

Transitioning to a Plant-Based Diet Post Near-Death Experience: A Literature Review

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Researcher Network member, Tani Khara, reviews the literature on near-death experiences and transitions to veganism

Religious and spiritual practices across various cultures significantly shape how humans interact with animals. These interactions, in turn, can greatly influence dietary choices.

Hinduism, **with its cultural practices extending for thousands of years** (Sunder, 2019) highlights humankind's symbiotic relationship with the natural world (Chapple, 2012). It promotes numerous teachings that stress the adoption of a plant-based diet, supporting the principle of 'ahimsa', or non-violence, toward all sentient beings (Szucs et al., 2012). Jainism also upholds the concepts of karma and reincarnation (Davidson, 2003). Jain teachings claim that "the entire universe is alive" (Davidson, 2003, p. 117) and that souls transmigrate across living beings. It is for this reason that Jainism advocates a plant-based diet (Jayanthi, 2001). Some Buddhist traditions similarly encourage non-interference with the lives of sentient beings (Sharma et al., 2014) and emphasise plant-based eating (Puskar-Pasewicz, 2010). There are also Judeo-Christian teachings which advocate compassion towards animals. In some aspects of Christian theology, humanity's role is defined as being a caretaker of the natural world (Linzey, 1987; Regan, 1986) and that animals are brothers and sisters to humanity (Bekoff, 2010; Sorrell, 1988). Similarly, the Hebrew word 'nephesh' refers to the life-blood and spirit of animals, hence, shedding their blood is believed to carry "**grave cosmological and spiritual risks**" (Northcott, 2008, p. 4).

On the other hand, religion is defined as a set of attitudes, beliefs, and practices which involve the worship of "the supernatural" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.-b). In this regard, religion has connotations of subjectivism (American Psychological Association, 2023) influenced by personal experiences and cultural traditions. The existence of an afterlife is also a **Magical** **Cookies** falls beyond the scope of many empirical studies. To this point, Shakespeare himself described death as the great unknown **Privacy & Cookie Policy** ere'd country, from whose bourn **no traveller returns**" (Shakespeare, 2016).

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However, studies on near-death experiences (NDEs) have provided some intriguing results. Firstly, a near-death experience (NDE) has been defined as an event that may occur to a person who is close to death (Blackmore, 1996; Greyson & Evans Bush, 1992; Judson & Wiltshaw, 1983). It has been described as “an occurrence in which a person comes very close to dying and has memories of a spiritual experience...during the time when death was near” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.-a). A 2014 Dutch study highlighting the following was reported among a minority of survivors who had a near death experience – they were aware of being dead and experienced positive emotions; others reported having an out-of-body experience, witnessing a life review, passing through a tunnel, meeting with deceased loved ones, witnessing a celestial landscape, beautiful colours and/or reported seeing a ‘border’ (van Lommel, 2014).

Research into near-death experiences (NDEs) and other related phenomena has been a topic of debate among the scientific community (Sartori et al., 2013). A rather widely accepted view of the causation of NDEs is that they occur due to a disturbance of the brain chemistry occurring during the dying process (Belanti et al., 2008; Braithwaite, 2008; Saavedra-Aguilar & Gómez-Jeria, 1989) and that they are a psychological response to the perceived threat of death (Gliksman & Kellehear, 1990; Jansen, 1989).

On the other hand, studies also highlight that survivors have reported being aware of specific events and details despite the cerebral function being severely compromised (Owens et al., 1990; Sartori et al., 2013) and electrical activity in the cerebral cortex and the deeper structures of the brain being absent (Parnia & Fenwick, 2002). Research on this topic has also found that survivors return with a changed sense of awareness that “we are connected to others and to ourselves” (van Lommel, 2014, p. 128) and report having a stronger sense of interconnectedness (Blackmore, 1996). Other work highlights that NDE survivors report experiencing a values shift from an ego-centered to other-centered consciousness (Greyson, 2006) and a heightened sense of empathy (Sartori, 2018).

Survivors also report profound shifts in lifestyle, some of which encompass a switch from a meat-based diet to a plant-based diet (Near Death Experience Research Foundation, 2023). While our understanding of the NDE phenomena is continuing to evolve, there are several survivor accounts on developing a greater appreciation of nature and social justice (Klemenc-Ketis, 2013) which appear to have prompted these dietary changes towards plant-based eating. Several survivor anecdotes in this article – presented in the form of italics – have been extracted from the Near Death Experience Research Foundation which includes an extensive compilation of NDE experiences. Several individuals who experienced Near Death Experiences (NDEs) mentioned a shift towards a plant-based diet following their ordeal, despite having consumed meat prior to their NDE. While some survivors explicitly mentioned becoming vegan, others discussed becoming vegetarian. To this point, it is worth noting that becoming plant-based or vegetarian was used to illustrate a significant change in dietary habits towards a more compassionate and less detrimental way of eating, as survivors of Near Death Experiences (NDEs) gained a heightened understanding of the links and interconnections among various life forms:

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- *“My past flashed before me... Since the experience, I have known how precious life is. I became a vegan... I am now very involved with environmentalism and the earth-religion movement.” (link).*
- *“I have no label for my belief system (since the NDE). It is my personal belief system, created through my life experiences. I believe in self-respect and respect for those around me. I'm vegan.” (link).*
- *“Since that time (the NDE), everything has changed for me... I've been a vegetarian since then. I eat many raw organic foods. I don't eat anything with chemical ingredients, and keep my food very pure, for the most part. My children and husband now eats mostly this way too. We are all feeling great” (Near Death Experience Research Foundation, n.d.-a)*
- *“With my kidney disease, I have to be on a super low protein diet, which means I am a vegetarian now” (Near Death Experience Research Foundation, n.d.-e).*

Several NDE survivors report adopting a plant-based diet for health-related reasons. This is reflective of other findings on dietary motivations in that health-related factors tend to be a key reason as to why consumers might reduce their meat consumption and switch to a plant-based diet (Mullee et al., 2017; Povey et al., 2001). However, there are other survivors who – after experiencing an NDE – discussed having an increased appreciation and respect for life (Groth-Marnat and Summers, 1998) and these were apparent reasons as to why they made the switch from a meat-based diet to plant-based eating. This also, interestingly, appears to reflect some of the philosophies underpinning ethical veganism (Beck and Ladwig, 2021; Heiss and Hormes, 2018):

- *“I am a more compassionate and tolerant person than I was prior to my experience. I live my life in a spiritual way with regard for all creatures and the environment. I no longer kill anything if I can help it, where before I was a champion spear fisherman and hunter. I am a vegan who supports animal welfare causes and my wife I have taken in rescued pets as family members” (link).*
- *“(Since the NDE) I started to look for where to help, more beings in need also found me... I became vegan, started to treat my body better, started to rescue animals in my home (link).*
- *“Today I am vegetarian as I feel it is wrong to take life. This is in spite of the fact I love the taste and smell of meat... I constantly question everything... I am so unlike what I was, before the experience.” (Near Death Experience Research Foundation, n.d.-b).*
- *“Many people after seeing the light go vegan or at least vegetarian because they get an increased empathy for every living being, including animals... I was right that God exists and promoting minimalism, veganism, naturism and nudism for increased animal wellbeing and connection with nature” (link).*

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Previous findings on NDE survivors developing greater awareness of interconnectedness and an affinity towards life (van Lommel, 2014) was also noted in these anecdotes from the Near Death Research Foundation:

- *“I felt a shift in my perspective. I now wish to support not just my family and friends, not just my following online, but our entire species, globally, and our planet, in healing from the damage done. As an example, I am (attempting) to go Vegan. I am interested in cleaning up our seas, in removing waste from our cities and forests, in supporting those in poverty, in doing what I can to diminish any affects on global warming, climate change etc. These are early days for me in this new venture, but I absolutely believe this is why I am here. I absolutely believe, this is vital to the future of Earth and all who do or will inhabit it”* ([link](#)).
- *“Large changes in my life (have occurred after the experience)...I have recently become vegan and I believe it's the right thing. We should not harm. We should love”* ([link](#)).
- *“One should know that animals also have souls and should be treated that way. My husband and I are now vegetarians due to our love for animals. We are very proud of this and we never regret it, not for a second. As an NDEr you will always be different from the majority.”* (Near Death Experience Research Foundation, n.d.-c).
- *“I came out of it thinking we are all connected on this planet, it doesn't matter our species, color, race or how much money we have... I just can't be cruel to something we are so connected to that have the same feelings and emotions we do.”* (Near Death Experience Research Foundation, n.d.-g).

Interestingly survivors who were already following a plant-based diet – prior to their NDE experiences – later recounted their NDE experiences saying that their dietary habits were a “good choice”. This reflects other work on dietary practices, where some plant-based consumers believe that eating meat is spiritually polluting (Rozin et al., 1997):

- *“I have never feared death after the NDE. I was a vegan...for over 27 years (before the NDE) and still lean greatly that way. I believe in truth, honesty, love, compassion, faith, empathy, consideration and kindness.”* ([link](#)).
- *“It was very apparent that every single thought, word and action affects everything around the entire universe, and indeed us including trees, plants, and animals too. I have been a long-term vegetarian since about eighteen years old and I know this was appreciated and is a good choice in life. Spiritually it seemed to show proof of respect for all life, and even seemed to balance some of the negative and wicked things I have done in my life.”* (Near Death Experience Research Foundation, n.d.-d).

The NDE phenomena is a fascinating and also controversial topic, intertwined with questions about consciousness, the nature of existence, and the potential for life – or some aspect of ourselves – to persist after physical death. To this point, another study on NDE survivors found that the participants were no more religious or spiritually inclined than the general population but that, following the NDE, there was a statistically significant shift towards spirituality on most items investigated (Sutherland, 1990). Although our understanding of the NDE phenomena is evolving, the findings and anecdotes from survivors on sentience, equality and justice, and viewing animals for their intrinsic value rather

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than as mere commodities are encouraging. This also stands as a commendation to the philosophy and practices of ethical veganism, which has consistently and emphatically underscored the principle that every form of life is entitled to respect, dignity, and compassion.

The views expressed by our Research News contributors are not necessarily the views of The Vegan Society.

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