

**PURPORTED AFTER-DEATH COMMUNICATION AND ITS ROLE IN THE RECOVERY
OF BEREAVED INDIVIDUALS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY**

Doctoral Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

PURPORTED AFTER-DEATH COMMUNICATION AND ITS ROLE IN THE RECOVERY OF BEREAVED INDIVIDUALS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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The death of a loved one creates a mix of emotions in the survivor. Anger, sadness, longing, and love create a conflicted psychological state of being. Coming to terms with the loss of a loved one involves what Devers (1994) calls “balancing the memories of the deceased” in order to gain a sense of closure. Without ADCs the bereaved might cling to psychologically troubling memories that could impede the grieving process. She adds: when conflicts remain buried in the unconscious they can create confusing and damaging emotions in the survivor. They may surface in unhealthy ways, such as misdirected anger, self-pity, depression, anxiety, or even psychosis. The goal of healing is to confront those issues and resolve them. ADC facilitates this process (p. 131). Published research has established that purported after-death communication (ADC) events experienced by bereaved individuals are common, natural, non-pathological, and helpful in facilitating the grieving process. This study further explored how ADC affects the grieving process of the bereaved, and more specifically, how ADC may result in a sudden, complete, and spontaneous lifting of the burden of grief. No attempt was made to demonstrate that consciousness survives death; however, it is important to discuss whether ADC percipients believe that it does, and if their experiences help them to resolve grief, recover from the loss, and live meaningful lives.

Potential participants responded to notices in the San Diego Holistic Nurses’ Newsletter, an announcement made at the 1999 Noetic Sciences Conference, and the Guggenheim website www.after-death.com, asking for bereaved individuals to participate in ADC research. Seven people were selected for interview from 18 completed questionnaires. The criteria for interview selection were that percipients felt that: (1) their ADCs reduced their grief; (2) in the hours or days after their ADCs their grief was less intense because of the experience(s); (3) their ADCs were life-changing in some way; and (4) they were willing to participate in a taped interview with the researcher. Interviews were semi-structured, transcribed verbatim, and then analyzed using phenomenological reduction methods of

Moustakas and Hycner to extract the essential constituents of the ADC experiences, and the meaning ascribed to these events by the participants.

Thirteen types of ADCs were found in the literature review: (1) sensing presence of the deceased, (2) hearing the actual vocal quality of the deceased, (3) telepathically communicating with the deceased, (4) touch, (5) visual, (6) taste, (7) fragrance, (8) dreams, (9) out-of-body, (10) telephone calls from the deceased, (11) precognitive (living person has a communication with deceased individual before knowing of the death), (12) psi kappa (moved objects), and (13) unusual natural phenomena, e.g., birds, rainbows.

The seven participants collectively experienced 40 ADCs of the types listed above with the exception of taste, which is rarely reported. In addition to the 13 types of ADC listed above, participants in this study reported sexual ADCs (the tangible, physical presence of the deceased is perceived by the survivor), mystical ADCs, and ADC messages delivered through radio-broadcast songs.

Eight themes emerged from the phenomenological reduction: (1) unexpectedness of ADC establishes authenticity for bereaved individual; (2) cues for recognition are specific to the deceased and reinforce authenticity; (3) bereaved considers self-delusion before accepting the experience; (4) after ADC, bereaved reports immediate relief, comfort, hope, love, emotional stabilization, encouragement, forgiveness, and the joy of continuing relationship; (5) ADC assists bereaved in completing unfinished business with deceased; (6) bereaved may reframe relationship with the deceased as a result of ADC; (7) may reframe relationship with self, and (8) may reframe relationship with God or the divine.

Participants said they felt blessed and privileged to experience ADCs, even if initially frightened or saddened by the initial contact. All were able to begin to grieve, continue grieving with a sense of completion of unfinished business, or complete grieving because of their ADCs, depending upon where they were in the grieving process at the time of interview. To varying degrees, they reported an expanded awareness of the meaning of life and death, feared death less, felt confirmed in who they believe themselves to be, and had a new understanding of themselves in relation to a bigger picture or universal grand plan. All said they had a "knowing" that consciousness and love survive death and look forward to reunion with loved ones.

Of the 40 reported ADCs, only one resulted in a complete release of grief for its percipient. The other 39 events resulted in varying degrees of spontaneous healing or

resolution of grief. All ADCs were described as ultimately beneficial even if initially frightening. The study did not include anyone who had an ADC experience and ignored or minimized it; nor does it include anyone who had an experienced they perceived as negative and then discarded.

Findings cannot be generalized to larger populations of bereaved individuals; however, emerging data suggest future research lies in (1) the further study of ADC-facilitated grieving, and in (2) the potential that ADCs hold for the percipients' self-actualization process after they have completed the grieving process. ADC is an anomalous psi experience that falls into the domain of Exceptional Human Experience (EHE), an area of research begun in 1990 by Rhea A. White (<http://www.ehe.org>). Anomalous or exceptional experiences can be points of catalytic transpersonal insight. To varying degrees on a pragmatic/esoteric continuum, the participants experienced, as a result of their ADCs, long-term, liberating, transformational changes in awareness of self, relationship with the deceased, and new understanding of the meaning of life, death, and the divine.