

THE ROLE OF PSYCHOTHERAPY IN EFFECTIVE INTEGRATION OF
SPIRITUALLY TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES (STES)

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Abstract

Building upon the rich literature in the discipline of spiritually transformative experiences (STE) studies, this paper examined the role of psychotherapy in facilitating the integration of STE narratives. STEs are broadly defined as a discrete experience of an altered state of consciousness that brings about a profound transformation in the spiritual identity and life expression of the experiencer (Brook 2017). STEs include near death experiences, mystical experiences, spiritual energy or kundalini awakenings, diverse psychic experiences, and inspired creativity (Kason 1994). Current psychological frameworks, theories, and interventions for STE integration were reviewed. Additionally, one clinician registered with the American Center for Integration of Spiritually Transformative Experiences (ACISTE) was interviewed to determine the most effective therapeutic approaches with this population . It is hoped that the results of this research will bring awareness to the mental health field about the importance of tailored treatment plans for STEs and highlight the role therapists can play in integrating profound spiritual maturation in these individuals.

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Introduction

When she was thirty-two, Barbara Harris was hospitalized for a spinal fusion procedure that promised to alleviate her deteriorating scoliosis condition. She had been hospitalized four times that year and had been plunged into a month's long depression because of her seemingly uncurable pain. She thought this procedure would change her life, which it did. Just not in the way she thought.

She was placed in a bed that prevented her lungs from filling with liquid. Sometime during the surgery, the machine wouldn't stop and continued filling her lungs with air. Barbara began to panic and passed out, not awakening until later that night. However, something unexplainable transpired. While Barbara was asleep, a part of herself floated upwards and escaped her body. This conscious entity began to experience a dimension of reality that Barbara had never felt before. Only her own words can truly encapsulate the phenomenon. "That floating feeling gave way to the sudden feeling of movement. Ahead and slightly above me, I could vaguely sense a light at the far end of a long tunnel. Everything was moving in the same direction—toward the light." She goes on to say, "At the same time, I was being caressed by a gentle breeze and could hear a low-pitched, droning noise. It was calling me, guiding me somewhere toward the light." She summed up her experience by saying, "This is not a metaphor for what happened. Close your eyes, open your heart. This all exists over there. Through the portal we label death" (Harris, 1990, p. 24). Barbara had what is commonly referred to as an out-of-body-experience, an event under the umbrella of spiritually transformative experiences.

Spiritually transformative experiences have the potential to catalyze life-altering spiritual transformations, but often require immense difficulty to effectively integrate these events into

their lives. Research has shown that nearly half of the Western world has experienced an STE, and there is reason to believe that many people do not recognize them and/or do not report them (Foreman, 1998). Stories of spiritually transformative experiences have existed in folklore and writings from every culture spanning centuries and have been described in many different fashions throughout time.

Almost universally, individuals describe the experience as ineffable and often struggle being able to articulate the profound spiritual changes they underwent in language. People who have experienced STEs (STErS) encounter visceral vivid imagery and connect with incredibly esoteric mystical forces that many others simply cannot understand. Experiencers are often labeled as delusional, and many medical professionals dismiss these events as medication induced hallucinations. As a result, many individuals seek professional help to effectively integrate their experiences into their lives and utilize the wisdom they accrued in the most altruistic way.

The potential for profound personal evolution coupled with the social ostracization many experiencers face can catalyze several life altering events such as divorces, career changes, and estrangements from social networks (Kason, 2008). As a result, many STErS have a desperate aching for a spiritual community to rebuild their social reality and deeply connect with their core values. Thus, many organizations have been established to meet the needs of this population. The International Association of Near Death Studies (IANDS) has provided support groups for experiencers and provided educational resources as well as conducted research since 1978 (IANDS, 2014). The American Center for the Integration of Spiritually Transformative Experiences (ACISTE) has a national directory of licensed clinicians trained in dealing with STErS and additionally conducts research and holds conferences about the discipline.

Psychologists have developed various strategies to integrate these experiences, but their practices and theories are still nascent. The purpose of this paper is to first distill the potential these experiences hold for transformational spiritual maturity, laying the groundwork for the influential role therapists can have in facilitating this growth. This will be followed by an exploration of the best practices for effective therapeutic intervention with STEs. It is hoped that by highlighting the positive externalities resulting from effective therapeutic intervention, more therapists will recognize not only the value therapy can have for STEs, but embrace and implement deep spiritual philosophies into their therapeutic practice as a whole.

Literature Review

Definition and Positive Characteristics of STEs

This section will first define what STEs are and pinpoint the identifying features of these experiences. Once foundational information for these experiences is established, the long-term psychological and spiritual ramifications of these experiences will be discussed to provide understanding for the potential therapeutic intervention can have in helping clients realize those positive aftereffects.

Before understanding the specific obstacles to personal meaning that this population faces and thus the goals of effective therapeutic intervention, an exact definition of STEs and a comprehension of their aftereffects is required. Multiple theorists have described STEs in different ways: the psychologist William James described the phenomenon of personal mystical revelation that arises from religious experience (James, 1902); the term “peak experience” was coined by Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1964); spiritual emergence was introduced by Grof (S. Grof & Grof, 1989), exceptional human experience by White (White, 1999), and spontaneous

awakening experience by Taylor (Taylor, 2012). Kason (1994) created the term spiritually transformative experiences to encompass these and others that have been studied over the past decades, such as near death experiences, mystical experiences, spiritual energy or kundalini awakenings, diverse psychic experiences, and inspired creativity.

The term spiritually transformative experience was first coined in 1994 in Yvonne Kason's book, *Farther Shores: Exploring How Near-Death, Kundalini, and Mystical Experiences Can Transform Ordinary Lives*. Kason didn't directly define the term, rather she created an umbrella of experiences that have so many similarities that they can be grouped under one name, including: mystical experiences, near-death experiences, psychic experiences, spontaneous inspired creativity, and spiritual energy/kundalini awakenings. This paper will utilize the term STE throughout as opposed to the other terms coined by previous researchers as it is the most widely used term today in clinical and research contexts. ACISTE defines the term loosely as something that "causes people to perceive themselves and the world around them profoundly differently: by expanding the individual's identity, augmenting their sensitivities, and thereby altering their values, priorities, and appreciation of the purpose of life" (ACISTE).

There exist several universal defining features of STEs that have long been supported by empirical research. An important feature of the experience of an STE is that it involves an altered state of consciousness. When individuals have an STE, they undergo a cognitive transformation where the quality of their mental functioning changes. Extraordinary mental functions during altered states include ecstasy, experiences of divinity, and ultimacy (Tart, 2009). Ultimacy can be understood as grasping reality beyond materially defined perception (Lomax, Kripal, and Pargament, 2011). STEs are also often described as a transpersonal experience, meaning that

individuals transcend their personal egoic boundaries and relate to their surroundings from a place of greater expansion and understanding (Greyson & Ring, 2004).

Another feature in defining an STE is that the experience provides the foundation for radical transformation in the personality of the experiencer. These events have the potential to produce a permanent alteration in the disposition and character evidenced by a change in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Holden, 2012). W.R. Miller and C'de Baca (2001) conducted a survey to examine the specific personality characteristics that undergo shifts during profound transformative experiences. They found that participants moved away from egotistical values and gravitated towards collectivist and spiritually-oriented values. Subjects chose from a list of selected values to describe themselves before and after the experience, and the top twelve reported across both genders were:

Before: wealth, adventure, achievement, pleasure, be respected, family, fun, self-esteem, freedom, attractiveness, popularity, power

After: spirituality, personal peace, family, growth, humility, forgiveness, loving, intimacy, honesty, creativity, generosity (W.R. Miller & C'de Baca, 2001, pp. 131-132)

Transformational alternations in one's value system and overall definition of their life purpose is derived from an acute understanding of human emotionality. Experiencers describe how their understandings of human consciousness deepen and they can enjoy lives of greater compassion and a dissolving level of fear surrounding change and death. This reduced fear of death, as pioneer researcher in the field of STE studies Bruce Greyson describes in his book After, "leads to a lack of fear of living life to the fullest, too" (Greyson, 2021, p. 184).

Individuals report being far less materialistic and possess a streak of altruism and deep

compassion for others. In many instances, the boundaries between self and other disintegrate and the dissolution of ego gives people a radically different perspective to navigate the world.

For mental health professionals to really grasp the profundity of these experiences, examples from specific aspects of STEs must be explored to provide vivid context for these psychological changes. There are several identifying features of an STE, with Bruce Greyson characterizing STE elements into a) cognitive features of time distortion, a life review, and revelation; b) affective features of peace, joy, cosmic unity, and an encounter with a “loving being of light”; c) transcendental features of otherworldly encounters with mystical beings and an accompanying feeling of bliss when in contact with these forces (Greyson, 2014).

Specifically, the life review has an integral impact on one’s long-term psychological and spiritual maturity. Delving into the manifestations of this aspect of an STE specifically will allow for a rich conception of the psychological shifts that occur. Personal accounts will be provided to accentuate the understanding of the experience the individual undergoes. The life review, while not a feature of every STE, occurs almost universally in mystical experiences where individuals encounter death, either through life-threatening danger or literally dying and returning to life. The life review process involves the reexperiencing of an individual’s memories and although the memories in a life review are often experienced in rapid succession, they are felt so viscerally that individuals can often report incredibly granular details and immerse themselves in the moment as vividly as when it originally occurred. As individuals are transported back into these specific moments in their lives, they are given the opportunity to acutely experience the emotional gravity of the moment which allows them to reflect more deeply on the meaning of these events.

One of the most transformational aspects of a life review is not only the ability to reexperience one's own memories, but to do so through the perspective of someone else. This is a very frequent occurrence that enables people to deeply understand the emotional quality of others, often perpetrators or receivers of trauma. Greyson cites a few prominent examples of the power life reviews can wield in his book, After. He interviewed a man named Tom Sawyer, who describes how he was able to assume the position of someone else present in his life review and experience the memory through their eyes.

“What I’m telling you is, I was in my Aunt Gay’s body, I was in her eyes, I was in her emotions, I was in her unanswered questions. I experienced the disappointment, the humiliation. It was very devastating to me. It changed my attitude quite a bit as I experienced it.” Tom goes on to add, “In addition to this, and what is probably more important, spiritually speaking, I was able to observe the scene, absolutely, positively, unconditionally. In other words, not with the horrendous emotional ill-feelings that my Aunt Gay experienced. I experienced it with this unconditional love that is only God’s eyes, the spiritual entity. No judgmental aspect whatsoever” (Greyson, 2021, p.41). The experience of a life review through the perspective of someone else isn’t an uncommon one. In fact, more than half of the people Greyson interviewed for his book saw their memories through the eyes of another. What is especially notable about Tom’s account is that he describes the spiritual force as being completely free of judgment, almost as if it is boundaryless. Even though Tom was reexperiencing this memory as if he was his aunt, the life review seemed to carry with it a distinct texture from her experience. He was able to view her frustration and the shame he carried for humiliating her, but he did not experience them as intensely negative like she did, rather the entire context of the review was embraced by this all-loving force.

The life review seemingly has the potential to provide individuals with an acute awareness of how their behaviors have affected others and from this arises a wisdom of how to best live a life of purpose and service. In After, Greyson includes a quote from Barbara Harris shortly after her experience, explaining the insights she accrued during her life review.

“In every scene of my life review I could feel again what I had felt at various times in my life. And I could feel everything everyone else felt because of my actions. All of this translated into knowledge, and I learned—oh, how I learned! The information came in, and then love neutralized my judgments against myself” (Greyson, 2021, p.42).

Barbara discusses this idea of an objective posture towards her feelings, without harboring an aversion towards perceived negative emotions. The elimination of biases and judgments towards certain emotions allows people to come to embrace the totality of their emotional experience and realize that their feelings arise and dissipate naturally if they are given the space to do so. The intimate understanding of the consequences that one’s actions can hold that comes after a life review can make individuals much more intentional with the choices they make and seek to behave in a way that aligns with their values.

Paradoxically, even though the connection with a non-judgmental spiritual entity is common, most individuals who experience a life review describe feelings of profound guilt and remorse for past behaviors. While there is not clear explicit research that explains how feelings of unconditional love and forgiveness during a life review can still result in feelings of self-loathing afterwards, it can be understood when the paradoxical theory of change is applied. First conceived by a German psychiatrist named Fritz Perls in the 1940s, this theory posits that change can only occur when someone contacts and deeply understands the part of themselves they wish to change, rather than through means of reward/punishment or coercion and insight (Worsley,

2012). The important distinction between the long-term effectiveness of a life review in behavior change as compared to simply recalling events is that feelings of remorse occur after the experience, not while it is happening.

When someone experiences a traumatic memory during a life review, they can intimately connect with themselves as they aren't encumbered by regret or shame, rather they are overcome by a sense of forgiveness. The punitive self-critic is drowned out by an all-loving force that helps these individuals get in touch with their human potential; in other words, the idealized version of themselves they want to orient towards. From this seat of overwhelming compassion for past transgressions, they develop a healthy sense of self-reflexivity, causing them to feel guilt and shame for what they have done that originates from a recognition that their actions deeply wounded others and aren't in alignment with their values. The guilt and shame does not originate from a seat of self-pity, rather its roots are in recognizing their previous lack of awareness of their action's effects and a desire to change. The greatest potential gifts that the life review process can wield is an expansion of one's personal boundaries through experiencing the emotions of others and developing a deep resonance with the effects of their actions. If realized effectively, the life review has the power to change how individuals act with intention and compassion in the world.

In summary, STEs are transformative events that allow individuals to enjoy a depth of conscious awareness not often experienced in daily life. Universally, they connect with an omniscient spiritual entity that dissolves boundaries of self and brings them out of their thinking mind and into greater compassion with their surroundings. These events produce long lasting changes in value structures as individuals wake up to lives of greater joy, community, and altruism. However, while STEs establish the foundation for the lives individuals want to lead,

there are immense difficulties in cultivating lives that allow these individuals to realize the positive benefits of their experience.

Challenges in STE Integration

Before the motivations for STEs to seek out therapy can be understood, the barriers to effective integration must be grasped. For therapists to acutely understand how to intimately connect with experiencers, they must grasp the totality of their emotional reality after their STE, which includes the positive externalities as well as the negative ones. This section will first broadly introduce the common struggles STEs face and then delve into specific examples of how these barriers are manifested and the challenges they present to long-lasting personal evolution.

After an STE, there are overwhelming challenges in effectively reentering existing social realities and healthily integrating the perspectives gained from the event. One of the most difficult aspects for people on the other side of their STE is communicating their stories to others. They are often met with skepticism, confusion, and outright dismissal of what they experienced and its effects. STEs come out of their experiences with a completely new visual and verbal vocabulary of themselves and the world and many feel alienated trying to navigate their relationships if they do not receive compassion and validation from those closest to them. A newfound value system and purpose can also isolate these individuals from relationships with others who now feel like they are interacting with a completely different person. As STEs establish a more heightened sensitivity to pain and suffering, individuals often struggle to grapple with the inhumane and destructive behaviors in the world. Reintegrating into a society that denies or suppresses the wisdom of unconditional compassion and acceptance that are derived from these experiences is often extremely alienating and a sense of despair often arises

as people have difficulty finding communities that share the same acute sensitivity to emotionality as them.

A pilot research study (Stout et. al., 2006) was conducted to assess the self-reported struggles and needs of STers. The inquiry consisted of a questionnaire which was distributed to twenty-five attendees from an IANDS retreat for STers. Two open-ended questions on the survey were a) What were the struggles or challenges that you faced following your experience? and b) What would help you or did help you with these challenges? Of the 115 challenges described at the retreat, 113 fell into one of six categories:

1. Processing a radical shift in reality
2. Accepting the return to life
3. Sharing the experience
 - a. Expressing the ineffable
 - b. Choosing confidants
 - c. Coping with negative reactions
 - d. Focus of others' interests
4. Integrating new spiritual values with earthly expectations
5. Adjusting to heightened sensitivities and supernatural gifts
6. Finding and living one's purpose

Many experiencers struggle finding acceptance in being brought back from a blissful reality against their will. Individuals often experience profound states of depression after their experience when they are confronted with their social reality that doesn't contain the same all-loving, transcendent qualities of the one they contacted in their STE. In After, Bruce Greyson includes the testimonial of a woman who describes the frustration she felt after her experience.

“All I could think about was how much I hated it here, and that I wanted to go back to that place. That place was so wonderful, and I wanted to go back so badly. I was so angry, and people on earth just seemed so mean, and nobody could understand”

(Greyson, 2021, p.196).

This woman’s sentiments are not abnormal, in fact many individuals express frustration that they were brought back from death against their will. The alternate dimension that STERs contact feels overwhelmingly peaceful which often makes the reentry back into the world with unspeakable pain and suffering feel unbearable and pointless. It is extremely difficult for STERs to grapple with the fact that their social reality is not congruent to their mystical experience and one of the biggest challenges for STERs is accepting this fact while still integrating their spiritual wisdom in the most effective way possible.

Many STERs also report experiencing states of depression and anger because of their newfound heightened sensitivity to worldly pain and suffering. The awareness of a consciousness vastly bigger than themselves can be a liberating gift, but it also means they internalize the pain of others much more deeply. Greyson includes an account of an experiencer who described how difficult it was to reckon with worldly suffering. “I felt so much pain and I didn’t understand any of it, or why it had to happen. That is one thing that was so confusing: if there was this Creator who is so absolutely incredible you can’t believe it, why is He letting innocent kids, people, and animals be harmed?” She goes on to add, “I was furious that I had that experience; it’s not just some great thing that happens to you. It makes life harder; at least, for me it did. I have always felt like, ‘Thanks a lot; why couldn’t you have told me just a little bit more, or nothing at all’” (Greyson, 2021, p.196)? Many experiencers have difficulties establishing healthy boundaries for themselves as they assume the pain of others and for many experiencers,

the act of protecting themselves from others, even if the relationship is unhealthy, feels antithetical to the boundaryless experience of their STE. The seemingly limitless depth of compassion and emotional sensitivity that is unlocked during this experience can prove detrimental in this existence thus another goal of therapeutic intervention is disciplining the client to wield these gifts in the most positive way while integrating a healthy level of self-compassion.

Another very common emotional reaction to an STE is one of confusion. Because STEs expose people to transcendent imagery and the physiological manifestations of the experience are so esoteric and seemingly other worldly, they often have difficulty parsing through the material world and the existence they were exposed to during their STE. In After, Greyson included the account of a woman who had an experience at age twenty-nine while she was anesthetized for childbirth and heard her heartbeat suddenly stop. When she woke up, she could not distinguish between the real world and a dream:

“When I did wake up, I was terrified, because I could not separate reality from what I call my ‘dream’. I knew it was not a dream, but I did not know what to call it, so I referred to it as a dream in my mind. And I thought I was losing my mind for quite a while, and this was why I had to suppress this. The experience itself was very pleasant, but the sorting out between reality and my experience was the problem and I felt like I had to try to bury the experience to keep my sanity” (Greyson, 2021, p.198). The radical shift in reality can be extremely difficult to process and can lead to the experiencer to question their mental stability if they aren’t able to delineate between the world contained in their STE and our world.

However, by far the most common struggle people face after their STE is a feeling of being misunderstood or ridiculed. Their stories are often received with confusion, skepticism, and sometimes outright denial of their experience as something legitimate that deserves to be deeply discussed. When individuals return from their experience with a completely newfound value system and life philosophy, many of their existing relationships are irreparably damaged as friends and family don't know how to adapt to changing behaviors and feelings. Experiencers face ostracization from their social reality as well as medical establishments that often pathologize these events. Medical professionals constantly dismiss STEs as bizarre reactions to medication or misdiagnose their experience as evidence of psychosis. Greyson includes a testimonial from a woman who describes how the denial of the validity of her experience by her nurse affected her. "With that pronouncement, I became very frightened. I figured that if the medical profession thought I was crazy, I had better keep my silence about the whole affair. I realized that the best thing I could do was to hold on to the light, never let it go, but keep silent, very, very silent. And so I did" (Greyson, 2021, p.200). If the legitimacy of profound wisdom and compassion that STErs experience is denied, it can often result in experiencers suppressing their identity and failing to realize the myriad gifts they were given during their STE.

STE narratives contain transcendent imagery that are so esoteric, articulating their stories accurately into language is often impossible. When STErs struggle to describe what they went through, it distances themselves from others, but it also makes them feel like the enormity of the event is diminished by their inability to articulate its profundity. Therefore, many STErs seek out clinical help from professionals trained in engaging with these narratives who can aid in navigating clients towards discovering language for their experience.

The forces of social ostracization many experiencers feel coupled with the ineffable nature of STEs create a steep challenge towards finding a supportive, welcoming community of people for individuals. For many experiencers, the only individuals they can reliably trust to be empathetic figures in their life are fellow experiencers. While these relationships can be incredibly emotionally and spiritually rewarding, it can also make experiencers feel like the only way for them to be understood is to insulate themselves with other experiencers. When STEs can have their experiences validated by a neutral third party, say a friend or therapist, they can begin to accrue the confidence that their truth is worth expressing and effective integration can take place.

The barriers to effective integration of STEs all originate in difficulties to find genuine connection with others. When these individuals return after contacting this alternate dimension, they arrive back to our reality irreparably changed. They possess insights, gifts, and degrees of compassion that they did not have before. However, this understanding of themselves and the world around them can be foreign and uncomfortable for others to contend with. Many STEs can transcend their identity suppression themselves and find out supportive, understanding communities but many need to seek out therapy to aid them in finding lives of meaning and purpose.

Research of Therapeutic Interventions for STEs

Many experiencers, driven by a multitude of factors such as disillusionment, despair, confusion, and anger seek out therapeutic help to facilitate a life of meaning of purpose. If this is the end goal of therapy with this population then the best methods and philosophies to empathetically connect with these individuals must be understand. This section will outline

successfully implemented modalities and guiding principles as well as providing personal insight into effective techniques from the conducted interview.

Only recently has clinical research started to be conducted which focuses on effective therapeutic strategies for STE integration. A new branch of psychotherapy called “integrative psychotherapy” has been created to address the needs of people wanting to experience and needing help in integrating STEs (Sperry, 2013). To further the aims of integrative therapy, the Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, a division within the American Psychological Association (APA), was created in 2011 (APA, 2017a). The Society carries forth the mission of promoting psychological theory, research, and clinical practice to understand the significance of religion and spirituality in people’s lives. Through the continuous dissemination of these materials, more mental health professionals will become exposed to spiritual philosophies and healing modalities and the Society hopes that this will lead to more holistic mental health care for STEs.

To properly address the specific needs of this population, several organizations conduct professional trainings for therapists, counselors, and spiritual guides, most notably ACISTE and IANDS. Educating mental health practitioners on how to competently engage with STEs has two main objectives. First, professionals must be able to accurately differentiate between an STE and a psychotic event indicative of pathology. Second, they are equipped with a specific skillset to effectively help their clients navigate their social reality after their experience.

Discernment between pathology and STEs is an extremely important skill that all competently trained therapists must learn. In Western societies, medical paradigms center around the belief that if something isn’t part of our conscious awareness and can’t be empirically studied, then it is not real or true. According to the National Institute of Health (NIH 2017a, para.

1), the term psychotic disorder is defined as a “distorted view of reality,” specifically characterized by “false perceptions” and “sensing things that are not there.” If a therapist is not trained in understanding the unique aftereffects of STEs, they might misconstrue contact with alternate dimensions or visualizing mystical imagery as evidence of psychosis. There has been a long-standing aversion towards and rejection of religious and mystical experiences that concern physiological and psychological manifestations that are outside our rational perception. This has resulted in the medical misdiagnosis of these experiences and the social ostracization many experiencers feel after their STE, one of the most challenging barriers to effective integration. Due to Western pedagogies that often attribute any symptoms out of our material reality as indication of mental instability, it is vital that clinicians understand the inherent validity of these experiences instead of dismissing these reports as signs of psychosis.

There are a multitude of implemented therapeutic models and strategies that have proven to be effective in the integration of STEs. Rominger (2014) proposed a seven-stage model for integration of STEs. The stages are:

1. Initial shock, confusion, upheaval
2. Initial settling, reorientation
3. Internal referencing, growing accustomed to changes in internal framework and social groups
4. Finding identity in new personal perspective and social groups
5. Embodiment and assertion of new self in relationship with others
6. Processing recent transformation and finding acceptance in the social world with their new framework of being
7. Accepting continual growth

Rambo (1993), suggested that the integration of spiritually transformative experiences evolves in a non-linear fashion, characterized by a crisis at a particular point followed by a search for a spiritual group or community to cement their newfound internal framework. This model emphasizes the need for purpose and meaning derived from community as the primary goal of STE integration. Welwood (2000) proposed a model of spiritual maturation inspired by Buddhist principles which involves integrating an awareness of one's true essence in everyday life. In this paradigm, the feeling of ego transcendence that was experienced during the STE is the focus of long-term social evolution.

While slightly different in their approaches, these therapeutic models clearly distill the primary focus of therapeutic intervention for STEs which is the establishment of a newfound identity and the belief in who the individual is in the face of substantial changes in their social reality. Effective therapy for STEs will recognize and appreciate the profound psychospiritual transformations that have occurred and aid the experiencer in centering themselves in their newly established value system. This assessment is corroborated by an interview conducted by the researcher with Dr. Valerie Keating, a therapist licensed with ACISTE. When asked about the most salient aspirations for therapy with this population, she responded, "This is really identity work. This is [you] becoming grounded in who you are and why you are here, how you have changed, how you see things." She goes on to describe her own personally developed spiritual lens that she aims to integrate with her clients.

"I used to literally imagine myself getting on a spaceship and going to outer space and looking back at Earth, at my little life down there. I do not have to have to do that anymore, it is just sort of downloaded in me. It was just sort of present in me, this trinity of [recognizing] human being, spiritual being, and then the witness to both. And so,

adopting a framework like that really does help somebody else. When you have an experience like this, you can get stuck in it. And it does sometimes take someone to help you reintegrate back in.”

The transition back to normal life with earthly problems and struggles with this newfound intelligence can feel like an arduous undertaking. One must grapple with the various roles they have to assume in human life while still maintaining their deeply rooted spiritual identity in every moment. Dr. Keating describes a cultivation of a neutral, objective awareness of oneself that corresponds with many Eastern ideas of spiritual transformation. From this seat of awareness, one can truly be themselves in everyday life because they are not encumbered by attachments to people, experiences, or personal identity. When STers have challenges integrating their experience, it is usually because they cling onto the blissful reality of their experience and carry an expectation that their life afterwards will continuously be that way. They are attached to their spiritual identity and have difficulties relating to other people who seemingly don't possess the same degree of spiritual intelligence. When these individuals can arrive to a place of non-attachment and find joy within themselves in every moment instead of constantly yearning for a replication of their STE, they can fully liberate themselves from seeking and come into being.

It is also clear that devoid of confident articulation and expression of one's story, STers can't properly navigate life after their experience. The salience of disclosure has been pinpointed by various clinician researchers who emphasize that the experiencer can more effectively integrate their STE if they are able to express their stories to others and have them listened to (Holden, 2012). Holden created a list of detrimental versus helpful listening attitudes that can be

used as a guide for therapists to provide an empathetic environment by which disclosure can occur.

The D's (detrimental):

Does not recognize or identify the experience as a real phenomenon

Disbelieves the experience

Pathologizes the experience as evidence of psychosis

Characterizes the experience as a visit from a demonic force

Does not disclose examples of similar experiences and successful integration of such experiences to put the STer at ease

The N's (helpful):

Identifies and names the experience accurately

Normalizes it as something that others have experienced

Emphasizes that it is not indicative of pathology

Allows the experiencer to explore the spiritual underpinnings without judgment

Navigates the experiencer towards relevant information and resources to further explore the nature of their STE (Holden, 2012, pp. 75-76)

By developing a relationship with a therapist who accurately labels the experience they are having and reassures them that there is a large community of people who have endured its aftereffects successfully, the individual will feel a greater sense of confidence in this aspect of their identity and more likely to integrate effectively. Dr. Keating describes what it means for her clients to have their experiences identified for what they are.

“Once you have the language, you can go, ok. I can look this up, I can read about it. I can integrate this now. I can digest that now. I know what it was. It is a personalized

paradigm shift that needs to be validated or at least guided and supported. If we do not name it, then it cannot be recognized. That relief when you get a diagnosis, like thank god! Someone believes me. I am not making this up.”

Identifying and normalizing the experience is a crucial step for the client to embrace the wisdom and insights derived from their STE rather than dismiss or suppress what they endured. Once the experiencer feels like they are part of a collective as opposed to an isolated, misunderstood individual, they can begin to feel the security of belonging to a community. Even if they do not end up seeking out STE support groups or befriend fellow experiencers, a therapist can provide the client comfort in knowing that they are not fighting this battle alone and others have successfully found meaning and peace after their STEs.

In 1984, IANDS hosted a conference in which therapists, counselors, and guides trained in engaging with near-death experiencer clients shared general guidelines for effective therapy with this population. In a study on clinical interventions for experiencers three years later, Bruce Greyson summarized the key takeaways from this conference. These professionals concluded that for meaningful therapy with experiencers to occur, the therapist must be aware of their own biases and judgments relating to these experiences and avoid imposing their own beliefs or interpretations throughout the therapeutic relationship (Greyson, 1987). As with any successful therapeutic relationship, sessions need to be guided by the clients' personal experience by the therapist allowing the client space to explore their own emotional reality. When the client begins to share their experience, the therapist should appreciate the profound nature of the event and its positive and negative aspects. Therapists need to remain conscious of the delicacy of these experiences and how change is almost always non-linear due to the instability many STEs face after the event.

Therapists must also guard against reducing the client's identity to their experience and disregarding the impact their prior personal history, their sociocultural, and religious background will have on their interpretations and integration of their experience. Due to frequent misdiagnoses of these events by medical professionals and general skepticism towards mystical events, therapists must establish an early precedent of validation and empathy towards the client. This will enable the experiencer to feel more prone to honestly express the manifestations of the event and their accompanying feelings and attitudes. According to Greyson, "the most helpful intervention following an experience is to listen attentively to whatever the individual wants to say. The experiencer will usually be relieved if allowed to struggle until he or she can find the correct words to describe the experience" (Greyson, 1987). The therapist should not pry for details about the experience, rather they should proceed at the pace of disclosure that the client is comfortable with. Due to the complexity of these experiences that often transcends words, clients can be overwhelmed with the proposition of disclosure. They will likely feel anxious to accurately pinpoint profound moments of their experience and they need to feel like the therapist is honoring the pace they are going at.

Therapists must also be conscious of the potential for personal psychospiritual growth resulting from working with STERs. Therapists who resist changes in their own spiritual perspectives will not be able to foster and maintain a genuine, transparent relationship with their clients. Therapists must be aware of their existing views on spirituality and mysticism and assess if those biases will inhibit their engagement with the client prior and during the therapeutic relationship.

Due to the myriad positive benefits of STERs that have been popularized in recent decades, it might be tempting for both the client and the therapist to romanticize the experience and its

aftereffects (Greyson, 1987). The therapist must guard against the client becoming overly attached to the profound insights and wisdom they have gained at the expense of attention paid to the struggles they are facing. This can lead to a sense of spiritual superiority towards others which will only serve to alienate the client from others. The therapist should honor and appreciate the transcendent changes the client has gone through but also have them grapple with the integrative problems they still face because of their experience.

An effective therapist will also help the client realize that all the aftereffects from their experience are fluid and the client can freely reject any unwanted feelings or attitudes after their STE. Because extensive research has been conducted to determine commonalities between STEs, clients might feel like certain byproducts are rigid and unchanging. The recognition of the transient nature of STE aftereffects doesn't diminish the value of the actual experience itself and the therapist should understand the differentiation between an STE and its aftereffects. The rapid personal transformation coupled with the disruptive reentry into their world brings profound ripples in their existing lives and wrestling with their newfound identity can be tumultuous. A competent therapist will aim to have the client recognize the waxing and waning of their feelings and attempt to achieve a consistent homeostasis where they can navigate life's changes confidently and calmly.

Due to the ineffable nature of these experiences, therapists can also implement creative non-verbal techniques to aid their clients in expression of their STEs. Image therapy has been a long-established method that could prove invaluable for STEs who heavily rely on the images they contacted to inform their psychospiritual maturation. Reassuring their clients that they do not have to feel compelled to constantly express their stories in words so long as they can integrate the insights into their actions is also an important step in alleviating the pressure of

verbal communication. This will loosen the grasp many STers have on their experience as an integral element of their identity and enable them to simply embody the spiritual wisdom they were given instead of feeling encumbered by sharing it with everyone.

One of the primary challenges for STers when they return is continually staying grounded in the present. The profundity of their experience may make the everyday navigation of life seem mundane and uninspiring. Having a therapist who can aid the experiencer in applying the deep joy and appreciation of life they felt during their STE to every moment will help the experiencer realize that they can cultivate those same feelings in their life back on Earth and find their true purpose. According to Greyson, “the therapeutic work is complete when the individual has found a way to actualize in daily life the love he or she received in the experience” (Greyson, 1987).

Conclusion

The prevalence of these experiences as a human phenomenon has been highlighted and the potential for transformational personal evolution has been explored. The difficulties STers face in effectively integrating their experiences and thus the motivations for them to seek out clinical help has also been understood. The research into the guidelines for effective therapy in STE integration has uncovered that foundationally, STE clients must be met with unconditional positive regard, a therapeutic principle derived from the psychologist Carl Rogers (1956). He posited that the basic ingredient for a fruitful therapeutic relationship is unconditional acceptance and compassion without judgment, regardless of what the client says or does. Every specific strategy and principle detailed in this paper originates from this root of understanding, that if the manifestations of these narratives and their aftereffects are treated with care and support, the STer will gradually develop the intuition and the confidence to utilize the love they felt in their

STE into their daily life. The interview with Dr. Keating helped to crystallize the moment of true integration for STE clients by describing the relationship between our human self, the spiritual self, and the witness to both. After an STE, experiencers have an acute understanding of what it means to be a spiritual being, but their biggest barrier is knowing how to engage as a human being again. She detailed that once the experiencer can arrive to a place where they can seamlessly transition between their various roles as a person while still maintaining their spiritual essence, they are liberated from the burden of worrying about being misunderstood or alienated because they are living authentically. Cultivating an awareness which transcends both their spiritual and egoic identity allows the individual to navigate the world devoid of attaching expectation to the outcome of life and live purely in the moment.

The most ambitious aim of this paper is that it will make therapists more appreciative of these experiences and the immense gravity they have if properly digested. According to Dr. Keating, “some therapists just are not interested in this stuff. They’re so busy being humans that they are not looking at the bigger picture of why we are here, they are just like we are here and we have to deal with it. I think some of these things are too big for some people and there is a sort of avoidance.” This paper has distilled the immense possibilities for radical personal change for STErs and the vital role therapists can play in helping them utilize their gifts in the most transformative ways. It is hoped that therapists will grasp the potential they have to facilitate life altering personal maturation with this population.

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