiences and NDE had given him an opportunity to awaken to his true nature as he now understands it—that he is a part of the source of all that is, whether that source is called *love*, *consciousness*, *energy*, *essence*, or the *soul*. This realization made me think of a concept from the ancient Indian Upanishads regarding our true nature that states in Sanskrit *Tat tvam asi* or “*Thou art That*,” which implies we are essentially the same and a part of the totality of existence (Grof, 2010).

Participants’ understanding of the deeper aspects of their self and how this affected their relationships with others and the events that were happening in their lives fostered an overwhelming increase in their compassion not only for their self, but also for others. This increase in compassion ultimately led participants to a desire for altruism and helping others as described in the next theme.

### **Theme 5: Service to Others**

This theme appeared to have a direct correlation to participants’ own spiritual growth and transcendence as a result of their experience of mystical states of consciousness. I had the impression that once participants experienced the self as not separate from others, this sense of unity enabled them to feel more loving-kindness towards themselves and others, which fostered a desire to actively help others, including with their participation in this study. These mystical experiences were a gentle reminder

to give back because they showed participants that such kindness would deepen and enlighten their souls and produce rewards far greater than any material gains.

*Leading by example.* The underlying concept expressed by this sub-theme is that participants' values shifted considerably after their mystical or altered states experiences. Although participants were not selfish people before their mystical experiences, after these experiences what was important to them changed—mainly a new sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. For them, the change was a new focus on giving and receiving. For example, Dave explained, “Trying to figure out a way how can I be an advocate or an educator in a way, or find a way to safely and responsibly expose people to the things that I’ve been exposed to.”

Participants began to look for appropriate ways to share their energy and time with others. Sam explained, “But I’m also able to reconnect to myself either through meditation or just volunteering time or caring or empathizing with someone and realizing that there is more to the picture.” Participants realized that reaching out or giving back could replenish them with hope and inspiration, and also send them in new directions. Johnny also realized that his values had changed considerably since his “nearing death experience”:

That’s part of who I am now, and I think I’m kind, I think I’m thoughtful, I think a lot of things you know, but things that wouldn’t have occurred to me before like when I was younger, it was mostly about me and what can I get and what can you do for me.

He had recognized the importance of giving back, and he claimed, “now it’s what can I do for you? Just to help others, just to be a better person.”



By touching other people's lives, participants opened the door to new ways of being in the world that could replenish their soul and the souls of those around them. Delia discussed how she used her new psychic gifts that had developed after her NDEs to help others: "I can't help but call it a gift. To me that's what it became. Before it was like okay you have this thing and you help people, but then it became a very big deal." Delia appeared to understand the ripple effect of the work that she did for others.

During his LSD trip, Wolfe and his friend Sprout connected in a moment of unified consciousness. In their shared LSD experience, it was as if together they downloaded and telepathically communicated their collective shared knowledge and wisdom. Wolfe took the lessons and insights he learned from this experience and applied them to service to others by learning to use crystals. He shared how his awakening led to an internal shift in his own values and how he sees things differently now:

You have this power because you have woken up, and I can help other people the same way Sprout did to me... which was mind-blowing... you won't understand until you learn it. I never understood it, until boom, I understood it.

Wolfe was moved to help others: "It was like yeah, I gotta help other people. I would go to Shambala, and it was my first time figuring out how to help people, and it's not through my words because no one understands."

Such a powerful experience is difficult to put into words, let alone duplicate to help others experience the same thing:

It's been my journey, and no one is going to understand it until they have experienced it. And just by being beside them, watching them, then figuring out

the lessons I would like to teach them through that energy transfer, the same way that happened when I was in Sprout's vicinity.

Wolfe was trying to stop seeing everything on a limited physical level, and was seeking the spiritual in all things. He was learning to see from his heart and soul, to see beyond what was just in front of him:

It gets a little far out saying this... so at the very end of Shambala, I was walking on the beach and just enjoying everything, and I ended up making eye contact with this girl, we'll call her Sparrow. And she was having a similar awakening, and I saw it in her eyes.

He believes that the power of spirit exists in all things and that everything is made from energy. He also believes that everything in our physical world contains a fragment of spirit, including the crystals that he works with to help others. He explained how he used these crystals at Shambala:

I ended up giving her that crystal... you can feel a metaphysical energy or force in the stone when you're using this drug. It's quite powerful. You can change someone's whole trip if they're on LSD, and you have a stone that you put good intentions into... just put it in their hand, it's weird, it makes no sense, but also magical.

Wolfe used his own transformational experiences to help others at Shambala to have their own personal awakenings and remember that they also are spiritual beings.

Marlow explained how he has learned to respond but not react, a lesson which he tries to model in his own behaviour:

I need to take a pause after a question has been asked of me so that I don't jump in with an old spontaneous reaction, so that I can allow a response to unfold, an authentic fresh response to unfold.

He believes that leading by example through his own behaviour is one way to show others some of the powerful insights that he has gained from his experiences. Participants' feelings of self-acceptance and compassion led to increased feelings of wanting to help others, which flows naturally to the next sub-theme—*reaching our full potential*.

***Reaching our full potential.*** The underlying sense I received from participants' narratives is that their mystical experiences enabled them to reach an understanding of a better version of themselves. In light of this understanding, participants were able to choose their beliefs, thoughts, perspectives, values, attitudes, and the actions to take to make their lives more meaningful. By fully integrating all the pieces of themselves—body, mind, and spirit—they were able to cultivate better habits and deeper insights into how their choices influence their circumstances, which translated into “be the change” and how to help others “be the change” and how to be better versions of themselves. Johnny simply said, “It's to help others to better themselves... to help somebody find their way or prepare them for their time... yeah to help other people, you know it's not all about me.”

Wolfe believed he had shifted his energy and focus through being on a new spiritual path:

Another lesson by the way is, or the last step is, to help others or the next person, so I'm always in AA. That's just how my life is, that's where it leads you, you

keep helping others, and by helping others, you keep practicing yourself and helping yourself.

I got the sense of “like attracts like” or that Wolfe was attracting everything and everyone into his life who had similar thought patterns and goals to his own.

Although Dave’s psilocybin experience pushed him to make many necessary and positive changes that were reflected in his spiritual growth, he sometimes felt pushed beyond his comfort zone as multiple areas of his life shifted:

As soon as I started going down this particular journey, not just with plant medicines but all the other stuff I was doing, it made me realize that it was clearing away the clutter and getting to the source of what the problems were in the first place, and once you deal with the problems, the symptoms go away on their own.

I felt the relief that Dave was feeling because he was free from the bondage of his egoic self and had gotten to the root of his problems. He further explained his next steps and motivations: “And that’s kind of the direction that I’m trying to do... and what can we do to erase the social stigma side of things by just having more conversations with people and explaining our personal stories.” I could feel that he wasn’t trying to push his point of view on anybody; rather, he was simply trying to understand the other side, and have compassion for people’s feelings and stories, so creative solutions could be found.

Delia had an absolute knowing and belief that she was here for a reason and that her purpose was to help others. She explained how she saw her role in helping others to reach their full potential: “You’re a seed planter and that’s your job. All you have to do is plant seeds, and people will water it and take care of it in the garden.” She intuitively

knew that she was only guiding people to make important and happy life changes that were right for them and that it was up to them to take action accordingly. She explained, “And stuff will happen and the good news is that you’re not going to own their garden. You don’t have to weed it, water it, or have to take care of it. Your only job is planting seeds.” Delia felt as if she was tapping into divine guidance through her own feelings and intuition, and then passing this information on to others who could then trust their own heart and be true to themselves.

Service to others was a sign of participants’ active connection to others and to life itself. By “being the change” and realizing that their mystical experiences ignited a journey of growth, participants came to some important insights as described in the next theme, especially with respect to their own fears surrounding death.

### **Theme 6: Transformation of Death**

This theme resonated with my whole being, a feeling that came from listening to participants’ insistence that these exceptional experiences were more real than life itself—not fantasies and not imaginary. These mystical experiences moved participants from a strictly physical view of their existence to a view that included indescribable and spiritual dimensions (Schlitz, 2015). Participants’ highly personal and subjective encounters with the transcendent offered them an opportunity to reshape their own understandings about death. More importantly, these exceptional experiences were spiritually transformative, forever changing participants’ outlooks on the meaning of life and death.

*Death is nothing to fear.* Due to the distractions of our physical bodies, it is easy to lose touch with our true essence, especially while living in a world where suffering and

death are inevitable. No amount of pleasure can negate these facts, yet we use our bodies—driven by our egos—to try and dissipate our pain. Therefore, I can truly understand how people get lost in trying to reduce their pain and suffering, never mind trying to escape from a state of spiritual alienation. I honestly can see how participants' exceptional experiences enabled them to overcome some of the obstacles in their lives, and to know the possibilities of the present moment and the truth it contains. These experiences enabled them to awaken from an unconscious mode of being and from being lost in a fragmented reality.

Many participants who experienced an ASC during a NDE or while using psychedelics arrived at the same conclusions about the problems of life and death. They concluded that the normalcy of their fear of death was a function of their autonomous ego-self and that they had been conditioned not to be aware of its existence until these mystical experiences enabled them to become more cognizant of their mental processes, thus freeing them from this conditioning and transforming their fear of death (Grof, 2010). For instance, Delia shared how her NDEs transformed her thoughts about death and dying:

Death didn't seem like the end or the final thing... it wasn't death that was frightening, the thought of being handicapped and only having a brain function that's terrifying... the cloud-like appearance, the lightness, you know checking out if you will, of not being attached to the body, it was not scary—it was just incredibly light and easy.

Delia's powerful noetic experience created a powerful buffer against her fear of death (Schlitz, 2015). She continued, "If you could imagine your body and dying as being easy."

For Delia, this idea was true regardless of the evidential nature of non-ordinary realms of existence because she personally had experienced them. She explained:

I had a friend who had cancer and had one surgery after the other, and she had this incredible fear of dying. I kept trying to explain to her, I have had that experience already, and it wasn't going to be painful, and it wouldn't actually be all that scary when it happened.

Delia's experience with death had a profound transformative effect on her, even though she couldn't convince others of its significance: "I couldn't explain it to her, but I knew for me that it was absolute. It was clear and I knew it... checking out and dying, I have no fear at all."

Finding more peace and meaning regarding death and what might come next was extremely important to Tim. He explained that his NDE gave him knowledge and insight about what to expect next: "I realized that death is easy. It's the dying part that is hard." After his NDE, Tim realized he was not afraid to die because he had gone through an NDE, which he believes is a progression into another form of energy. However, he is still afraid of the dying process because it is still unknown to him:

I think I have a little better understanding about the light part and going to the light and all that, but what I would like to know is what's on the other side. I've had people who've asked "Are you afraid of death?" and I'm like it will be a whole new experience. I can hardly wait... [laughs]...you never know.

Tim believes that death will not be something to fear, and he is looking forward to what is coming next.

According to the literature, similarities in the cases of “nearing death” and NDEs suggest that consciousness extends beyond the body (Schlitz, 2015). Johnny believes that his own “nearing death experience” has given him a new perspective about his own thoughts regarding life and death: “Death permanently removes us from this place, so a person should really look at more for today than buying RRSPs for tomorrow.” He has come to appreciate time, and he has learned to stay in the present. He elaborated:

And because of this my thoughts about our death and going to the other side—and I prefer the term *crossing over*—we don’t really know what we are going to cross over to, but it’s probably not as bad as we make it out to be.

While talking with Johnny, I had the impression that his brush with death has enabled him to embrace his authentic and true self right here, right now. He no longer fears dying because he realizes that he always has been dying. For him, now the difference is that he knows his true self and that the way he is dying will not be any different from the way he currently is living his life.

During his NDE, Marlow was an observer of what was happening to him—he was a disembodied participant, since he was detached from the unfolding events by floating above them. After reflection and looking for answers, he realized that he was free from the constraints of his religious upbringing, and his whole motivation for existence changed. Over time, he began to understand that death is a natural part of life, an awareness that has helped him with his daily work:



It helped me to sit with people in addiction who are never getting out of it and their fucking knocking on death's door, or to be more present at a funeral and that we're fucking rotting and dying but that's okay... You know, and how refreshing the knowledge that comes from that freedom... we're rotting and the day we were born is the first day closer to death.

He sensed that a part of us dies every moment, and our identity is constantly changing. Through this awareness, he has gained an awareness of his own death, which has enabled him to live his own life with meaning and purpose. He explained further what his psychedelic experiences had showed him: "It's been really cool that those psychedelic experiences have opened me up even more to the deaths that I have been near in the past. It continues to inform both backwards and forwards." His awareness of his own mortality has transformed his fear of death because it has shown him that it's only the identity that dies, not the eternal soul or consciousness.

Dave recalled how his newly gained insights into the impermanence of physical existence challenged his old belief system. He also talked about his own ego death and how his old self transformed during his psilocybin experience: "The idea of having ego death as part of this experience I would probably say that I got very close to that, but I didn't quite go over the threshold where I lost a sense of who I was." Nevertheless, he still believes that he had some experience with relinquishing his ego identity:

Not in a sequence of events where I could pin the moment that it happened, but very much a sense of that it was okay to let go of that person that I thought I was or I had contorted myself into being... it was okay to let that go.

Dave's intense experiences of psychospiritual death and letting go of his ego were followed by deep insights into a fundamental understanding of human nature and its relationship to the universe (Grof, 2010). He explained:

It wasn't fearful to let that go and start over fresh. It was a very strong sense that if something had gone wrong in that moment and I had passed away, that it would be okay that it wasn't an end of whatever manifestation of the universe that I happen to be.

This powerful experience enabled him to experientially understand the unity of all things, which he felt himself to be an integral part of, thus transforming his fear of death. He found peace because it became a question of who or what dies. He innately understood that his consciousness would somehow continue in another manifestation so to evolve and experience life.

Wolfe also was significantly impacted by his LSD experiences, which have completely changed his thoughts about death. He has learned that his ego is not in control and that he is connected to his true nature within:

It helps you basically understand death on a spiritual level and accept it... once I awoke, I understood death... absolutely to know if my time's coming, it's coming and because once I had that main awakening, that's another thing I understood for sure too, was just my life... I'm on this path, this isn't me who is in control. I need, I have to take care of myself, and no death is not a thing that scares me in the least bit. I mean physically it does, and I'm not going to run across the highway blindfolded or anything.

As a result of his powerful transpersonal experiences, Wolfe discovered dimensions of existence that changed his previous worldviews and beliefs. He innately understood that he needed to take care of the physical vessel that he is in, and that the dying process can be scary because it is still unknown to him, but he no longer fears death now that he has experienced feelings of cosmic unity and a deep connection to his inner wisdom, which he now knows to be his true self.

Sam's LSD experience connected him to mystical states of consciousness that had profound consequences in shaping his beliefs regarding death. He remembered seeing a spider in the corner of his room during his LSD trip that caused him fear, and he wanted to separate himself from the spider. As he thought about it, he realized that he was much larger than the spider, and he had nothing to fear. He forced himself to sit right next to it, and as he watched it crawl around in its web, his fear dissolved. This experience enabled him to face his biggest fear—death. He reflected on why he specifically feared death, and because his mind was open to possibilities he hadn't considered before, he shared:

This just can't be it for my consciousness because I'm able to realize that my consciousness is somehow separate from my body. And I saw consciousness as everywhere. I saw consciousness as talking through me, through my trip from somewhere else, uhm, not inside my own skull. And that's when I kind of formulated the idea that death wasn't really something to be feared because it wasn't an end-point... it was a beginning... that's just what I came to.

Sam's expansion of consciousness beyond his mind-body and beyond space and time enabled him to deeply experience a feeling of cosmic unity. This opening and feelings of belonging to a vast cosmic panorama gave him peace regarding his individual

demise (Grof, 2010). He described what this LSD trip meant for him and his beliefs about death and his own mortality: “Even today I don’t see myself as someone who fears death. I think I fear the uncomfortable idea of it, but death itself and what comes after it, I’m actually quite comfortable with.” Having this direct experience was key to transforming his fear of death. He may still fear the dying process because he does not know what this experience will be like for him, but his powerful LSD experience gave him a direct and personal experience that his consciousness can operate beyond his mind-body, and thus death is nothing to fear because he trusts that his consciousness will continue.

These exceptional experiences gave participants an opportunity to experience their lives differently. Since transformation occurs through insight, their new awareness regarding the fear of death resulted in life altering changes in their perceptions of life, death, and reality, especially regarding death as a transition.

***Death is transition.*** This sub-theme was revealed through the participants’ expressions of intuitive knowing, beginning with a loss of the fear of death and moving towards an understanding that death is a natural part of life. Participants had come to a realization that death was an illusion, which opened them to a new understanding that death is a transition. I could sense the peace—underneath the participants’ words—that this new insight engendered, as if surrendering to their awareness that death was another transition brought them comfort. For instance, Delia shared:

We have a choice when we die... the picture that I got in my mind was we’re on this highway, and there’s all these exit ramps and you can get on a ramp and change your mind, come back around and get back on the highway... and that’s also very calming. It’s also very calming that you can change your mind. You can

get 9/10s of the way down that road... and you can change your mind... It put it in a different sort of frame... death didn't seem like the end or the final thing. It started to make sense to me that maybe we are recycled and maybe we come back.

Delia's experiences helped her to understand that she has a mind and a body through which her consciousness or her soul operates. I had the sense that she also believed that this consciousness or soul energy survives death and continues from one body to another or transitions to another form of energy, which gave her a strong sense that death is a transition to another dimension or possibly another life.

From his psychedelic experiences, Wolfe had a powerful realization regarding death as a transition, even though he wasn't sure how he came to know what he knew: "Death is not the end. I know it's not the end, I don't know how I know that, but that's another thing I know!" He now believes, "Yeah, this is just a vessel for me to experience life. How the fuck did I learn this?" Tapping into mystical states of consciousness enabled him to pierce the veil of separation between the physical world and his normal focus on his body and mind, and experience the light of his pure consciousness. Ultimately, these experiences led him to an understanding that when you die, only the elements of the physical self fall away, and the true self or consciousness continues (Chopra, 2006).

Dave also was significantly impacted by his psilocybin experience, and he now believes that the universe will manifest his consciousness in some other form after his physical form dies:

It did introduce this idea that I am not an individual self-contained life form that has an individual self-contained existence after we die, but I am just a different manifestation of the Universe that has some kind of inherent consciousness that it may or may not be aware of. Somebody, I can't remember who said it, but it's like I am a way for the Universe to experience itself... that is probably the best way that I can describe it.

Ultimately, he realized that his death would be some kind of transition into another form of energy or manifestation through which the consciousness of the universe could experience itself. Although he might not have realized necessarily how he gained this knowledge, it changed his beliefs about what he thought would happen after death. He further explained, "The Universe as a whole would continue on, and I was simultaneously a really important part of that and also completely and utterly insignificant... it's just such a bigger concept of anything that had ever occurred to me before." His powerful psilocybin experience gave him a newfound awareness of his own mortality, which changed his own beliefs about death and what happens next. He shared, "It's okay to let a different version of myself go forward that isn't burdened with all that baggage." Dave's worldview has changed significantly regarding what he used to think about his life, death, and reality, which has given him a new appreciation of how he experiences his life today.

In the course of experiencing and transcending their physical bodies, participants significantly reduced their fears of dying and came to a peaceful acceptance of their own mortality. For example, Marlow's personal and subjective experience of transcending his personal identity gave him the certain knowledge that his essence or consciousness

persisted after his bodily death. This innate knowing came from both his NDE and his various psychedelic experiences. He also gained deep insights into death as a transition, and he shared what he had learned, “And so through it all, I’ve gained the awareness that death is another experience to be lived, to be deeply experienced.” These words that he now lives by are from Osho, which he clearly indicated to me, but I also felt his strong resonance and relationship to them. He explained their power and meaning: “They have resonated with me so powerfully that I’ve seen within my lifetime, I’ve seen so many lives and deaths it seems like.”

Marlow was so influenced by his exceptional experiences that he was aware of the death of his identity in each moment, both in his dreams and waking states:

Even in my dream states I can see the deaths... and it allowed me to see that my awareness, the witness observes the waking and the sleep, and that they live and die each moment. That like the dreamer kills the awake person, and then the awake person kills the dreamer.

These experiences broadened his worldview, but more importantly, they continue to inform who he is now, as he continues to question his perceptions of existence. He explained, “Our perception stays limited, and so it really has left me to question everything, to experience everything new and that means death too. I’m allowed to see it as just another transition.”

Sam’s mystical states of conscious during his LSD experiences profoundly altered his own fear of death. He has gained deep insights into his general beliefs regarding death, and he now believes that death is a means of transitioning forward:

When I have thought about death, it's been quite profound, and when I've seen friends and family talk about it and stuff like that or even deaths in my family... it's, and this sounds strange to say, it's not such a tragic event. It's almost as if it's a moving forward of a soul. It just seems so necessary to life. It's hard for me to think of death as both an end-point or as something tragic because if we were to live forever, we would go insane to the point where we wouldn't want to live any more. I think life is very hard, and I think death is an escape and a beginning from that.

I had the feeling that Sam was less afraid of death because of his experience that his consciousness continued on, that death is a transition, which gave him a sense of comfort and peace. He believed that death is a necessary part of life and that the soul or consciousness needs to move forward or transition as part of its evolution. Letting go and surrendering to the belief that death is another experience to be had or a transition enabled participants to shed old patterns and beliefs, especially with respect to their ego-self, as is described in the next sub-theme.

***Death of self.*** The main idea revealed through this sub-theme is that transcendence requires the death of the separate self and a shedding of the ego. As participants discussed their experiences and the powerful insights they gained, it was clear that many were saying goodbye to their old selves, which included old ways of thinking, old beliefs, and old behaviours. My felt-sense was that they were starting fresh with new perspectives on their authentic selves and ways of being in the world. Dave was so significantly impacted by his psilocybin experience that he walked away from it with a completely new perspective on his self:



When we were initially talking about my participation in this [study], I hadn't had a near-death experience in the way that I would have thought about it, which is like I was in a car accident or my heart stopped beating for three minutes and I came back. It's not like that, it was more of an internal sense that the instance of the person that I was died.

From talking with Dave, I felt that his extraordinary experience enabled him to totally accept his life circumstances and who he is. Becoming aware of the stories that his ego had created enabled him to let go of the pain and suffering he had been carrying. This awareness, in turn, led to an internal shift and acceptance of who he is in each moment, which gave him access to his true nature.

Marlow also gained significant insights and a recognition of his true nature, which enabled him to move forward and surrender to what is. He shared his thoughts:

It's allowed me to see the old beliefs of me that were unsupported or had resistance against death and resistance against moving forward and changing and letting behavior die away or letting parts of my ego structure fall and die away.

He became acutely aware that his pain was a reaction to something that was happening in the moment, whereas his suffering was the projection of the stories that his mind created:

Being proved wrong... it's allowed me delight to be proved wrong. It's allowed me to stick to my guns but also to really delight in and enjoy being proved wrong. That's what I fucking want, it's my heart's desire to know truth that much more fully.

As he surrendered to each moment and became aware of “what is,” he realized that he was living more authentically and suffering less. He shared, “It seems like that as I die, I feel parts of me die, and it also feels like parts of me live more fully through me.” He had found true peace.

Sam’s experiences have helped him to accept how he is feeling, what he is thinking, and more importantly what has happened. He explained how his experiences with psychedelics have changed his whole perspective about death and himself:

I’ve been able to place that belief [about death] a little bit more permanently into my ideas and perspectives of the world I felt on magic mushrooms... I was able to gain access to another way to live my life or another way of seeing the world. But never have those experiences quite embodied the fact that I should personally go out and change the way that I am like that one [LSD experience] did. After that experience, on that specific subject, I felt that my opinion of the matter had changed completely, and it still has to this day where I’m sitting.

Sam is learning to trust that everything is happening as it should. He innately understands that these powerful experiences are a gift of seeing himself in a new light, and that they also have fostered a genuine connection with his inner self. These experiences profoundly transformed his beliefs and values in such a way that he now is able to live his life by honoring his own unique spiritual self.

Chittick (1994) has discussed the work of Ibn al-’Arabī who explains that the mystery of existence is that the cosmos is both real and unreal at the same time, and that the purpose of the spiritual journey is to discern between these two dimensions. As participants shed old parts of themselves, they became more open to their transpersonal

qualities and recognized that they were surrounded by a transpersonal realm, an awareness which is discussed in the next theme—*encounter with ultimate reality*.

### **Theme 7: Encounter With Ultimate Reality**

Participants' exceptional experiences enabled them to view their lives through the eye of their souls. They appeared to gain an intuitive sense to a knowing that they were part of something more from which they were not separate. Their descriptions of piercing the veil of illusion brought them clarity and understanding. Underlying this theme were ideas of self-transformation and transpersonal dimensions of reality, which included the notion that the transpersonal realm was always around us and that unity consciousness was always available to us. These concepts appeared in participants' descriptions of transcending the self, which appeared to be reflections of Jung's concept of the *collective unconscious*—a realm of archetypes and primordial images shared by all humans—or of the *unity consciousness* spoken of by the mystics (Metzner, 2017).

***Transformation of self.*** Since our experience so often is ambiguous, the spiritual quest or inquiry can help explain our reality and the roots of our existence, and thus can be a path to knowing or truth. According to Nasr (1989), separation from our true nature is the root of darkness, and so experiencing truth closes the gap between things as they are and things as they ought to be. Participants clearly were impacted by their exceptional experiences, which was reflected in the profound clarity and changes they described regarding their own understanding of how they saw themselves before and after these experiences. Wolfe succinctly expressed, “because of my spiritual awakening, I looked inside and went, oh there’s me.” My sense was that he meant that he had been living in a dream, and now he was awake.

I had an impression that participants realized that they were no longer trying to become someone else because they recognized that they always had been enough. After his experience, Dave realized, “Now what I am is something different.” Delia’s sense of self was changed at every level—body, mind, and soul. She explained how her experiences changed her whole sense of self: “All I know is that these experiences changed me physically, psychically, and spiritually.” Johnny also described the difference in his being after his “nearing death experience”:

Even when I have bad things going on in my life, and I do, whereas before I would have thought this is too earth-shattering, this is too much, I go well now no, it’s going to be okay. One way or another, life goes on, and it’s going to be okay.

As he considered how his own death made his life possible, he was able to become a happier, more well-adjusted person, which renewed his purpose in life.

Marlow described how being connected to his true self gave him a sense that he was living his life authentically and that he could just be:

Freedom to live and die in each moment really. But I have this felt-sense that it’s inescapable. It’s helped me to look closer at the parts of life that scared me because death was present... as a freedom in this moment.

This awareness gave him the freedom to broaden his own perspective about his own understanding of his own consciousness and his own unique existence. He continued:

Whatever archetype shows up or whatever costume I happen to be wearing, what I notice or not, you know... just abiding... it just helped me fucking fully abide, take all the risks that I feel and yet grow more aware with each new experience...

but each new experience illuminates my awareness just a little bit more, a little bit more.

As Marlow moved from belief to clarity, his transformative journey of his self gave him a chance to become more aware of seeing the truth of “what is.” Furthermore, he gained these deep insights by doing a thorough investigation into who and what he was. He explained, “And it doesn’t mean that it’s some hierarchal progression because it’s often repression that continues to illuminate, continues to illuminate. It’s helped me to participate in that.” He came to an acceptance of things as they actually are, including his own reactions and judgments.

These experiences and the transformation of their selves helped participants to gain a deeper understanding that their consciousness transcends the awareness of their ego identity, which gave them access to their soul, the specific human essence that guides us towards wholeness, and thus towards change and growth. Moreover, it makes sense that these exceptional experiences enabled participants to connect to the very essence within them, which prompted them to grow and transform (Dowling-Singh, 1998; Mackinnon, 2012) More importantly, this higher transcendental reality is readily available to us in our everyday life, so we just need to know where to look, which is the next sub-theme.

***Transpersonal realm surrounds us.*** Participants’ experiences with mystical states of consciousness profoundly altered their worldview and experience of reality. These experiences opened new doors of perception and changed how they could see the extraordinary within the ordinary. They seemed to understand the difference between *samsara*, a Sanskrit word that describes the world of existence that includes birth, death

and rebirth; and *nirvana*, a Sanskrit word that describes the realization of the unity of all life (Easwaran, 2007). I had the feeling that participants innately understood that *nirvana* is *samsara* and *samsara* is *nirvana*, which is a concept of Nāgārjuna, an important Buddhist philosopher. Samsara is wanting things to be other than they are, and nirvana is completely accepting things the way they are. Participants understood that they were in samsara, which could become nirvana when they stopped trying to be somewhere else or when they accepted things the way they are.

For example, Sam shared:

I was all powerful, and it wasn't that God was above me looking down at me as a unique creature but that I was a direct embodiment of God and that I was able to foresee what I wanted to do.

He further explained how his use of psychedelic drugs had enabled him to access that connection with the ground of being, his true self, his essence, or his soul: "I think everyone's first use with these drugs is almost getting back to who you know you want to be rather than being disillusioned by your ego and becoming someone else." In other words, his experience enabled spirit to manifest itself through him and through his soul to its highest possible level (Mackinnon, 2012).

Wolfe believed that he had connected to his true self and that his awakening had enabled him to access the higher transpersonal aspects of himself, which included transcendental reality: "I understood my higher self, once I connected with who I was... this is not about me, this is really continuing to look in me and finding God." Through his drug experience, he reconnected with his true essence, which guided him towards change and wholeness. He explained further what this meant to him:

I don't like using the term *God* because it's been such a.... especially with people I hang out with, people who have found spirituality through drugs hate the term *God* because they found spirituality within themselves, which is totally justifiable. I can see that.

I could sense Wolfe's resistance to using the term *God* around others because it comes from a long and treacherous history of trying to explain the unexplainable. From a nondual perspective, all that is or all that exists is referred to as *essence*, *the source*, or *consciousness*, which mean the same thing as *God* (Liquorman, 2012).

Despite his reluctance to use the word *God* around others, he still had a deep understanding of what this term meant to him, and how his psychedelic experience revealed *God* to him or the divine energy within him. He shared:

My personal belief, especially coming from, my whole family that is very religious, I wouldn't say that I am, but I do believe that there is something bigger than just me. I found God within myself, that God is everything.

Wolfe's psychedelic experience fostered a spiritual awakening through which he had a direct recognition of himself as the source of all that is, just as he realized that his idea of God was the source of all that is. This profound realization helped him to understand that transcendental reality was available to him in his everyday life because it was within him.

Delia's life changed significantly after her two NDEs. She was able to trust her intuition and the voice that she always had heard since she was a child. Her confidence in her psychic abilities skyrocketed, and she followed her passion and purpose by changing

careers and helping others through giving them readings. Instinctively, she knew that there was something more beyond our rational minds:

It became so real. So verifiable and proven over and over again. And knowing for certain that we came here for a reason and there's all kinds of stuff that we don't get, or we don't have to see or experience that's going on at the same time.

Gaining access to these transpersonal realms became a part of Delia's everyday life. Once she was connected to her true essence and inner wisdom, she experientially knew them to be real and true for herself. She explained further:

There were things that we couldn't perceive in our day-to-day lives. I can't believe how common it was... tapping into that energy... maybe *common* is not the right word, maybe *ordinary* fits better, like the kind of thing that just happens... it is what it is and not that big of a deal. I just accepted it as something that happens; it made me calm.

She realized that she was a soul that came with a body and that her soul was her true essence. She was able to tap into her unlimited supply of soul power or guides to help those around her, and she was able to trust what she was receiving:

At the same time, I know that there's something... it's like footprints in the snow. You can see where someone has been, but you can't see the person, and so you can pick up the story and you can pick up the stuff and have the evidence of it being in the snow, but you don't have to walk through the snow with them.

Delia's NDEs enabled her psychic abilities to develop, which gave her trust in her belief that her consciousness must be multidimensional and that it extends beyond her



mind-body. By tapping into these transpersonal dimensions of reality and hearing the wisdom of her own soul, she experiences these transpersonal realms in her everyday life.

Marlow's NDE and his experiences with psychedelics contributed greatly to his spiritual growth and psychological well-being. They helped him to recognize the innate nature of his consciousness or soul that was guiding him towards wholeness. He realized the significance of understanding these transpersonal realms of being in his everyday life: "That I find love in all directions, that I see myself in each appearance, the form and the formless." He further explained how his mystical experiences gave him insight: "It's helped me see through spiritual lenses, how to be in the world but not of the world, or at least let the goddam world inform me." I had a heart-felt sense that these experiences deeply changed Marlow and how he sees himself and his reality. He truly feels connected to all that is because he knows innately that he is this, and that he can tap into this transcendental reality at any time.

This access to a higher self and inner wisdom, coupled with an awareness that these transpersonal dimensions of reality are easily accessible were made possible by participants' experiences with mystical states of consciousness while using psychedelics and during a NDE. The next theme explores how both of these experiences are tools for spiritual growth—*medicine for the soul*.

### **Theme 8: Medicine For the Soul**

Participants reported that their experiences with psychedelics or NDEs were catalysts for change leading to spiritual growth. The underlying idea of this theme is that an innate mechanism existed within participants that had a desire to help them evolve, so they could be the best versions of themselves. The NDEs or psychedelics acted as

containers or vehicles that enabled participants to experience growth and learn through transpersonal dimensions of reality, as described in the next sub-theme.

***Mystical intervention.*** When it was time to expand or make a shift in awareness, this innate mechanism triggered an intervention for participants, so they could live their best lives possible. This *intervention* could be an idea, experience, thought, feeling, or moments of synchronicity or unusual coincidences that awakened a participant's innate desire to reach their full potential. *Mystic* is the divine energy within participants' inner being and within the cosmos that connects everything. The intervention and the mystic worked together to ignite the desire for change and to create opportunities that enabled participants to evolve. Prominent throughout this sub-theme were the ideas that the NDEs and psychedelics were mystical interventions that came into participants' lives to help them move forward or awaken, and that they acted as vehicles for spiritual growth. Dave linked these ideas by saying:

I was going to be very, very deliberate about it, so I tried to use the resources that I had available to me to say to myself if I only have a one-time chance to go away and be by myself, I better make the best use of it.

Marlow realized that his NDE was a mystical intervention in his life that was particularly difficult. This difficult life experience had occurred to wake him up, which led him to psychedelics, so he could start on the path to awakening. He shared, "Through these altered states and through the near death experience, through the psychedelic states, I have found freedom of having to look at those places with a detachment and in empathy, with an understanding of kindness and awareness." As he began to listen to his feelings, and the stirrings of his inner wisdom became alert to the synchronicities in his

life, he continued to use psychedelics, which furthered his growth and understanding. He explained, “Psychedelics showed me how to simplify my life, that nothing matters.” As he tapped into his inner mystic, he gained valuable insights into his self.

This concept of a *vehicle for transformation* or a *mystical intervention* was especially significant for Wolfe, and he shared what it meant to him, “LSD to me did everything that the other drugs did plus more. It was a positive experience. While I was high, it gave me energy, but it took away all the negatives.” When you realize you are connected with the mystic, you can take action to update your mechanism for growth, and you can move forward at an accelerated pace. The intense energy that Wolfe encountered while using psychedelics helped him to accomplish things in hours that would have taken him months or years. He explained, “I know that LSD has this spiritual side of it... how does it do it, I have no idea, but I know it wouldn't have happened without LSD.”

Sam believed that his inner mystic called him to use psychedelics so that he could become inspired and learn what steps to take next in his life. More importantly, he wanted to connect with his authentic self and learn how to lead a more spiritual life. He explained how these mystical interventions were very helpful:

Both experiences, magic mushrooms and LSD, have been very positive for me... There have been no regrets from doing them. I've been nothing but incredibly happy with my experience with the drugs and my life... and I see myself continuing to use them as a tool to reach new spiritual developments and help me guide my life through the very complex journey that it can be.

He believes that his use of psychedelics have led him to deep insights and truths about his own being and how he sees his reality.

Interestingly, even though participants who used psychedelics saw them as mystical interventions, they also talked about the importance of doing some kind of research before using them. They also discussed the power of psychedelics and the importance of being responsible about using them, as described in the next sub-theme.

***Responsible use.*** As discussed previously, participants were aware that their state of mind and environment were important facilitators for their psychedelic experiences. It was evident that participants' expectations—conscious and unconscious—also influenced their overall experiences and helped to determine whether they were positive or negative. These insights naturally led them to an understanding that using psychedelics responsibly was extremely important. For example, when Sam recounted a psilocybin experience he had while hanging out with a girl he liked and she wasn't feeling well, he shared, "And to that day [this experience], I think it shows that it was a lesson for me that showed you need to use psilocybin, or any drugs for that matter, very cautiously." His experience taught him that the quality of a psychedelic experience does not solely rely on the function of the drug effect alone. He explained further what he believes about these powerful drugs:

I'm at the point in my life where it's not like I'm craving them or they're addictive, that's not it. It's quite the opposite of that because contrary to popular belief, they're not fun drugs or party drugs, they're drugs that can lead to quite a lot of hardship during the trip in order to achieve something greater... maybe it's not for everyone as these are very transformative experiences, and if people are in a dark place, then the experience will take them to a dark place at certain times, and these dark places are a learning experience, but some people just aren't ready

for that... So you have to be very careful with them, but they have a lot of potential to do a lot of good.

I had an impression that Sam was somewhat aware of what the literature refers to as *set* and *setting*. He intuitively discussed *set* when he spoke of people being in a dark place; in the literature, *set* refers to one's mind-state, attitude, or expectations of the drug. He also shared that psilocybin could take a person to a dark place or potentially do a lot of good, and these expectations also could be influenced by external factors of the environment known as *setting* (Metzner, 2017).

Dave also reflected on his experience of using psilocybin and how much it helped him on his own journey of healing:

I think there is a correlation behind the amount of time and effort and work that I put in preparing for it and the outcome. I think there's too much misunderstanding, and it needs more conversation about this word *recreational*.

I felt that he also recognized the importance of using psilocybin responsibly and the significance of set and setting. The emphasis on responsible use came from his personal intention to use psilocybin therapeutically versus recreationally. His personal experience with using psilocybin therapeutically enabled him to realize how this drug could help someone discover meaningful insights and recover lost aspects of the self. He further explained:

And people are too... even knowledgeable people are probably too flippant about the potential for what it can do if you just put in a little bit of time and effort... if you come in with a specific desire and purpose.

Using these drugs properly and preparing a specific purpose and intention can help to create powerful experiences that are potentially life-altering for those who experience them. I had the sense that Dave intuitively knew the difference between a drug-induced mystical experience and leading a spiritual life filled with meaning.

Marlow had similar insights regarding his experiences with psychedelics:

You know I'm very cautious. It's like I'm not interested in doing psychedelics very often. With a lot of people, I would use the line, "Well, when you get the message, hang up the phone, you know what I mean?"

Again, Marlow was very aware that these psychedelic experiences had the potential to produce extreme states of mind. Therefore, he realized that he didn't need to chase these experiences because once he had a vivid memory of them, he could learn from them and integrate their lessons into his life. He further explained, "In a certain set and setting for a certain period or a certain person, but who knows? They have been very helpful to me." He was aware that his psychedelic experiences had contributed to his own spiritual development and growth, but he also had an insight that these powerful substances already had provided him with the spiritual knowledge that he needed.

By experiencing these drugs as vehicles or mystical interventions, and using them responsibly, participants were aided in their journeys towards spiritual growth and learning. These exceptional experiences enabled them to look deep within themselves where a transformation of their internal selves was occurring. This spiritual awakening led to many positive aftereffects, which is the next theme.

### **Theme 9: Positive Aftereffects**

These mind-expanding experiences significantly impacted all facets of the participants' lives, and continue to affect them long after these experiences have concluded. More importantly, each participant came to an understanding of their own truth that brought them their own sense of personal peace and understanding of "what is" for them in the present moment. This mind-expanding experience included freedom from the bondage of their egoic self and their actions or judgments, which resulted in a clarity that came from understanding how circumstance plays a role in their lives (Liquorman, 2012). Participants' deeper appreciation for their connection to their true nature, identified as *soul* or *consciousness*, brought them great comfort and peace. They saw this soul or consciousness as a greater power, greater than themselves, and more importantly, greater than their egoic selves. Although participants didn't claim to know exactly how they came to know this, it didn't really matter because what mattered was their inherent belief in something greater than themselves.

***Appreciation for life.*** As participants reflected on their experiences, I had a heartfelt sense that they had a deep gratitude and appreciation for them, which was displayed through their emotions, words, and body language. Gratitude was expressed in the peace and calmness they displayed as they honestly reflected on their experiences and the appreciation they felt for the lessons they had learned from them. For example, Johnny reflected on his "nearing death experience":

You ponder your whole being and existence, and what is it you really want, and why you didn't get it, why you didn't do anything about it...we take so much for granted, and we shouldn't. We should take nothing for granted because we don't know, we have no clue... This is where I was at, and now it's going to be

something else, and the future, I may not necessarily be a part of that... and then you go well that's okay because I've had a really good life in my opinion.

I could feel how much Johnny appreciated his life and being alive. He cherishes every experience he has had, the good and the bad. His "nearing death experience" has taught him that his life is truly a gift.

Tim also was inspired by his experience, and he feels a great sense of peace because he has gained experiential knowledge about what could be coming next, which helps him to appreciate the life he has now:

After experiencing it [a NDE], I know this is right, this is wrong, and this is right, but this is all I know... this little piece because it's been proven to me, and I'm satisfied with that, and I know I understand that.

Tim's NDE gave him an awareness of his own mortality, which informs how he lives his life now—with meaning and purpose.

Dave also was significantly impacted by his psilocybin experience, which inspired him to live his life differently: "I'm probably taking deliberate time to appreciate things in my life more, being aware of how fortunate I am... and really my time is better spent just appreciating and being aware of how fortunate I am." I had the sense that overall, Dave's quality of life has increased. He has had fundamental internal shifts within his own being, which in turn have led him to appreciate many external factors in his life. He simply appreciates who he is and all of the experiences he has had; and he enjoys being alive.

These exceptional mystical experiences offered participants many new possibilities for living more fully in the world, for harnessing the full intelligence of their



minds, and for using the wisdom of their souls. For example, Sam expressed his appreciation for his experiences, “I see it almost as a freeing transformation... our ability to navigate consciousness.” Talking with him gave me a deep feeling that he now truly understands that he is here for a reason. Wolfe’s encounter with mystical states of consciousness has enabled him to fully live his life with a newly found purpose because he knows himself beyond his identification with his ego. He also expressed his appreciation: “Yeah, once you connect to yourself, that’s it. 100% life changing.” I had a sense that he appreciates his time in this physical time-space reality, and he looks forward to fulfilling his life’s purpose.

Marlow’s experiences truly helped him to learn and appreciate the depths of his own human experience, and they became a doorway to his own evolution. He described what his experiences have revealed to him:

I recognize that it’s helped me slow down my life to the point where I celebrate the breath because I know the breath is life. That when I breathe in, it feels good, and I can feel it through my whole body. When I eat something, I eat it slowly, and I can feel chocolate hit my brain and then go down and ripple through my cells.

These experiences opened him to a new worldview that enabled him to invite humility, compassion, gratefulness, and appreciation into every moment of his life.

Participants’ appreciation for life was accompanied by a cultivation of awareness that they described as being a key factor going forward in their lives. They also came to realize that if they witnessed their own experience with conscious awareness and remained in their own authentic state of being, the lessons they learned and the gifts they

received—such as trusting their intuitive hunches and recognizing coincidences—occurred much more frequently.

*Awareness is key.* Awareness is knowing that something exists, but I believe that by increasing our awareness, we come to know why it exists, how it works, and how our society is impacted by it, which helps to increase our understanding of the link between our personal experiences and our larger social systems. Participants came to understand that through awareness, they gained self-knowledge and thus a better understanding of themselves—their motivations, limitations, and weaknesses. Increasing our awareness allows us to surrender to each moment, and see our connection to our true essence. For instance, Wolfe shared:

If you practice, which is why I kept yoga, mentally it keeps me in check just to spend 20 minutes a day or half an hour to get in touch with myself, and say, hey slow down and take care of your body.

I could feel how important yoga was to him. It enabled him to connect to his inner wisdom or essence, and being able to quiet his mind was instrumental to his awareness of the connection between his body, mind, and soul.

Johnny also became more aware of his thought processes and how they affected his reactions in the moment. He realized, “I don’t do anything stupid anymore because before I probably would do stupid shit, whereas now I just think about it more, you’re just more aware.” He reflected further:

I’m fortunate enough to be sitting here with you. I just realize that I’m that close at any time, and just by you know the grace of God, I’m still here. I’m just happy

to fumble through life and be out and about, and every morning that I wake up, I don't feel much going on, I'm a pretty happy guy.

He had gained the awareness and freedom to know that his life was in perfect order just the way it was.

Marlow reflected on how his mystical experiences helped him to cultivate a deeper sense of awareness of "this is it":

It's helped me cultivate an awareness with... in some senses, it helped me negate my senses. But through negating my senses and just seeing that I am not my senses and that my senses send me in the direction of seeking and addiction and aversion and avoidance.

Our awareness must expand significantly before we can recognize that even our faults and resistance are given to us by the same source that inspires us to act with love and compassion (Liquorman, 2012). Marlow explained:

But seeing those false parts fall away... and then I'm now able to celebrate the senses in such a way where... when I dance, it's like the first time, when I kiss my wife, it's like kissing the beloved for the first time ever.

He was no longer ruled by his senses, and every moment was fresh and new. He shared:

It's given me every moment to be this freshness, this newness, to be perceived so fully that my awareness just penetrates so deeply in things, and yet it's not constricted or bound to any single thing... going through all the gigs that looked like all of those things, but it was just one becoming of this awareness and cultivating this awareness in this moment.

I had a deep sense that Marlow was no longer standing still or running in place; for him, each moment flowed into the next, which he joyfully allowed to happen with full awareness.

I could see that Dave had let many of his old beliefs about himself go, and this new awareness was seeping into all aspects of his life. For example, he let go of caring about what others think, which was evident in his willingness to share his experience with others. He also was aware that he was letting go of his anxiety as a lifestyle—he now understood that he had let go of his self-doubt and his need for certainty. He reflected on what gaining this sense of awareness meant to him, especially as it related to not knowing:

Going from a space of I know this and I know that, and have that fall away and get into a space of I don't know is huge... and not being afraid or anxious just about this idea of I don't know because it used to instill fear. Well, not knowing something is the worst circumstance you can find yourself in, and you need to figure out what you have to do to know that this particular church is true or this thing actually happened. Getting into a space of I don't know is just so free and liberating. It's huge.

Dave's new found awareness had given him the freedom to accept how he feels, what he is thinking, and what has happened in the past and right here and right now. I had the impression that he had found liberation and freedom from acknowledging who he is, and from finding his truth of "what is."

Sam's experiences also enabled him to come to the conclusion that he only needed to be himself. He discussed what it meant for him to become aware of his

connection to something larger than himself, and how the insights generated through his psilocybin and LSD experiences changed his perspective and provided him a new way of being in the world:

I don't think I would be even close to this perspective without all these experiences kind of bound up together... these psilocybin and LSD experiences have made me a much more open person. I'm able to portray exactly what I'm feeling to other people on and off the drugs quite easily, and this is how I became so deeply connected to my roommate... I just would not have been this open and empathetic and understanding, and just willing to listen.

Sam is truly aware of the profound changes that these experiences have given him. He realized that everything is still the same, yet he is radically different. I had a sense that he understands that he has much to learn, but I think the difference for him is that he has compassion and an openness for the learning that is still to come. He is aware that life will continue to bring him both good and bad experiences, but now he understands that he can learn from both.

Wolfe's experiences opened his heart, especially his awareness for those who are suffering and need his help. He described where he is now: "I particularly don't connect with my friends anymore, we are not on the same level... the people I connect with now are generally... they're recovering addicts because they've gone through the program." His experience enabled his heart to naturally open and help others, particularly those people he knows who have addictions. I had a feeling that his motivation to help these particular people arose because he had faced similar difficulties before his awakening. He shared what he was trying to do:

That is exactly what I'm teaching myself, which is my way. The beauty of these awakenings are there are so many different types, and we all learned the exact same lessons in a similar way to arrive at pretty much the same place or in a similar place.

Wolfe is aware that we all are innately inclined to move towards wholeness, and he is using his awakening to help others reach the same place.

Participants' personal work taught them how to stay in awareness and surrender their worries, and to just be a witness to their experience right now in this moment. However, they all realized that they needed to work every day to stay in awareness, and that they needed to remind themselves to surrender and let their worries go and have faith that their life will work out, especially on days when it keeps adding obstacles.

The next theme was generated by a question that I asked of participants: How would you share this information (regarding the transformation of death or transformational experiences) with others if you could? So, this theme examines participants' responses.

### **Theme 10: Sharing the Vision**

This theme had underlying currents of honesty. Participants described the importance of being honest not only with others, but also with themselves. Through honesty and trust, we can learn to build our understanding not only of ourselves, but also of our relationships and make authentic connections with others. Thus, it was important for participants to share what had happened in their exceptional experiences as openly and honestly as possible, just as it was for me to interpret and give their experiences

meaning as openly and honestly as possible. What stood out in this theme was that participants wanted to help others learn what they had learned.

*Opening the doors.* Without the knowing heart, a connection between the self and being cannot exist. According to Nasr (1989), the human is a threshold between two worlds, two realities—the reality of material existence, where the ego dwells, and the reality of spiritual being, where the essential self is held. The realized being has a knowing heart and sees from the eye of the heart, so these two dimensions can meet and become integrated (Nasr, 1989, p. 311). The light of the knowing heart removes the veils of ignorance, and our purpose in life is to know the heart without the veils of our fears because our heart is the hologram of the seen and the unseen universe, the part that reflects the whole. From my perspective, these words succinctly express the meaning of participants' experiences, and they articulate the message that participants wanted other people to know. Participants' exceptional experiences enabled them to gain access to the transpersonal dimensions of reality, which included feelings of cosmic unity and intense emotional states, and heightened insights and spiritual understanding that resulted in self-transformation and, most notably, a change in their perceptions about death (Goldsmith, 2011).

In the next sub-theme, participants describe how they personally shared this information.

*Passing the gifts.* I asked all the participants the following question: How would you share with others this information regarding the transformation of the fear of death or the transformation of yourself? Delia thought about it and realized that these were

difficult questions to answer. She replied, “It’s like the footprints in the snow, it’s like an illusion, but you see the footprints, and you know it wasn’t.”

Dave responded to these questions in the following way:

Very much with a goal of figuring out ways to help other people heal if this is appropriate for them and the circumstances they are in. I think that just talking about it and helping people reframe their circumstances in a different way, even if they never go down this particular path, could be helpful.

Johnny had a very different response to this question, since his perspective on death has changed over time:

I suppose what they should do is probably ask everybody at 40, 50, 60, and 70.

The same person in 10 year intervals what they think about death and preparing for death, and see they are different perceptions because it’s going to change.

Marlow thoughtfully replied to this question, and it was evident that his experiences were reflected in his answer:

The key component is just being it, being it... being this freedom, being the true self that is free of all the old appearances of the false self, conscious or unconscious, or allowing the unconscious to unfold in this present moment.

Honesty and education are also key as we watch consciousness unfold beyond a point where it’s ever unfolded, and I think that as consciousness talks about consciousness it’s expanding.

Sam responded to these questions with a thoughtful answer:

I would just be very open about it... my use of drugs and my spiritual transformations are never something that I feel as if I need to hide. I’ve talked to



my parents, and they know about my experimentation with psilocybin, and I've talked to them about responsible use and that this is the choice that I've made... and they've actually taken it quite well... so it would be the same for everyone that I would meet or anyone who is curious. I would just ask them to approach the conversation with an open mind as I would do, and kind of talk through things. I mean if people want to make that decision, that's up to them, but my suggestion for themselves is if that is what you want to do for yourself, at some point at least find a close friend, a trip sitter, or a trained professional and just sit down and do it properly once... and I think you will find quite quickly with the effect that the drug has on you that these are no drugs that I want to use or abuse.

When I asked Tim how he would share this information with others if he could, he simply responded, "well just like we did right here, have a conversation."

Wolfe responded to these questions by stating:

As far as I can do is to share it with everyone that I have influence with... I will share my journey with whoever I can effect. But in my experience, if people aren't ready to learn, they won't and those who are proceed. So I will share my story with whoever wants to hear it... so for now, word-of-mouth and also continuing to go to these festivals and helping other people along their journey do the same.

In summary, Chapter 4 has examined 16 themes that emerged from this research study, including a theme about the transformation of the fear of death. These themes were naturally revealed in three sections of this chapter: "Part 1: The Experience

Itself,” “Part 2: Illumination of the Experience,” and “Part 3: The Gifts and Lessons Learned.”

Chapter five presents my final thoughts and reflections about the study, followed by a discussion of how the results relate to the theoretical implications in the literature, with an emphasis on participants’ understanding of the transformation of their fear of death. Next, this chapter discusses the implications for mental health and counselling, especially with respect to end-of-life issues. Finally, it discusses the limitations of the study, suggestions for further research, and provides a conclusion.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The current study explored the transformation of its participants' fear of death that was brought about through mystical experiences while using psilocybin or LSD, or a near-death experience (NDE). The aim of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the transformation of the fear of death that could not be captured through transpersonal or hermeneutic research approaches alone. Therefore, I utilized a combination of these research approaches to delve into those difficult to quantify inner private human experiences encountered in altered states of consciousness that normally are hidden from our normal everyday waking consciousness behind what James (2014) has described as the "filmiest of screens." The intent was to give voice to these exceptional experiences and interpret the expressive accounts of participants' lived experiences so to better understand the transcendental aspects of the mystical states of consciousness encountered while having a NDE or while using psychedelics. It was important to explore how these mystical states of consciousness and their subsequent effects may have transformed participants' fear of death, and to ascertain whether the literature supported this hypothesis (Goldsmith, 2011; Grob, Danforth, Chopra et al., 2011; Grof, 2010; Greyson, 2014).

In this chapter, I present my final thoughts and reflections on the study, beginning with a summary of the findings and what I found to be most significant, followed by a discussion of how these themes relate to the theoretical implications in the literature. Next, I consider how these findings might inform the field, specifically mental health and counselling with respect to end-of-life issues, and the implications of this study for

counsellor education and training. Then, I discuss the limitations of this study, followed by suggestions for future research. Finally, I present the conclusion.

### **Summary of Findings**

How do the mystical experiences of NDEs and psychedelics, specifically psilocybin and LSD, transform the fear of death? Although the experiential content of altered states of consciousness encountered in mystical states is beyond our everyday self or ego, these experiences represent some of the deeper aspects of being human (Cortright, 1997; Grof, 2000; Richards, 2017). Thus, this study aimed to capture the richness of the feelings and meanings of the lived experience of its seven participants by asking this question and conducting interviews with them. The result was an interpretive account that gave voice to these mystical and transcendent states of consciousness in such a way to capture their complexity and meaning. As an implicated researcher, I resonated with my participants' experiences, and yet I was aware of the challenge of how to best describe these experiences with words that could evoke the understanding that I was sensing (Amos, 2016).

The hermeneutic circle represents the dynamic relationship between the whole and the part; in other words, the meaning of the text as a whole informs the meaning of its parts, while, at the same time, the meaning of the parts illuminates the meaning of the whole (Amos, 2016). The hermeneutic circle and the analysis of the participants' interviews produced 3 parts, from which 16 themes emerged. The development of the themes was influenced by a transpersonal, hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry that provided the framework for the methodology of the study, which was aided by

interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a key heuristic device used for interpretation and deeper understanding (Amos, 2016).

### **Part 1: The Experience Itself**

Three main themes conveyed the experiences participants encountered during a NDE or while using psychedelic substances: 1) Allies for Awakening, 2) Magical Mystery Tour, and 3) Sacramental View of Reality. In Theme 1, participants highlighted the importance of a trigger for their awakening experiences. These triggers, or the set and setting, varied for each participant and included their state of mind, the environment, illness, stress, depression, loneliness, and the physiological changes brought on by psychoactive substances. Participants suggested that a greater power was working in their lives to manifest some kind of dramatic life event that triggered these catalysts or exceptional experiences that resulted in the transformation of their consciousness.

Participants felt that they had experienced a deep realization within themselves that something was missing from their lives, which was accompanied by a corresponding movement of being guided towards wholeness. They became aware that they were looking for answers or seeking relief from pain or from past circumstances, and that their inner psyches seemed to know where to lead them for healing. They found that they were on new paths of understanding regarding their current views of reality, especially with respect to their understandings about life and death.

Part of “Theme 1: Allies for Awakening” was specific to those participants guided towards psychedelics as a means for personal growth and healing. This specificity included reading about psychedelics before embarking on such a journey, setting personal goals or intentions, and being prepared for what the psychedelic session could teach

them. Other examples of participants' preparations included the following: being cognizant of their own state of mind, being aware of the environment, having a trusted guide, using rituals, and taking the proper time to reflect and meditate on their experiences.

“Theme 2: Magical Mystery Tour” was the ineffable journey, and words could not capture its significance. This journey enabled participants to connect with alternate dimensions of reality—that included experiencing a transcendence of the usual boundaries of the physical body and/or space and time—which left them with a feeling that they finally had awakened. This subjective inner “experience” of consciousness, free of their ego-mind, enabled their true nature to shine. These journeys revealed a whole new universe of profound sensory splendor that enabled participants to see and hear the world around them as if for the first time. On an emotional level, their inner psyche knew which wounds and conflicts needed to be healed. Mentally, they received knowledge from alternate realms or a divine source, often telepathically.

“Theme 3: A Sacramental View of Reality” was about participants' access to the spiritual dimensions of reality, accompanied by an overwhelming sense of being part of something greater than the self. Participants' thoughts were rapid, and they had experiences with energy and different spirits, and feelings of being connected to unity consciousness, which they often described as joy, sacredness, and great peace. They experienced deep insights and understanding regarding the nature of reality and their place within it, especially in regards to death and their eternal nature. They described these experiences as being more real than reality itself. The magnitude of these

exceptional experiences may have been ineffable and difficult for participants to describe, but they continued to transform their lives as they searched for ways to implement them.

## **Part 2: Illumination of Experience**

Three main themes illuminated the experiences that participants encountered during a NDE or while using psychedelics: 1) The Meaning of it All, 2) Clear Away the Past and Enhance the Present, and 3) Tapping into the Energy of Now. This illumination process was a journey of transformation for participants, which included the transformation of their worldviews, identity, and ultimately their entire being, both internally and externally.

“Theme 1: The Meaning of It All” reflects how participants began to shed their preconceived and internalized beliefs about the self and to let go of false, deeply ingrained negative scripts, which enabled them to see that they had been disconnected from their true self or essence. This connection with their true self enabled them to trust in what they had experienced, which led to an expanded sense of being connected with the unifying source of all that is. In other words, they understood unity or “Thou art That.” The self of each person is not separate from the source; it is the same indivisible reality both within and without. NDEs or acceptance of human mortality were intrinsically valid experiences for participants, which radically changed their worldviews and activated spiritual awakenings. After these experiences, participants understood that wisdom comes from their essence, not from their cognitive mind. They innately understood that they were much more than their mind because they were spiritual beings with access to the experience of their minds, bodies, and emotions, as well as their souls or essence.

“Theme 2: Clear Away the Past and Enhance the Present” involved participants moving from the exoteric to the esoteric when they asked who or what dies? By encountering these mystical states of consciousness, they came to a realization that their identities would not be ruptured by the death of their physical bodies. These powerful experiences enabled them to discover the transient nature of their physical identities as they saw through the many self-defense mechanisms that had been created to distract them from the betrayal of forgetting their true selves. They were able to transcend their ego-mind and their identification with their created false selves, which gave them access to higher modes of knowing and understanding. They finally understood the illusion of the separateness they had been living, and how to move beyond the conditions of their normally limited perception to experience the totality of their existence. Through this transformational process, participants were able to truly accept “what is” and trust that they were enough, just as they were. The meaning inherent in “what is” increases our health and well-being. These valuable insights often are the goal of many therapeutic interventions, and they played a powerful role in how participants viewed their lives, including death and what might lie beyond.

By experiencing a reality beyond their sense of self and ego, participants were able to reformulate their worldviews and let go of emotional baggage that no longer served them. As was suggested in Theme 3, participants needed to stop fighting their own reality. Surrendering to this wisdom enabled them to be present in the moment and to focus on their own intuition or any synchronicities or signs they were given. Participants recognized their own powerlessness and inability to control the events and circumstances



in their lives, which gave them more clarity to see their reality as it was, and thus appreciate the now that illuminates their way of being in the world.

### **Part 3: The Gifts and Lessons Learned**

This section examined the subsequent transformational effects of exceptional mystical experiences in participants' lives, especially as they related to their fear of death, which included 10 themes: 1) We Are Here to Learn Lessons, 2) Moving Towards Wholeness, 3) Missing the Point, 4) Living Lessons Learned, 5) Service to Others, 6) Transformation of Death, 7) Encounter With Ultimate Reality, 8) Medicine for the Soul, 9) Positive Aftereffects, and 10) Sharing the Vision.

“Theme 1: We Are Here to Learn Lessons” involved the understanding that life was a school and that we continue to come back to this physical time-space reality to learn more lessons. One lesson was that life is cyclical in nature—a continuous wheel of birth, rebirth, and death. Another lesson was for the evolution and expansion of our consciousness and/or souls. These lessons were to teach participants the importance of the whole of existence and service to others, which is not about individual pursuit or success. Participants seemed to gain an awareness of *karma*—that everything they did to themselves, they did to every living thing. This awareness came from their understanding of unity consciousness, that all is connected. From a transpersonal perspective, they began to live and experience their lives with more conscious awareness, with an understanding that their consciousness always was evolving and changing, which gave them a sense of healing and growth in their lives.

“Theme 2: Moving Towards Wholeness” involved participants' recognition of their own essential nature, which is spirit. They realized that they were moving towards

wholeness by recognizing their own true presence, and by living with the awareness of their true nature. These experiences enabled them to see through the collection of things that the ego had used to prop up their sense of identity. They learned to let go of their attachment to the material world, including their belief in a unique and separate identity, which led them to the truth of their true nature. This awareness, in turn, helped them to realize their own timeless immortality in relation to the whole of existence, and they began to integrate all of the pieces of themselves (body, mind, soul, and spirit). These powerful insights led to radical changes in their being that were manifested in their cultivation of living with presence, which gave them the ability to be truly present with others and enabled them to fully live an authentic life.

“Theme 3: Missing the Point” involved what had become important and meaningful to participants once they viewed their life through the eyes of their soul. They described this experience as an awakening from a dream, and now that they were consciously aware and fully awake, they could live their lives in an authentic state of being. This state enabled them to realize some of the things that made their lives more meaningful, which included the joy of life itself. Thus, they began to appreciate and understand the importance of things, such as making true connections with others, relationships, being a better person, and knowing there was something more to life beyond their rational mind. In light of these insights, they also understood that material success was not so important.

“Theme 4: Living Lessons Learned” involved the lessons participants learned from their exceptional mystical experiences. They described their journey of transformation as a cultivation of virtues and values that had real world applications.

They recalled that the lessons they learned from these experiences were never-ending and that they required a continuing awareness to expand their insights. This ongoing work included letting go of old ways of thinking and being, and letting in new ways of being that was true to their soul's purpose. Participants strived to cultivate many of life's important virtues—such as love, compassion, gratitude, courage, generosity, and humility—while trying to integrate their mystical experiences into their lives. By mirroring these virtues in their interactions with others, they were able to find new meaning and purpose in their lives.

“Theme 5: Service to Others” involved how participants moved from self-enhancement towards more meaningful social behaviour. This theme implies the integration of participants' experiences and spiritual growth, which fostered a desire to actively help others, including participating in the present study. They began to look for new ways to share their energy and time with others that nourished their souls. Service to others and “being the change” were signs that participants were actively connecting to others and to life itself, which indicated that their exceptional experiences had ignited their journeys of transformation and growth.

“Theme 6: Transformation of Death” involved how participants' exceptional experiences changed their perspectives on the meaning of life and death. Participants who experienced an ASC during a NDE or while using psychedelics came to the same conclusion—death makes life possible. Understanding their own truth about death became possible once they understood that they were more than their ego. These personal and subjective experiences released their fears about death, and thus transformed these fears. Once participants identified with their true self or essence, they understood that

although their physical bodies would die, they would not die, which led them to the understanding that death was ultimately a transition, akin to changing clothes. This new understanding of death and their eternal nature changed everything, including how they live their lives now. They realized that death was an illusion because their experience of transcendence taught them that their separate self was an illusion, which helped them to shed their ego.

“Theme 7: Encounter With Ultimate Reality” involved participants’ understanding that humanity has an innate drive for a spiritual journey towards wholeness. Participants mirrored this journey as they worked to integrate the split-off aspects of themselves. By identifying with their true essence during their peak mystical experiences, they were able to momentarily drop their identity with their ego. Then, they were able to see that they were part of a greater whole, but more importantly, they also were able to see how they fit in with and affected the whole. This growth reflected a sense of relativity and interrelationship. In other words, they were aware that they are a part of something more, without separation. A deeper understanding that their consciousness transcends beyond the awareness of their ego identity gave participants access to their souls, their guide to wholeness. This realization enabled them to grow and transform. These mystical states of consciousness enabled them to recognize themselves as the source of all that is, just as they realized that consciousness is the source of all that is. These spiritual awakenings enabled them to access the higher transpersonal aspects of themselves, which led them to an understanding that transcendental reality was available in their everyday lives because they had not lost the knowledge gained from their

experiences and they were able to connect to their true nature because there is no separation, it is all one and the same.

“Theme 8: Medicine for the Soul” involved an intervention and mystic working together to ignite participants’ desires for change and opportunities for transformation. An *intervention* could be an idea or a feeling that moved them to take action, and the *mystic* was the divine energy within participants’ souls. Although a NDE was considered to be a difficult mystical intervention, participants could understand its value, which was similar to the experience of participants who had moments of intense difficulty during a psychedelic journey. Participants recounted that the rewards and lessons they learned often were worth the risk because they revealed the hidden aspects of the self that needed to be healed. It is interesting to note that all participants who used psychedelics discussed how powerful these drugs were and the importance of their responsible use, which included doing research and gaining knowledge about these drugs, set and setting, therapeutic use versus recreational use, intention and purpose, training and a guide, and caution and respect.

“Theme 9: Positive Aftereffects” was a culmination of how these mind-expanding experiences impacted all facets of the participants’ lives and how these changes continue to inform their way of being and their view of reality today. The greatest gift to emerge for participants was the freedom from the bondage of the egoic self, which translated into a deeper self-love that emerged from an intrinsic knowing and appreciation of their connection to their true self, soul, or consciousness. The knowledge they gained that they were connected to something greater than themselves has dramatically shifted their worldviews, and increased their gratitude and appreciation for their own human

experience and life. This new appreciation for life came from their realization that death was nothing to fear, which was accompanied by their cultivation of awareness. They described this awareness as being key to their success. They realized that if they could witness their own experience with conscious awareness and remain in their own authentic state of being or presence, their lessons and gifts—such as compassion, recognizing synchronicities, and staying in the moment—came to them with more ease and grace.

“Theme 10: Sharing the Vision” involved participants’ willingness to share the insights and lessons they learned with others, with an honesty and vulnerability that were truly heart-warming. The totality of these exceptional experiences enabled participants to experience the transpersonal dimensions of reality, which inspired feelings of cosmic unity, intense emotional states, heightened insights and spiritual understanding, self-transformation, and most notably a change in their perceptions of death (Goldsmith, 2011).

### **Implications for Theory**

This section discusses how participants’ experiences (in the form of the themes discussed in Chapter Four) relate to the theory previously discussed in the literature review in Chapter Two. I discuss the aspects of these exceptional mystical experiences that appear to be congruent with the findings from the present study and the existing theory in the literature, and also any challenges or gaps that the present study might have illuminated. According to Grof (1990), these themes reflect the characteristics of the transcendent experiences and mystical states of consciousness that can occur through spontaneous events such as a NDE or through a self-induced ingestion of psychedelics.

In light of the present study, the transpersonal view of development is important to consider. According to Cortright (1997), whether this development is linear, chaotic, or cyclical, the transpersonal view posits that consciousness or spirit is the specific essence that defines a human being, and humans have an innate desire to move towards wholeness. Participants' descriptions clearly validated Cortright's theory when they described feeling as if their deeper spirit seemed to be expressing its will through their ego self to facilitate healing and growth. Their recounting of their movement towards wholeness was similar to Dowling-Sing's (1998) expressed belief that human beings become whole by returning to their essence.

Participants also highlighted the importance of a trigger for these awakening experiences, which aligns with previous research regarding spiritual development and individuals in psychospiritual crisis. Participants suggested that a greater power was working in their lives to manifest some kind of dramatic life event, which triggered these catalysts or exceptional experiences that resulted in the transformation of their consciousness, thus beginning their process of self-inquiry and exploration. Individuals who experience a crisis due to trauma, illness, or psychedelic drug use can grow spiritually if they can accept, explore, and learn from these experiences (Kasprow & Scotton, 1999; Mackinnon, 2012).

Participants' choices to use psychedelics raises a question regarding set and setting as examined within the literature. For example, the participants who purposely chose to ingest psychedelics for their own personal growth used large doses of the drug with an intention to induce a mystical experience (Garcia-Romeu, Kersgaard, & Addy, 2016; Grof, 1975; Grof, 1980; Metzner, 2017). Although participants paid particular

attention to set and setting—*set* being their state of mind and *setting* being the environment in which they ingested the drugs—this context was a natural setting rather than a carefully prepared research setting (Metzner, 2017). The limitations of this type of research (psychedelic-assisted treatments) have important implications, since the present study has shown that individuals currently are participating in their own version of these types of activities.

According to Grof (1990) and the findings of the current study, the benefit of experiencing altered states of consciousness—made possible through NDEs or LSD and psilocybin use—is that they provide access to non-ordinary realms, which provide novel ways to understand the meaning and structure of the universe. Participants described being on a journey or having the ability to explore other dimensions of reality outside of their normal time-space reality or the physical material universe, an encounter known as a *transpersonal experience* (Grof, 1990). These transpersonal experiences involved non-ordinary states of consciousness that participants encountered during a NDE or while using psychedelic substances (Grof, 1990; 2000; 2010). More importantly, these transpersonal experiences have the capacity to bring about mystical states and a sense of unity consciousness, and they have been shown to reduce the fear of death and increase understanding about the transient nature of the physical self (Cortright, 1997; Grof, 2010; Johnson et al., 2008).

Participants' accounts of their NDEs matched many of the NDE characteristics found in the literature. The profound altered states of consciousness experienced during a NDE were accompanied by a subjective sense of transcending the time-space dimension, an inability to describe the experience, an out-of-body experience, a tunnel of bright light,



encounters with spiritual beings and/or light, a sense of enhanced awareness, an acceleration of thought and knowledge, an encounter with a border, and a return to the body (Greyson, 2003; 2006; Metzner, 2017; Moody, 1975).

Participants who ingested psychedelic substances also experienced mystical states of consciousness that produced significant and profound alterations in their thoughts or awareness, which amplified the meaning they attributed to these experiences (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2016; Goldsmith, 2011; Griffiths, Richards, Johnson, McCann, & Jesse, 2008). Participants' described many of their experiences—brought about by a NDE or psychedelic use—as mystical, which supports the consensus in the literature. These mystical experiences included feelings of awe and peace, an inability to describe the experience, a sense of being in the presence of a power bigger than oneself, a sense of unity, an encounter with energy, an experience with a bright light, deeply felt positive moods, a transcendence of space and time, and noetic in quality (Goldsmith, 2011; Greyson, 2006, 2014).

Participants who had a psychedelic mystical experience described the following characteristics: objectivity and paradoxicality, a loss of space and time, an inability to explain the experience, deep feelings of awe, access to insightful knowledge, and a connection to unity consciousness (Pahnke & Richards, 1966). Furthermore, many of these characteristics compare to the characteristics of the mystical NDE and the mystical “nearing death experience” (Greyson, 2006), which participants described as being more real than reality itself. These findings support the evidence in the studies by Greyson (2014) and Grof (2000) that found that the NDE and psychedelic experiences were more

lucid than reality itself and are often remembered with more detail than ordinary experiences.

According to Greyson (2003) and Grof (2000), these non-ordinary states of consciousness have been found to offer insight, meaning, and purpose to the lives of those who have encountered them. “Part 2: Illumination of the Experience” describes how participants began an illumination process that was a journey of transformation of the self and how these experiences can be understood through the framework of transpersonal theory and the developmental stages of consciousness as found in the literature (Dowling-Singh, 1998; Wilber, 2016). Social and cultural contexts influence our sense of self and help our mental egos to build a personal identity. These experiences enabled participants to restructure many of their own rigid behaviours and negative thoughts patterns, including depression and anxiety symptoms, which often is the goal of therapy. These findings support the findings of the research conducted with healthy volunteers to study the psychological effects of LSD (Carhart-Harris et al., 2016), which were found to produce intense positive results, such as heightened mood, increased optimism, and overall improvements in psychological growth and well-being.

Participants’ experiences with mystical states of consciousness gave them an opportunity to see beyond the awareness of their ego identities, which enabled them to experience transpersonal realms of awareness (Cortright, 1997; Dowling-Singh, 1998). As discussed in Chapter 2, *transpersonal consciousness* is the experience of unity consciousness, which includes a level of being and awareness, identity, and knowing that is beyond the ego and a sense of a separate self (Cortright, 1997; Dowling-Singh, 1998; Wilber, 2016). As a result of their mystical experiences, participants finally could see

through the illusion of separateness that they had been living. These exceptional experiences enabled them to pierce through the veil of illusion, past the conditions of their normally limited perception, to experience the totality of their existence.

Participants came to understand unity consciousness and that they were a part of its essence. They had a true sense of being connected to a broader reality, and they realized deeply that they were not separate individuals. This realization is discussed in the teachings of nondualism, and is supported by Liquorman (2012) who concurs that the ego-self manipulates us into believing we are separate and powerful individuals. This relationship between being and understanding also strongly resembles Richards and Pahnke's (1966) findings regarding death and non-existence, since participants of the present study came to understand that their existence was more about being a part of unity consciousness than being a separate individual.

These valuable insights played a powerful role in how participants viewed their lives, including death and what might lie beyond. Both NDEs and psychedelic experiences gave them deep insights into the nature of reality and their place within it, especially in regards to death and their eternal nature. These insights support Lorimer's (1990) understanding that the expansion of consciousness encountered during these mystical states of consciousness are believed to be related to the fear of death itself. Participants who had a direct and personal experience with death and faced their own mortality during a NDE or symbolically while using psychedelics came to the same conclusion—death makes life possible. This awareness aligns with Grof's (2000) research that found that an experiential confrontation with death can create potential healing and transformation. Once participants understood that were more than their egos,

their own truth about death became possible. According to research, an encounter with death—whether experiential or symbolic in nature (i.e., within a psychedelic session) or real (NDE)—can bring about powerful insights and spiritual transformation, and reduce the fear of death (Becker, 1973; Greyson, 2003; Grof, 2000; Yalom, 1980).

These personal and subjective experiences released participants from their fears about death, which transformed these fears. Once they identified with their true self or essence, they understood that although their physical bodies would die, they would not die, an awareness which enabled them to realize that death ultimately was a transition akin to changing their clothes. According to Greyson (2014), NDEs are most notably associated with a decreased fear of death, followed by an increased appreciation for life. These findings are similar to the lived experience of participants in the present study who had a NDE, since they too had life-altering changes in their attitudes, beliefs, and values. After a NDE, participants understood their eternal nature, the highest realization of our human existence, because the experience offered them a glimpse into life beyond their material existence (Greyson, 2010).

Participants in the present study reported spiritual growth and a renewed sense of meaning and purpose within their lives. These findings may be partially explained by the studies described in Chapter 2 that explored the psychopharmacological effects of psychedelics in healthy individuals (Griffiths et al., 2006). In these studies, healthy participants were given a high dose of psilocybin, and the results showed that their experience had a profound effect on their sense of spirituality and personal meaning. The results of the present study showed that participants experienced a reduction in their fear of death, which corroborates the findings of an earlier study (Grob et al., 2011) that found

that psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy was associated with a decrease in the fear of death and a reduction in anxiety and improved mood for individuals with advanced cancer. According to Strassman (2001), psychedelic experiences that involve the dissolution of the ego give their experiencers access to higher dimensions, and the result they most often report is a reduced fear of death. Participants in the present study who encountered a symbolic experience of death through using psychedelics reported experiences that were both transformative and mystical in nature, which changed their attitudes towards death.

The fact that the participants of the present study were called to action by their mystical experiences, which manifested in service to others, is an indication of the power of these transformational experiences. Once they had connected to their true selves and were living a more authentic life, they opened themselves to different ways of being in the world, which included more meaningful connections and interactions with others. This innate desire to help others, showed participants desire to help others in the world around them. This idea aligns with Maslow's concept of *self-transcendence*, which posits that if we reach this state, we are motivated to help others reach their full potential (Gawande, 2014; Roberts, 2013).

The results from the present study suggest that the two transcendental states experienced by participants—either initiated by a NDE or while using psychedelics—produced profound changes in them. Moreover, their salient memories of these experiences were intrinsically valid and life-altering. As indicated by Richards (2017), these transcendental experiences are carried forward in individual's memories, which appear to be the therapeutic factor that induces change.

Participants in the present study came back from these experiences fundamentally transformed. They became more altruistic, less self-centered, less afraid of death, and more engaged with their own ideas of spirituality. In this context, *spirituality* could be a universal human experience, since it was mystical, non-denominational, and all-encompassing (Grof, 2010, p. 381). Participants' experiences in the present study reflect and validate the aspects of transpersonal theory described in the literature (Dowling-Singh, 1998; Wilber, 2016). Although transpersonal psychology does not promote any particular belief system, the evidence from participants' experiences in the present study acknowledges the genuine nature of their spiritual experiences and the transformative nature of their transcendent states, which are believed to be universal experiences (Grof, 2008; Kaspro & Scotton, 1999). The next section discusses the results of this study and its implications for mental health, specifically counselling.

### **Implications for Counselling**

Although this study did not deal directly with counselling, its results indicate that our personal awareness of death plays a significant role in how we live and how we transform (Schlitz, 2015). Moreover, even though the findings from this study do not prove what happens to us after we die, it provides us with new reasons why we should consider our own mortality. These findings ask us to reconsider the benefits of addressing our own denial of death, and how this process can potentially liberate us from our fear of death and possibly transform the way we live. In addition, addressing our fear of death has significant implications for those involved in healthcare and mental health, especially counsellors offering psychospiritual or bereavement support for clients at their end-of-life.

Despite the relevance of this topic—fear of death—for everyone, many of us hesitate to talk about our own mortality. This denial has serious implications for those who seek counselling help after a diagnosis of a terminal illness or those who are trying to help their loved ones end their lives in a compassionate and dignified manner. Helping professionals' understanding of their own worldview about death and others' worldviews about death and dying is paramount to their providing adequate social, psychological, philosophical, and spiritual support for those who are dying (Grof & Halifax, 1977). Having a counsellor who is comfortable with talking about death is important because existential anxiety increases at the end-of-life, and by not talking about death, the dying individual misses the opportunity to share their final wishes with family and friends (Grof & Danforth, 2013; Schlitz, 2015). Counsellors must do their own personal work in regards to their own mortality because, otherwise, they may be limited in being able to talk about death when helping others. Moreover, since a dying person loses autonomy and personal power, and family members can be burdened by end-of-life decisions, not being supported to talk about death can make their grieving process longer and more difficult (Schlitz, 2015).

This present study also showed that our worldviews about death can make a difference in how we live our lives. Participants who became aware of their own mortality and who lost their fear of death, now live their lives with meaning and purpose. The study also revealed that participants' transformation of their fear of death through direct personal experience of mystical states of consciousness made them aware of broader realms of existence beyond the physical world (Grof, 2010; Schlitz, 2015). This kind of awareness in a client can challenge a counsellor's definition of reality, which may

require an expanded ontology or model of reality to help them to be open to and embrace their client's differing worldview about death. A holistic approach might enable counsellors to find a meeting point between noetic insights and the predominant current rational understanding of mind and matter, which could help them to meet their clients with an open mind in the here-and-now. Counsellors could use this knowledge to help clients accept their death process, and find meaning in their lives, so they could live the remainder of their time more fully and with less anxiety (Richards, 2017).

As indicated by this study, many experiences of transformation are beyond language. Therefore, being able to help clients make sense of these exceptional experiences is key to their integration process. Some danger exists that these experiences will be pathologized or dismissed by some counsellors because they misunderstand them, they are difficult to talk about, are initiated by illegal substances, or are inexplicable in nature (e.g., a NDE). Counsellors need to understand a mystical or transcendent experience that points to unity consciousness or a reduction in a client's fear of death, so they can fully facilitate these experiences. If these exceptional experiences are denied or repressed by a counsellor, psychosomatic symptoms and emotional disturbances may result from the incomplete processing of the unconscious themes related to mortality and impermanence, whereas proper integration can lead to healing and transformation (Grof, 2010, p. 310). According to Grof (2010), research indicates that allowing these death-related themes to reach our conscious awareness minimizes their influence in our life experience. This helps to explain why some terminal cancer patients no longer fear death even though their biological demise is looming (Grof, 2010). Therefore, it is imperative that counsellors have a better understanding of the significance of these subjective



experiences, so they can help their clients to make meaning of them and integrate these transformative experiences into their lives in a meaningful way.

The mystical transformations of both the NDE and the psychedelic journey have potential implications for promoting death acceptance, especially in regards to end-of-life counselling. To change the stigma around death, we need to bring death awareness into the counsellor's office and the education system; and we need to find new ways to train future counsellors. The findings from the present study show their potential implications for creating a new model for living and dying that could be used to guide the development of future training programs and decisions regarding the inclusion of psychedelic experiences for therapists in training. The findings from this study also support the evidence in the literature regarding the efficacy of psychedelics for therapeutic interventions, especially psychedelic-assisted treatments for end-of-life.

This study also supports the notion that education and training programs would benefit by integrating a transpersonal, nondual perspective when considering these exceptional mystical experiences that transform the fear of death. Transpersonal and nondual perspectives appreciate the psychospiritual transformation of the ego, and support exploration into who and what we truly are, including the knowledge gained from non-ordinary states (Cortright, 1997; Grof, 2010; Liquorman, 2012). This approach opens the possibility of creating a new framework for teaching an aging population to prepare for death. Many intuitive insights can be gained from these experiences, which can help to change our widespread fear of death by bringing a new awareness to our natural relationship with our own mortality (Assante, 2012; Dowling-Singh, 1998; Schlitz, 2015).

The next section discusses the limitations of the current study.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study aimed to understand the transformation of the fear of death that was initiated by participants' mystical experiences while using psilocybin or LSD or having a NDE. I structured the study in such a way that it gave voice to these exceptional experiences and the deeper meaning that participants attributed to them.

Although research into liminal zones values the knowledge gained from transpersonal experiences and encounters with altered states of consciousness, it is important to be aware of its limitations by recognizing the ambiguity and non-state specific memory involved when recalling such phenomenon (Davidson, 2013; Metzner, 2017). A further limitation to consider is the timeframe between participants' experience and their recollection, specifically, the time of the interview (i.e., either 2 years or 30 years), which could have an effect on the overall results. For example, participants who had these experiences over 30 years ago may remember broad details and their integration process entirely different from the participants who had their exceptional experience just 2 years ago.

With respect to the interviews, other limitations need to be considered. Participants were asked to capture a memory of their exceptional experiences during a 60–120 minute interview. I could not control some factors that might have affected this particular snapshot in time, including the participant's mood, level of tiredness, hunger, anxiety, etc. Furthermore, I conducted the interviews via Skype or in-person, which may have affected the validity of the results. For example, Skype interviews may have altered or affected the content that participants were willing to share, compared to in-person

interviews that may have provided additional feedback via nonverbal cues and body language. Nevertheless, I experienced moments of intense connection and resonance with the participants despite the interview modality.

Another potential limitation to consider is methodology. Since I only interviewed seven participants for this study to allow for a deep and rich uncovering of their accounts of the phenomenon, the generalizability of the study findings are limited. In addition, I chose a small, homogenous, and geographically confined sample of participants. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that similar research on the transformation of the fear of death initiated by NDEs or psychedelic experience provides some evidence for generalizability.

Another concern regarding the sample size relates to the potential of psychedelics to create psychological and physical dependence. As previously discussed in Chapter 2, the potential for severe psychological or physical dependence on classic psychedelics is actually quite low (Goldsmith, 2011). The small sample size of participants in this study were responsible with the use of these drugs, and they respected the therapeutic value of the intense states of mind they produced. It must be noted that while these drugs are not physically addictive, a larger sample size of participants may include some who are encouraged to repeat their use because of the powerful transcendent feelings that these drugs produce (Goldsmith, 2011).

Also important to note are the limitations of the implicated researcher. This study was explored through a specific lens, which also was informed by my own personal experiences with the phenomena under study (Anderson, 2015). Therefore, the majority of the themes developed were cultivated through my own experience of the phenomena

and my own interpretation of participants' accounts. As noted in Chapter 3, it was impossible for me to separate myself from the phenomena under study, and I addressed this limitation by exploring my own reflections and understandings of the interpretations as they naturally unfolded.

Last, the main research question focused on the transformational aspects of the mystical nature of the experience initiated by psilocybin or LSD use or a NDE. Although this focus is a strength of the study, restricting the topic to only the transformational aspects of these experiences opens the possibility of skewing the information uncovered. Although participants described aspects of their experience that were difficult and disorienting, by focusing on the transformative characteristics of these exceptional experiences, I did not give an equal voice to any negative subjective experiences (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2016; Goldsmith, 2011). This limitation could create a misunderstanding that these transformative experiences were solely positive.

Despite these limitations, the current study has added more depth and understanding to how the mystical nature of psilocybin, LSD, and the NDE can transform the fear of death for their experiencers. The results have painted a picture of the manifestation of these exceptional experiences and their integration process, which may provide a frame of reference for future counsellors to help their clients make sense of these kinds of transpersonal experiences especially as they relate to reducing the fear of death.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

While most researchers today understand that psychedelic-assisted treatments require a therapist who is trained and understands the importance of managing the set and

setting to maximize positive outcomes, the results of this study clearly show that no serious adverse effects were observed without the aid of a therapist (Johnson, Richards & Griffiths, 2008). While this type of research is currently limited, the results of the present study clearly indicate that people are using psychedelics for their own therapeutic potential.

Thus, the present study can be utilized by future research to explore these exceptional experiences—with the aid of a therapist—with respect to facilitating the integration process for experiencers. Although, the NDE cannot be replicated, in hospital settings, a counselor could be employed to ask clients about their NDE to ensure that these exceptional experiences are being captured, so we can learn from them. Although, it might be difficult to find participants immediately after a psychedelic experience, it would be interesting to see if exploring these exceptional experiences with a counsellor outside of a research setting would help participants to illuminate their experiences. This approach would enable a counsellor to investigate the natural set and setting of a participant's exceptional experience and still make use of the counsellor's knowledge of various modalities to interpret the participant's experience.

Additional research questions regarding integration could be studied such as the following: Does a counsellor aid the integration process with more insight, or does integration occur faster, or can the therapist reveal hidden or unseen aspects of the experience? This in turn could lead to a longitudinal study of the effects of such experiences in participants' lives to explore whether these changes are lasting, and to capture the different ways this change has occurred. Do the changes wear off? How do these changes affect others? If possible, a participant could be followed until their own

physical demise to see whether the transformation of the fear of death has real world applications.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, this study has explored the lived experience of individuals who have had their own fear of death transformed through the mystical nature of LSD, psilocybin, or the NDE. I am forever grateful for the participants who let me into their lives to share their experiences of transformation. Through this sharing, I feel as if they have added depth and meaning to answer my research questions from their combined wisdom, understanding, and insights. As we explored how death gives our lives meaning, transformation occurred simultaneously for all of us—for participants, as they learned more about themselves and what these experiences meant for them; and for myself, as I learned more about what these experiences meant to me. It is my hope that the readers will also experience transformation, perhaps from learning something new, or from realizing the importance of facing their own mortality.

“If you know yourself as someone beyond time and space, your identity will have expanded to include death” (Chopra, 2006, p. 26).

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## **Appendix A: Recruitment Poster and Scripts**

### **Online Group Pages/Facebook Recruitment**

Hello (*insert community name if applicable*)

My name is Janet Nielsen and I am a graduate student at the University of Lethbridge. I am interested in exploring the effects of spiritual transformations on experiencer's lives in the context of the near-death experience (NDE) and using psychedelics, specifically psilocybin and/or LSD and how these occurrences specifically reduce the fear of death. For my research I am looking for individuals who have had either of these exceptional human experiences (EHEs) either one or both, (NDE and/or psychedelics, or both combined) who have been transformed by that experience and are willing to share and explore their experience during an interview. This study would require approximately 3 to 4 hours of your time in total and would include a telephone screening process, an audio-recorded interview, and a follow-up discussion to review preliminary results. Your participation in this research would make you an active participant who would collaborate and provide feedback during the research process in order to better understand the transformative nature of these life-altering phenomena. In this study, the procedures and methods have been designed to promote confidentiality, anonymity, and minimize risk to any potential participants. Participation is voluntary and there are not any negative consequences if a participant chooses to withdraw. If you chose to withdraw all information collected from you will be destroyed.

If you wish to participate and share your story as part of this research project, or would like to know more about the study, please contact me using the following information:

[j.nielsen@uleth.ca](mailto:j.nielsen@uleth.ca)





## Appendix B: Recruitment Poster

Have you ever had a spiritual transformation? In the context of the near-death experience (NDE), and/or using psychedelics, specifically psilocybin and/or LSD?

This study is a graduate research project on the effects of spiritual transformations on experiencer's lives in the context of the near-death experience (NDE) and using psychedelics, specifically psilocybin and/or LSD and how these occurrences specifically reduce the fear of death.

Principal Researcher: Janet Nielsen, M.Ed. (Student)

Research Supervisor: Dr. Marcia Rich

Volunteers for this study will be asked to explore and share their life altering, mystical experiences, in relation to NDEs and psilocybin, and/or LSD.

Participation in this study would require approximately 3-4 hours of your time (In total), as part of a phone screening, an audio-recorded interview, and a follow-up discussion.

In this study, procedures and methods have been designed to promote confidentiality, anonymity, and minimize risk to the participants.

If your experiences of either one of these transformational experiences (NDE or psychedelics), has changed your life and you are interested in participating in this research study, or would like more information, please contact:

Janet Nielsen

[j.nielsen@uleth.ca](mailto:j.nielsen@uleth.ca)

## Appendix C: Recruitment Email

*E-mail Subject Line:* Transforming the Fear of Death Through Near Death Experiences And Experiential Psychedelics

*(Insert community name, or the University of Lethbridge)*

*(Insert Date)*

Dear *(Insert Potential Research Participant's Name)*:

Thank you for responding and expressing interest in the research project, titled, “Spiritual Transformation of Near Death Experiences and Experiential Psychedelics: A transpersonal Hermeneutic Phenomenological Inquiry.”

My name is Janet Nielsen and I am a graduate student at the University of Lethbridge. I am interested in exploring the effects of spiritual transformations on experiencer’s lives in the context of the near-death experience (NDE) and/or using psychedelics, specifically psilocybin, and/or LSD and how these occurrences specifically reduce the fear of death. For my research I am looking for individuals who have had either of these exceptional human experiences (EHEs) either one or both, (NDEs, psychedelics, or both combined) and who have been transformed by that experience and are willing to share and explore their experience during an interview.

This study would require approximately 3 to 4 hours of your time in total and would include a telephone screening process, an audio-recorded interview, and a follow-up discussion to review preliminary results. Your participation in this research would make you an active participant who would collaborate and provide feedback during the research process in order to better understand the transformative nature of these life-altering phenomena. In this study, the procedures and methods have been designed in order to promote confidentiality, anonymity, and minimize risk to any potential participants. Participation is voluntary and there are not any negative consequences if a participant chooses to withdraw. Furthermore, if you wish to leave the study for any reason, you are able to withdraw any time during the interview process, or before transcription, or up to four weeks after receiving the transcribed interview, without penalty and without question. If you choose to withdraw up until this point (4 weeks) all information collected from you will be destroyed. After the 4-week time period, the information will have gone through data analysis and written in a final draft of the thesis and it will not be possible to remove from the study.

Participation in this study may cause some risks or discomforts related to this research. This includes triggering emotional or psychological discomfort regarding the discussion of illegal substance use, and possible breach of confidentiality (i.e. unintentional theft of research material, or its seizure by authorities). However, should you need assistance with any sensitive issues that come up for you, you can call University of Lethbridge Counselling Services at 403 317-2845.

If you have any other questions regarding your rights as co-researcher in this research, you may also contact the Office of Research Ethics, University of Lethbridge 403-329-2747 or [research.services@uleth.ca](mailto:research.services@uleth.ca).

At this point, I would like to invite you to participate in this research study and schedule an initial screening phone call. This call could take up to 30 minutes, please provide a phone number, and time/date that works for your schedule.

If you have any questions or would like more information please feel free to contact me at: [j.nielsen@uleth.ca](mailto:j.nielsen@uleth.ca)

## Appendix D: Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria was chosen to support the evidence within the literature. Therefore, participants must have had a near-death experience (NDE) and/or psychedelic experience that was transformative, meaning that it had a significant impact on their lives and met some of the characteristics of a mystical experience. The inclusion list was as follows:

- Must be over 18 years of age.
- Must have had a NDE.
- NDE was transcendent in nature (i.e., a sense of being out of the body, an altered perception of time and space, enhanced awareness, etc.).
- This NDE experience was transformative (i.e., it made you change your life in significant ways or reevaluate your worldviews).

AND/OR

- Must have used psilocybin and/or LSD.
- Must have had a mystical or transcendental experience from using psilocybin and/or LSD (i.e., a sense of unity, a strong sense of the interconnectedness of all people and things; sacredness, reverence, or awe; noetic quality, a sense of encountering ultimate reality; transcendence of time and space; deeply felt positive mood; and ineffability, the experience cannot adequately be described).
- Psychedelic experience was transformative (i.e., it made you change your life in significant ways or reevaluate your worldviews).
- Must be motivated to share experience and are able to articulate experience.
- Must be able to provide consent themselves.

- Must not be in a current state of emotional crisis.

Gender, race, ethnicity, employment status, and religious values were not considered for the inclusion criteria in this study. If participants met the criteria, I invited them to participate in the research study, and they chose a pseudonym and a time and date for the semi-structured interview.

## Appendix E: The Initial Screening Process

I used a telephone contact to screen potential co-researchers. I introduced myself and explained my role as a graduate student at the University of Lethbridge, and described my current interest in exploring the transformative nature of NDEs and psychedelic journeys, specifically psilocybin and/or LSD. I explained that my participants needed to meet the inclusion criteria, first by answering the questions below. If this initial screening process was a match, I then explained the rest of the data collection process, and the length of time required from a participant, which was approximately 3–4 hours, and the methods I would use to carry out the interview. The interview process took approximately 60 to 90 minutes, and I required that it be audio recorded. I explained that I would personally transcribe all of the interview material. I also explained that I would follow-up with the participants after transcribing the interviews to ensure that the information collected was accurate. I collected demographic information and a pseudonym chosen by participants during the following screening questions:

- Are you 18 years old or over?
- Where do you live?
- Have you ever had a near-death experience?
- Was it transcendent? (i.e., a sense of unity, a strong sense of the interconnectedness of all people and things; sacredness, reverence, or awe; noetic quality, a sense of encountering ultimate reality; transcendence of time and space; deeply felt positive mood; and ineffability, the experience cannot adequately be described)

- Would you describe this experience as transformative? (i.e., it made you change your life in significant ways or reevaluate your worldviews)
- Have you ever used psilocybin and/or LSD?
- Have you had a mystical or transcendental experience from using psilocybin and/or LSD? (i.e., a sense of unity, a strong sense of the interconnectedness of all people and things; sacredness, reverence, or awe; noetic quality, a sense of encountering ultimate reality; transcendence of time and space; deeply felt positive mood; and ineffability, the experience cannot adequately be described)
- Would you describe this experience as transformative? (i.e., it made you change your life in significant ways or reevaluate your worldviews)
- Are you willing to share and explore these transformational experiences?
- Are you currently in a state of emotional crisis?
- Discussing these types of experiences might cause some discomfort or bring up intense memories or emotions for you. Do you believe you are able to share this story?



## Appendix F: Adult Letter of Consent

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### **Transforming the Fear of Death Through Near-Death Experiences and Experiential Psychedelics: A Transpersonal Hermeneutic Phenomenological Inquiry**

*(Insert Date)*

Dear Participant:

You are being invited to participate in a research study entitled “Transforming the Fear of Death Through Near-Death Experiences and Experiential Psychedelics: A Transpersonal Hermeneutic Phenomenological Inquiry”. Janet Nielsen is conducting the study. Janet Nielsen is a Graduate Student in the faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and you may contact her if you have further questions by email: [j.nielsen@uleth.ca](mailto:j.nielsen@uleth.ca).

As a Graduate student I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Masters’ Degree in Counselling Psychology. The information collected from this study will be presented and written in a Master’s thesis defense, in addition to other scholarly publications and presentations (no personal identification will be disclosed). It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Marcia Rich. You may contact my supervisor, at (403) 332-4035 or by email: [marcia.rich@uleth.ca](mailto:marcia.rich@uleth.ca).

#### Purpose

The purpose of this research is to explore and understand the lived experience and meaning behind the mystical experiences on the use of natural plant medicines, specifically psilocybin and/or LSD, and /or the mystical experiences encountered during a near death experience. The research aims to understand the transformative nature of these experiences, specifically the reduction in the fear of death, and how these awakening experiences have been integrated into everyday lives of experiencers.

#### Background Information

Published research indicates the importance for creating a framework for teaching an aging population to prepare for death. The goal of this study is to bring more awareness into the field of psychology and counselling psychology surrounding the lived experiences of those who are having these mystical and transformative experiences in the context of using psilocybin and/or LSD, or from the near-death experience and how these two different experiences specifically reduce the fear of death.

#### Study Applications

The hope is that by exploring these rich phenomena, we can utilize and understand further the psychological and spiritual knowledge gained from these transformational experiences, which can be integrated into the counselling process. This information may provide mental health practitioners and counselors new ways of understanding and approaching work with terminally ill clients. Through the facilitation of these experiences



we might be able to help make death and dying a profound psychospiritual event for our clients in the future.

#### Inclusion Criteria

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have met the following inclusion criteria:

- You are 18 years or older.
- You have had an exceptional experience in the context of a (NDE).
- You have described this NDE as transcendental and mystical in nature, (i.e., unity, a strong sense of the interconnectedness of all people and things; sacredness, reverence, or awe; noetic quality, a sense of encountering ultimate reality; transcendence of time and space; deeply felt positive mood; and ineffability, the experience cannot adequately be described).
- You have described this NDE experience as transformative (i.e., you made changes to your life in significant ways or altered your worldviews).

#### AND/OR

- You have used natural plant medicines, specifically psilocybin and/or LSD.
- You have described the psychedelic journey as transcendental and mystical in nature (i.e., unity, a strong sense of the interconnectedness of all people and things; sacredness, reverence, or awe; noetic quality, a sense of encountering ultimate reality; transcendence of time and space; deeply felt positive mood; and ineffability, the experience cannot be adequately described).
- You have described this psychedelic experience as transformative (i.e., you made changes to your life in significant ways or altered worldview).
- You have indicated you are willing and able to share these transformational experiences and are motivated to participate in this research study.
- You have indicated that you are able to give consent for yourself.
- You have indicated you are not in an emotional crisis.

Gender, employment, race, ethnicity, or religious values were not considered to meet inclusion criteria in this study.

#### Participation

This research will require about 3 to 4 hours of your time, from start to finish. This entails a single one-on-one audio-recorded interview at a time and date of mutual agreement. During this time, you will be interviewed about your personal mystical experiences on the use of natural plant medicines, specifically psilocybin, and/or LSD, and/or your mystical experiences during a near death experience. If you agree to participate, the interview will be audio-recorded during the face-to-face interview, at the University of Lethbridge or Skype interview depending upon your geographic location.

Several steps will be taken to protect your anonymity and confidentiality. I will be conducting the interview, as well as doing the transcription of the interview and only I will have access to the audio-recording during data analysis. I will use a transpersonal

lens to identify underlying themes through grouping various statements and overarching ideas and themes will be grouped together. I will follow up with you after the interview to ensure the information of your experience is accurate and the emerging themes relevant. The thesis and any other presentations will not contain any mention of your name; the pseudonym chosen by you will be used, including pseudonyms for any other people indicated in your interview. As a participant in this study, it is important that a level of trust and understanding is built between us through the collaboration of exploring your experiences throughout the research process, therefore, you will be given copies of all transcribed data upon completion.

### Risks

There are some potential risks or discomforts related to this research. Your participation in this research may trigger some emotional or psychological discomfort around discussing the event that led to the near-death experience, and/or the discussion regarding illegal substances and possible breach of confidentiality (e.g., theft of research material or its seizure by legal authorities). The researcher is currently interested in exploring and understanding the lived experience and meaning of these transformational experiences during altered states of consciousness encountered while using psychedelic substances and the subsequent transformation of the fear of death. Therefore, this researcher will maintain confidentiality in respect to the disclosure of the use of any illegal substances, including the reporting of any such use for the purpose of this study.

Although the researcher is a counsellor in training, should any material surface during the interview, which causes distress, it is important for you to reveal this to the researcher. You can stop the interview at any time to disclose this information. You may also request for the recorder to be shut off at any time throughout the interview process, or choose not to answer any questions. In order to prevent further risks, there are counselling service referral numbers attached to this letter of consent in order to mitigate any further discomfort from participation in this study and, it is integral that you contact the recommended counselling services if you are experiencing distress from participation in this study.

Please note that you will be excluded from the study if you disclose any information regarding current risk of harming self, or others, or actively harming a child or animal. If this information is disclosed, the researcher has the ethical obligation to report such information to the appropriate authorities and confidentiality has the potential to be breached.

### Participant Rights

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. You will not directly benefit from participation in this research, although research has shown that sharing the lived experiences of these transformative and mystical experiences can have positive psychological effects. You may choose to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without any consequences or any explanation. Furthermore, if you wish to leave the study for any reason, you are able to withdraw any time during the interview process, or before transcription, or up to four weeks after receiving the transcribed interview, without penalty and without question. If you choose to withdraw up until this point (4

weeks) all information collected from you will be destroyed (i.e., consent forms, emails and interview material). After the 4- week time period, the information will have gone through data analysis and written in a final draft of the thesis and it will not be possible to remove from the study.

All of the audio recordings and print data collected in this study will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office or on a password-protected computer on a password encrypted file and/or a password encrypted USB drive, and only myself and my supervisor and you will have access to them. The transcript will be edited to remove any personal identifying information. The audio-recording will not be used for any purpose other than data collection. Electronic and print copies will be destroyed after five years.

### Results

The results from this study will be shared with you, the participant, and my supervisor as well as other academic professionals during a public oral thesis defense, and a written thesis which is also a public document. It is anticipated that this data and the results from this study will be shared with others in the following ways: it may be presented in scholarly publications and presentations, and/or University classes, and may be presented at community conferences and/or events.

### Other Contact Information

If you require any additional information about this study, please email me at [j.nielsen@uleth.ca](mailto:j.nielsen@uleth.ca). You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Marcia Rich, at 403-332-4035 or [marcia.rich@uleth.ca](mailto:marcia.rich@uleth.ca).

Questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Office of Research Ethics, University of Lethbridge (Phone: 403-329-2747) or Email: [research.services@uleth.ca](mailto:research.services@uleth.ca)).

Thank you for your consideration, and participation.

I have read (or have been read) the above information regarding this research study on the mystical impact of near death experiences and psilocybin, and consent to participate in this study, as outlined above.

\_\_\_\_\_ (Printed Name of Participant)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Date)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Printed Name of Researcher)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Date)

***A copy of this consent will be left with you and the researcher will take a copy.***

## **Counselling Services**

### Contact Information for Counselling Services:

1. Associates' Counselling Services, Inc. (403) 381-6000
2. Lethbridge Family Services (403) 327-5724 (Sliding scale depending on income)
3. Crossroads Counselling Centre (403) 327-7080
4. University of Lethbridge Counselling Services (403) 317-2845 (University of Lethbridge students only)
5. Distress Line of South Western Alberta (403) 327-7905 OR 1-888-787-2880

If participants who were interviewed via Skype require counselling services, the researcher will investigate counselling services specific to the geographic location of the co-researcher as needed.

### Appendix G: Interview Protocol

- 1) Which mystical experience did you have, NDE or psychedelic?
- 2) Describe in your own words the nature of your experience that best represents what happened.
- 3) How do these experiences relate to the experience of death, if at all?
- 4) How has this experience changed your life, or how are you living your life differently?
- 5) How would you share this information regarding the transformation of death with others (if evidence of the transformation of death is found)?

#### Prompts:

- When did you experience that? (chronology)
- What aspects of the experience stood out the most for you? Why?
- What was most important to you?
- What was happening for you at this time? (context)
- How would you describe this experience as transformational?
- How have these mystical experiences changed or influenced your life?