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DEFENSE STYLES AND MINDFULNESS AMONG NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCERS

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Abstract

Background: Near-death experiences (NDEs) are profound psychological experiences reported in circumstances involving perceived proximity to death or intense danger. Although the phenomenology and aftereffects of NDEs have been widely discussed, relatively limited attention has been given to psychological characteristics such as defense styles and mindfulness among individuals reporting NDEs, particularly in the Indian context. The present paper focuses specifically on two psychological variables: defense styles and mindfulness among near-death experiencers.

Method: The paper is based on the quantitative component of a mixed-method study. Eight participants aged 22–71 years were selected purposively from internet groups, mental health professionals, and personal contacts. Participants met the study criterion of scoring 7 or above on the Near Death Experience Scale. The two variables were assessed using the Defense Style Questionnaire-40 (DSQ-40) and the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ). Descriptive analysis was used to summarize defense-style and mindfulness scores. The original study included qualitative narratives and the NDE Scale; however, these are treated here only as background and participant-selection information rather than as study variables.

Results: Mature defense style was the predominant defense style (M = 6.72), followed by neurotic defense style (M = 5.56) and immature defense style (M = 4.97). For mindfulness, the highest mean facet score was Observing (M = 3.73), followed by Nonreactivity (M = 3.67), Describing (M = 3.57), Acting with Awareness (M = 3.48), and Nonjudging (M = 3.10). The overall average FFMQ

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item score was 3.52. These findings indicate a descriptive pattern characterized by greater endorsement of mature defenses and relatively prominent observing and nonreactivity facets of mindfulness.

Conclusion: Within this small, purposively selected sample, near-death experiencers demonstrated predominantly mature defense styles and a relatively prominent capacity to observe internal and external experiences. The findings are consistent with the interpretation that adaptive defensive functioning and mindful awareness may be relevant psychological characteristics among NDErs. However, the study does not establish that an NDE causes mature defenses or greater mindfulness, and the results should not be generalized because of the small sample and absence of a comparison group.

Keywords: *near-death experiences, defense styles, mindfulness, mature defenses, Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire, Defense Style Questionnaire-40*

1. Introduction

Near-death experiences have been described as profound psychological events that may occur in individuals who are close to death or who perceive themselves to be in situations of intense physical or emotional danger. The literature describes NDEs not simply according to the medical circumstances in which they occur, but also according to the cluster of phenomenological features reported by experiencers. These may include altered perception, unusual bodily experiences, feelings of peace, encounters with figures, bright light, altered time perception, and changes in the individual's understanding of life and death. Greyson's Near Death Experience Scale was developed to quantify these experiences across cognitive, affective, paranormal, and transcendental domains. The original study used this scale as a screening measure, with a score of 7 or higher used to identify individuals for further study.

The psychological significance of an NDE extends beyond the experience itself. Previous research has described changes in emotional functioning, values, interpersonal attitudes, spirituality, and attitudes toward death following such experiences. The original dissertation from which the present paper is derived also reported themes of emotional regulation, insight, acceptance, personality

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change, and altered perspectives on death. These observations raise an important clinical question: what psychological processes may be characteristic of people who report such experiences? The present paper narrows this question to two variables—defense styles and mindfulness.

Defense mechanisms are psychological processes that help individuals manage internal conflict, anxiety, distress, and challenging external circumstances. Contemporary approaches commonly organize defenses into broader styles according to their relative maturity. Mature defenses include mechanisms such as sublimation, humor, anticipation, and suppression; neurotic defenses include mechanisms such as undoing, pseudo-altruism, idealization, and reaction formation; and immature defenses include projection, passive aggression, acting out, isolation, denial, displacement, dissociation, splitting, rationalization, and somatization. The DSQ-40 provides a structured self-report method for assessing these higher-order defense styles.

Defense styles are relevant to NDE research because intense threat can activate psychological processes involved in the regulation of fear, emotional arousal, and meaning-making. Earlier work cited in the dissertation has considered dissociation and denial in relation to NDEs. However, the presence of dissociative or unusual experiences does not necessarily imply psychopathology. The dissertation notes that dissociative symptoms reported by NDErs may occur at levels lower than those observed in pathological dissociative disorders. Therefore, examining the broader pattern of mature, neurotic, and immature defenses may provide a more balanced understanding of psychological functioning among NDErs.

Mindfulness constitutes the second variable. It is commonly conceptualized as purposeful attention to present-moment experience with a nonjudgmental stance. Rather than representing an all-or-none quality, mindfulness can be understood as a multidimensional capacity. The Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire assesses observing, describing, acting with awareness, nonjudging of inner experience, and nonreactivity to inner experience. These facets capture different ways in which individuals relate to internal and external experiences.

Mindfulness may be particularly relevant to NDErs because the experience itself is often described as unusually vivid and salient, and because many experiencers subsequently report acceptance,

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meaning, emotional changes, and altered perspectives. The original dissertation reported the highest FFMQ facet as Observing and discussed acceptance as conceptually related to mindfulness. Nevertheless, the cross-sectional data cannot determine whether mindfulness preceded the NDE, developed after the NDE, or was influenced by other personal or cultural factors.

The present research paper therefore focuses only on the two variables of defense styles and mindfulness. The NDE is retained as the defining characteristic of the sample rather than being treated as a third analytic variable. This narrower focus makes the paper suitable for examining the psychological profile of NDErs without overextending the available data.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Defense Styles and Near-Death Experiences

Defense mechanisms have their origins in psychodynamic theory and have subsequently been examined empirically as patterns of psychological adaptation. The maturity of defenses is generally conceptualized along a developmental continuum. Mature defenses are associated with more adaptive regulation of distress while allowing continued engagement with reality. Neurotic defenses may reduce distress but can involve less flexible ways of managing internal conflict. Immature defenses are generally associated with less adaptive regulation and greater difficulty understanding, expressing, or regulating emotional experiences.

The relationship between defenses and NDEs has been discussed in several ways. Some psychological explanations have proposed denial, dissociation, depersonalization, or altered perception as possible responses to extreme threat. Greyson's work, as summarized in the original dissertation, reported more dissociative symptoms among NDErs than among individuals who came close to death without reporting an NDE, while emphasizing that the level of symptoms was substantially below that typically associated with pathological dissociative disorders. Such findings suggest that unusual perceptual or self-experiential phenomena may occur as non-pathological responses to extreme circumstances.

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At the same time, defense styles should not be reduced to a single mechanism. An individual may use multiple defenses, and the relative predominance of mature, neurotic, or immature defenses may provide a broader picture of psychological adaptation. Mature defenses such as sublimation and humor can facilitate regulation without requiring withdrawal from reality. In the context of an NDE, the predominance of mature defenses may therefore be relevant to the way experiencers integrate a highly salient event into their subsequent lives.

The present study does not test whether NDEs cause a change in defense style. The original data were collected retrospectively, and no pre-NDE assessment of defense style was available. Consequently, the appropriate interpretation is descriptive: the study identifies the defense styles reported by NDErs at the time of assessment.

2.2 Mindfulness and Near-Death Experiences

Mindfulness has increasingly been studied as a psychological construct associated with attention regulation, emotional awareness, acceptance, and reduced reactivity. The FFMQ provides a multidimensional assessment rather than treating mindfulness as a single homogeneous characteristic. Observing refers to noticing internal and external experiences; describing refers to labeling experiences with words; acting with awareness reflects attention to one's current activity; nonjudging involves allowing experiences without evaluating them as good or bad; and nonreactivity refers to allowing thoughts and feelings to arise without automatically responding to them.

The relevance of mindfulness to NDErs can be considered from both experiential and adjustment perspectives. NDEs are often remembered as exceptionally vivid experiences, and some experiencers report changes in acceptance, emotional regulation, and meaning. The original dissertation found Observing to be the most prominent FFMQ facet and linked acceptance in the qualitative material with mindfulness. The dissertation also referred to prior work in which NDErs were reported to have greater mindfulness than non-NDErs, with Observing emerging as a prominent facet.

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However, mindfulness should not be interpreted as evidence that the NDE itself produced a mindful disposition. Because the assessment occurred after the experience, the observed mindfulness may represent a pre-existing characteristic, a consequence of post-experience adaptation, or an interaction between personality, life circumstances, and the NDE. A longitudinal design would be required to clarify temporal direction.

2.3 Rationale for the Present Two-Variable Focus

The existing study contains several components, including NDE phenomenology, qualitative narratives, defense styles, and mindfulness. For a focused research article, combining all components can dilute the central psychological question. Defense styles and mindfulness are theoretically relevant because both concern how individuals relate to distressing internal and external experiences. Defense styles describe relatively characteristic ways of regulating conflict and distress, whereas mindfulness describes awareness and the manner in which experiences are attended to and responded to.

Focusing on these two variables also avoids making unsupported claims about relationships that were not statistically tested in the original dataset. The available data provide individual DSQ-40 and FFMQ scores and descriptive summaries, but do not provide an adequate basis for claiming a statistically significant correlation between defense styles and mindfulness. Therefore, this paper presents a descriptive quantitative profile rather than an inferential test of association.

3. Method

3.1 Aim

To assess defense styles and mindfulness among individuals who reported a near-death experience.

3.2 Objectives

• To assess the predominant defense style among near-death experiencers.

• To assess the five facets of mindfulness among near-death experiencers.

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• To describe the psychological profile of the participants in terms of defense styles and mindfulness.

3.3 Research Design

The original study used a mixed-method approach. For the present research paper, only the quantitative component relevant to the two selected variables is retained. The resulting analytic framework is descriptive and cross-sectional: defense styles and mindfulness were assessed in individuals who met the NDE screening criterion. The qualitative narratives and NDE phenomenology are not treated as outcome variables in this paper.

3.4 Sample and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used. Participants were recruited through internet groups, mental health professionals, and personal contacts. The sample comprised eight participants aged 22 to 71 years, including five men and three women, from different states of India and varied sociodemographic backgrounds. Seven participants were contacted virtually and one was contacted personally. All participants identified themselves as having experienced an NDE in the past.

For inclusion, participants were required to obtain a score of 7 or higher on the Near Death Experience Scale, be between 18 and 75 years of age, be able to read and speak English or Hindi, and have access to a smartphone and/or internet connection. The stated exclusion criteria included a history of major psychiatric illness and current psychiatric medication or psychoactive substance use. The dissertation also notes that one participant reported anxiety and depression but was included after the researcher judged the severity insufficient to interfere with contact with reality; this is important to retain as a limitation when interpreting the sample.

3.5 Measures

Defense Style Questionnaire-40 (DSQ-40)

The DSQ-40, developed by Andrews, Singh, and Bond (1993), is a 40-item shortened version of the Defense Style Questionnaire. It provides information on 20 individual defenses and three higher-order defense styles: mature, neurotic, and immature. The mature factor includes sublimation,

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humor, anticipation, and suppression. The neurotic factor includes undoing, pseudo-altruism, idealization, and reaction formation. The immature factor includes projection, passive aggression, acting out, isolation, devaluation, autistic fantasy, denial, displacement, dissociation, splitting, rationalization, and somatization. Items are rated on a nine-point scale. The source dissertation reports test-retest reliability coefficients ranging from .70 to .91 and strong correlations between the factor scores across versions.

Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ)

The FFMQ was developed by Baer et al. (2006) and contains 39 items assessing five facets of mindfulness: observing, describing, acting with awareness, nonjudging of inner experience, and nonreactivity to inner experience. Responses are made on a five-point scale ranging from never or rarely true to very often or always true. The dissertation reports internal consistency of approximately .70 for the instrument. Because no normative cut-off was available for the FFMQ in the study, scores were interpreted as continuous indicators of relative prominence across facets rather than as evidence of being or not being mindful.

3.6 Procedure and Ethics

Rapport was established with participants before data collection. Participants were informed about confidentiality and the procedure, including audio recording of narratives in the original mixed-method study. The NDE Scale was used to screen participants, after which the DSQ-40 and FFMQ were administered. Participants were informed that they could discontinue discussion if recalling the experience became stressful or unpleasant. The original study reports that participants were debriefed after data collection and follow-up contacts were used to clarify information. For the present paper, only the quantitative DSQ-40 and FFMQ data are analyzed.

3.7 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the DSQ-40 and FFMQ scores. Means and standard deviations were calculated for the three defense-style domains and the five mindfulness facets. Because the sample consisted of only eight participants and no comparison group was available, inferential testing and causal interpretation were not emphasized. The descriptive approach is

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consistent with the limitations of the dataset and prevents overinterpretation of individual differences.

4. Results

4.1 Defense Styles

The DSQ-40 results demonstrated a clear descriptive ordering of the three defense styles. Mature defenses had the highest mean score (M = 6.72, SD = 1.19), followed by neurotic defenses (M = 5.56, SD = 1.47), while immature defenses had the lowest mean score (M = 4.97, SD = 0.92). The original dissertation similarly reported mature defenses as predominant, with mean scores of 6.70, 5.56, and 4.96 respectively.

Defense style	Mean	SD
Mature	6.72	1.19
Neurotic	5.56	1.47
Immature	4.97	0.92

The pattern indicates that, within this sample, participants more strongly endorsed defenses categorized as mature than those categorized as neurotic or immature. The finding should be interpreted as a sample-level descriptive pattern rather than a diagnostic classification. DSQ-40 scores do not establish that an individual always uses a particular defense style; rather, they provide an indication of the relative endorsement of defense-related statements at assessment.

4.2 Mindfulness

The FFMQ results showed variation across the five mindfulness facets. Observing had the highest mean score (M = 3.73, SD = 0.79), followed by Nonreactivity (M = 3.67, SD = 0.68), Describing (M = 3.57, SD = 0.67), and Acting with Awareness (M = 3.48, SD = 1.17). Nonjudging had the lowest mean score (M = 3.10, SD = 1.05). The overall average item score was 3.52 (SD = 0.24).

FFMQ facet	Mean	SD

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Observing	3.73	0.79
Nonreactivity	3.67	0.68
Describing	3.57	0.67
Acting with awareness	3.48	1.17
Nonjudging	3.10	1.05
Average item score	3.52	0.24

The highest score for Observing suggests that noticing internal and external experiences was the most prominent mindfulness facet in this sample. Nonreactivity was also relatively prominent, indicating a comparatively strong tendency to experience thoughts and feelings without immediate behavioral reaction. Nonjudging was the least prominent facet, although its mean remained above the midpoint of the five-point response scale.

The source data show that the eight participants differed considerably in their individual facet profiles. For example, some participants reported relatively high observing and describing scores, whereas others showed stronger acting-with-awareness, nonjudging, or nonreactivity scores. Therefore, the group means should not be interpreted as evidence that all NDErs have the same mindfulness profile.

5. Discussion

The present paper examined two psychological variables among individuals reporting NDEs: defense styles and mindfulness. The most notable finding was the predominance of mature defense styles. Mature defenses are generally considered relatively adaptive because they allow individuals to manage distress while maintaining engagement with reality. The present pattern therefore suggests that the participants, as a group, reported greater use of mature than neurotic or immature defensive strategies.

This finding is relevant because NDEs are frequently associated with experiences of intense threat, altered bodily awareness, and strong emotional salience. One might expect such circumstances to be

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associated exclusively with primitive or maladaptive psychological processes. However, the present data do not support such a simple interpretation. Although the original literature has discussed dissociation and denial in relation to NDEs, the overall DSQ-40 profile in this sample was characterized by mature defenses. This supports the view that unusual experiences and adaptive psychological functioning can coexist.

The predominance of mature defenses may also be considered in relation to the reported aftereffects described in the original study. The qualitative component identified emotional regulation, insight, acceptance, and personality changes among several participants. These findings cannot be statistically linked to the DSQ-40 scores because the original study did not test such associations. Nevertheless, at a conceptual level, adaptive post-experience changes are compatible with the broader picture of relatively mature defensive functioning. This interpretation should remain tentative because the qualitative and quantitative findings were not integrated through a formal statistical model.

The mindfulness findings provide a second important dimension. Observing emerged as the highest FFMQ facet. This indicates that, among the five facets, participants most strongly endorsed the tendency to notice internal and external experiences. The result is consistent with the original dissertation's interpretation that observing was particularly prominent among NDErs. The dissertation also noted that previous research had reported higher mindfulness among NDErs compared with non-NDErs and similarly identified Observing as a prominent facet.

Nonreactivity was the second-highest facet. From a psychological perspective, nonreactivity concerns allowing thoughts and feelings to occur without automatically becoming behaviorally driven by them. A relatively prominent nonreactivity score may be relevant to the adaptation of individuals who have undergone a highly salient experience, because integration of unusual experiences may require the capacity to notice strong internal events without responding impulsively to them.

The comparatively lower Nonjudging score is also noteworthy. Mindfulness is multidimensional, and a person may be highly observant without showing equally strong nonjudgmental acceptance.

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Therefore, the findings should not be summarized simply by stating that the participants were 'highly mindful.' A more accurate description is that the observed mindfulness profile was particularly characterized by observing and nonreactivity, while nonjudging was comparatively less prominent.

An important conceptual issue concerns the direction of the relationship between NDEs and the two psychological variables. The present study cannot determine whether mature defenses or mindfulness predisposed participants to interpret or report an experience as an NDE, whether the experience contributed to later psychological changes, or whether both are influenced by other characteristics such as personality, spirituality, coping style, age, or life circumstances. The original dissertation explicitly acknowledged that defense and mindfulness scores could not be compared before and after the NDE because pre-experience measurements were unavailable.

The small sample is particularly important. Only eight participants were assessed on the DSQ-40 and FFMQ. Such a sample is useful for exploratory description but insufficient for population-level conclusions. There was also no non-NDE comparison group. Consequently, it is not possible to state that NDErs have more mature defenses or greater mindfulness than the general population on the basis of this dataset alone.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes an exploratory psychological profile of NDErs from an Indian context. The findings indicate that research on NDEs need not focus only on the unusual phenomenology of the experience. Psychological adaptation, emotion regulation, defense functioning, and mindful awareness may also be important areas of investigation. A balanced approach is particularly valuable because NDE reports can be interpreted through medical, psychological, cultural, spiritual, and philosophical frameworks, and no single framework is sufficient to explain the diversity of experiences.

6. Clinical and Research Implications

The findings have several implications for clinical psychology. First, clinicians working with individuals reporting NDEs should avoid automatically interpreting unusual experiences as evidence of psychopathology. Assessment should consider reality testing, distress, functioning,

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cultural meaning, and the individual's interpretation of the experience. The predominance of mature defenses in this small sample further emphasizes that an NDE report can occur alongside apparently adaptive psychological functioning.

Second, mindfulness-related assessment may be useful when exploring how individuals process highly salient experiences. Observing and nonreactivity were the most prominent facets in the present sample, suggesting that attention to how clients notice and respond to internal experiences may be clinically relevant. However, mindfulness should not be prescribed or interpreted solely on the basis of an NDE report; individualized assessment remains necessary.

For research, future studies should recruit larger samples and include non-NDE comparison groups. Prospective studies involving individuals exposed to life-threatening medical events would be particularly valuable because they could assess defense styles and mindfulness before and after the event. Such a design would help clarify whether the psychological characteristics precede the experience, follow it, or change over time.

Future studies should also examine whether defense styles and mindfulness are associated with the intensity of NDEs. This question was not tested in the original dataset and therefore cannot be answered by the current paper. With an adequate sample, researchers could test correlations between mature, neurotic, and immature defense scores and the five FFMQ facets, while controlling for relevant demographic and clinical variables. Cultural factors should also be incorporated because the interpretation and meaning of NDEs may differ across contexts.

7. Limitations

• The sample was very small (n = 8), limiting statistical power and generalizability.

• Purposive sampling may have introduced selection bias because participants self-identified as NDErs and were recruited through internet groups, professionals, and personal contacts.

• There was no non-NDE comparison group.

• The study was retrospective and did not include pre-NDE measurements of defense styles or mindfulness; therefore, temporal or causal conclusions cannot be made.

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• The FFMQ was interpreted descriptively because the study did not have normative cut-offs for the sample.

• One participant reported a history of anxiety and depression but was retained in the original sample after clinical consideration; this may be relevant when interpreting psychological functioning.

• The present paper does not claim a statistical relationship between defense styles and mindfulness because such an association was not established in the source data.

8. Conclusion

The present research paper focused specifically on defense styles and mindfulness among eight individuals reporting near-death experiences. Mature defense style was the predominant defense category, while Observing was the most prominent mindfulness facet, followed by Nonreactivity. The overall pattern suggests that the participants demonstrated relatively adaptive defensive functioning and a mindfulness profile characterized particularly by awareness of experience and reduced automatic reactivity.

These findings provide a useful exploratory basis for understanding NDErs from a psychological perspective. Importantly, they do not establish that NDEs cause mature defenses or increased mindfulness. Instead, they describe psychological characteristics observed in a small, purposively selected group. Future research using larger samples, comparison groups, longitudinal designs, and culturally sensitive measures is needed to determine how defense styles and mindfulness relate to NDEs and their subsequent psychological adaptation.

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