

Health and Well-being Benefits of Exceptional Human Experiences

William Braud

Chapter Overview

Exceptional human experiences (EHEs) are anomalous experiences that, if worked with sufficiently, can foster beneficial and transformative changes in the experiencer. This chapter explores the nature, accompaniments, and aftereffects of such experiences and focuses on the variety of ways in which their experiencing and their disclosure can benefit the experiencer's mental health and well-being. The EHEs treated here include primarily mystical and unitive, psychical, encounter, unusual death-related, and peak experiences. The possible mental health benefits are described in the contexts of the models and findings of theorists Rhea White (on their transformative potential and their useful role in establishing more life-potentiating self narratives), James Pennebaker and Ian Wickramasekera (on the health benefits of disclosing these types of experiences to others and even more fully to oneself), Tom Driver (on the value of "professing" such experiences), and the "positive psychology" of Barbara Fredrickson (how such experiences may broaden the experiencer's momentary thought and action patterns and allow the building of more enduring coping resources). The chapter addresses ways in which therapists, counselors, and other helping professionals might best work with persons reporting these experiences. Other chapter sections address possible reasons for the underreporting and underappreciation of EHEs, as well as some possible negative accompaniments and misunderstandings of such experiences.

Relevant Experiences

Anomalous experiences are those that depart from our own familiar personal experiences or from the more usual, ordinary, and expected experiences of a given culture and time. Obviously, there are many types of anomalous experiences—some merely infrequent, some deemed abnormal or pathological, and so on. This chapter addresses only a certain subset of anomalous experiences—those that involve alternative modes of knowing, doing, and being and that are suggestive of enhanced human potentials. A useful name for this subset is *nonordinary and transcendent experiences*—nonordinary because they are relatively rare and unfamiliar, and transcendent because they go beyond our conventional understanding of ourselves and of the world, and because, under special circumstances, such experiences can trigger transformative changes in us and may allow us to transcend what we were before having these experiences. As we will see, these experiences also can contribute positively to our physical, psychological, and spiritual health and well-being.

Historically, many names have been offered for the types of experiences treated in this chapter.

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Alternative names and conceptualizations are considered in detail in Palmer and Braud (2002) and Braud (2003). Of all the names, classification schemes, and interpretations that have been offered, for our present purposes perhaps the most useful treatment of these experiences is that of Rhea White, who coined the term *exceptional human experiences* (EHEs) to bring together large sets of experiences that previously had been considered in relative isolation from one another. White (1993) initially identified approximately 100 kinds of EHEs, which she organized into five major classes: mystical and unitive experiences, psychical experiences, encounter experiences, unusual death-related experiences, and exceptional normal (later called *enhanced*) experiences. White and her coworker Suzanne Brown (2000) later expanded the list of EHEs to approximately 200 types, and reorganized these into nine classes, which are paraphrased, below, from descriptions provided by White (1997), White and Brown (1998), and White and Brown (2000).

Mystical and unitive experiences are those in which there is a strong sense of greater connection, sometimes amounting to union, with the divine, other people, other life forms, objects, surroundings, or the universe itself. Often, this is accompanied by a sense of ecstasy or of being outside of one's skin-encapsulated individual ego or self identity.

Psychical experiences are those in which we learn about or influence the world through means other than the conventionally recognized senses, motor systems, or their mechanical extensions, or rational inference, in cases in which chance coincidence has been ruled out. The four major forms of psychical experiences are telepathy (direct mind-mind interactions), clairvoyance (direct mind-object interactions), precognition (accurate foreknowledge of future events), and psychokinesis (direct mental influences on physical or biological systems).

Encounter experiences are those in which the experiencer is confronted with something that is actually there but is awesome and wondrous (such as a glorious mountain peak) or something that is not supposed to be there (such as a Marian apparition or a UFO). These could also include encounters with the Divine, angelic beings, mythical beings, or an inner guide. These experiences could be described as encounters with realms or beings that seem alien or other.

Unusual death related experiences include near-death experiences, strange experiences associated with the moment of death (such as clocks stopping or pictures of the deceased falling at the moment of their deaths), apparitions of the dead, and various apparent communications with the dead.

Peak experiences are both related to, yet different from, mystical experiences. They are self-actualizing moments in which one experiences, more closely than usual, all that one can be. They typically are short-lived, yet profound, and are accompanied by a sense of enhanced perception, appreciation, or understanding. One may feel lifted out of oneself, in the flow of things, self-fulfilled, engaged in optimal functioning, and filled with highest happiness. These experiences can be triggered by the beauty and majesty of the natural world, by great music or art, by witnessing noble acts, but also by experiences of the tragic aspects of life.

Exceptional human performances/feats are activities that extend the limits of what a given person has been accustomed to doing, or activities beyond what persons as a whole had been doing. These are ways in which we go beyond previously experienced or understood capabilities;

often, these elicit feelings of awe and wonder. Examples include exceptional sports or athletic performances, outstanding musical performances, unusual feats of strength or stamina, and so on. This class also would include the extraordinary abilities displayed by precocious geniuses and by savants.

Healing experiences include instances of recovery, cure, or enhancement of physical, psychological, or spiritual well-being beyond what is usually experienced or expected on the basis of conventional medical or psychological knowledge.

Desolation/nadir experiences are those of profound feelings of isolation and experiences of loss of meaning, satisfaction, or well-being, which, nonetheless may be triggers for peak experiences or may be preludes or steps in one's overall development or movement toward their opposites—the peak experiences of wholeness, joy, and rich connection. Desolation or nadir (the lowest point or trough of feelings or affect) experiences often are associated with disasters and life-threatening circumstances. These are contacts with the depths of self—complements to the heights of self experienced in peak experiences.

Dissociation experiences are those in which one feels, knows, or acts in ways that seem apart from, detached from, or disconnected from one's usual conscious awareness, actions, or self-identity. One feels an Other to oneself.

These EHEs are of interest chiefly for their accompaniments and aftereffects—namely, their health and well-being benefits and their potential for transformative change in the experiencer. The process through which these benefits and changes may come about is explored below.

Relevance of EHEs to the Helping Professions

Although EHEs typically are relatively unfamiliar, considered unusual, and not well understood, they are, nonetheless, rather widespread experiences. Many surveys and other estimates—of varying degrees of carefulness and representativeness—have indicated that EHEs are surprisingly prevalent and widely distributed in the general population. For example, several representative random surveys of the incidence of beliefs in EHEs, with samples sizes ranging from 430 to 2,126, indicated that the percentages of persons believing in the reality of certain named EHEs varied from 9% to 56% for various types of EHEs (Farha & Steward, 2006; Harris, 2008; Moore, 2005; Newport & Strausberg, 2001; Pew, 2009; Rice, 2003). Of greater importance is that similar representative random surveys, with sample sizes ranging from 268 to 2,325, found that 5% to 39% of the persons in their samples had had personal experiences of the various types of EHEs (the particular percentage depended upon the type of experience; Haraldsson & Houtkooper, 1991; Palmer, 1979; Pew, 2009). These surveys were conducted with respondents living in the United States; however, international surveys have yielded similar results (with some percentage variations, depending upon which countries were being surveyed and which experiences were included in the surveys).

However, despite the relatively high incidence of EHEs, misunderstandings about the nature, accompaniments, and aftereffects of EHEs abound. Misinformation and misunderstandings regarding EHEs are common among not only the persons having such experiences but also those

from whom the experiencers may seek explanations and advice. Due to the relative absence of serious discussions of EHEs and their nature and meanings, persons who spontaneously have such experiences may experience emotional reactions such as surprise, confusion, conflict, and fear, along with a reluctance to discuss the experiences with others. Due to their own limited experience and education regarding EHEs, those in the helping professions (health practitioners, counselors, therapists, spiritual guides) often are ill equipped to provide accurate information and useful advice to clients who have had such experiences.

Given the absence of sufficient accurate information and the presence of active disinformation about EHEs, it is important that both professionals and the general public be provided with greater and more reliable information about the nature of EHEs and their possible life impacts—both positive and negative. The remainder of this chapter focuses most fully upon impacts bearing on health and well-being and upon ways in which professionals might more effectively deal with those seeking help regarding their EHEs.

Life Impacts: Theories and Models

This chapter section treats five theoretical positions or models that address the possible accompaniments and outcomes associated with EHEs. A subsequent section presents empirical findings relevant to these theories and models.

The “EHE Process” Proposed by Rhea White and Suzanne Brown

White (1997, 1998) and Brown (1998) address life impacts of EHEs according to what they have termed *the EHE process*. The process begins with an *anomalous experience* (AE), an unusual experience that cannot be explained in terms of conventionally recognized physical, biological, psychological, or sociological processes. It is possible that an AE will be ignored, dismissed, or explained away. However, if an AE attracts the experiencer’s attention and the experiencer wishes to learn more about its possible meaning, the AE is not dismissed; it becomes an *exceptional experience* (EE). As one continues to work more deeply and extensively with an EE, one begins to uncover other, similar experiences, the EE’s meaning and significance deepens, and in the process one can discover and begin to actualize and express more of one’s true *human* potentials. The EE then becomes an *exceptional human experience* (EHE), and one’s self-schema, lifeview, and worldview begin to transform. One begins to shift one’s prior narrative to a new narrative, and begins to disidentify with one’s earlier, limited, isolated, separate ego-self (“little self”) and begins to re-identify with what White called a more inclusive “All-Self” (of a similar concept, William James, 1902/1985, p. 508, wrote, “[One] becomes conscious that this higher part is conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of [one], and which [one] can keep in working touch with . . .”). One enters the “experiential paradigm,” begins to live a new “project of transcendence,” and develops a new way of being in the world.

The narratives we construct may be life-depotentiating (as when we attempt to devalue, explain away, or view unusual experiences in a continuing anomalous or pathological context) or life-potentiating (as when we affirm the exceptional experiences and use them in stories in which they are more meaningful and in which we have a more meaningful place). The nature of the

narrative can be known through its everyday life fruits—the life-potentiating ones yielding a more productive, happier, healthier, zestier, and more exciting life.

As was just indicated, White and Brown used various terms for these experiences (AE, EE, EHE). To accurately distinguish AEs, EEs, and EHEs would require much information about the experiencers, their histories, and the contexts in which the experiences occurred. Therefore, throughout the rest of this chapter, only the term EHE will be used, in the interest of simplification and to avoid unnecessary confusion.

White and Brown suggested that one of the best ways to realize the benefits of EHEs is to prepare an extensive and ongoing journal of one's own EHEs in what they called the *EHE autobiography*. In an EHE autobiography, one attempts to tell the story of one's life, not in terms of the usual outer events of a typical autobiography, but rather in terms of one's inner life—the EHEs that one has had. In working on the EHE autobiography, one focuses increased attention on one's EHEs, allowing these to be better remembered and more fully integrated with each other and with the entirety of one's life. Working with EHEs in this systematic manner provides a catalyst for forms of growth and development that otherwise might not be possible.

The Role of Disclosure According to James Pennebaker and Ian Wickramasekera

There is undeniable evidence that recognizing, owning, honoring, and sharing one's experiences, especially one's more unusual experiences, is beneficial to one's physical health and psychological well-being. Although all counseling and psychotherapeutic traditions are based upon this truism, two approaches are especially germane to EHEs and their disclosure.

James Pennebaker is a psychologist who has been studying the psychological and physiological correlates of confession, self-disclosure, and confiding of significant experiences. He has found that even relatively brief disclosures of personal and traumatic experiences (especially those that have been kept secret from all others) are associated with improvements in health and well-being as measured by various psychophysiological indices, symptoms, physician visits, and immunological reactions (Pennebaker, 1995, 1999). Although processes of catharsis, extinction, and disinhibition are undoubtedly involved in Pennebaker's findings, perhaps the most important health-facilitating aspect of disclosure is that the process allows reconceptualizations or cognitive changes as the experiences are shared and explored from new and different points of view.

Ian Wickramasekera (1989) is a behavioral medicine practitioner who has found that the majority of his patients who present somatic complaints are either very high or very low on hypnotic susceptibility. Those who are highly hypnotically susceptible tend to report psychical and other unusual experiences. As the patients discuss these experiences and assimilate them more thoroughly into their lives, they experience remission of their somatic symptoms.

Pennebaker's and Wickramasekera's conceptualizations and research programs are relevant to the life impacts of EHEs in that they suggest that energy loss and low-level stress can occur when one has but denies exceptional experiences, and that there can be healthful benefits of disclosing and assimilating these previously excluded experiences. Such disclosure can occur

through journaling about one's experiences (as in creating an EHE autobiography) and through discussing these with others.

Tom Driver and Confessional Performance

Theologian Tom Driver (1991) has detailed the value of *confessional performance*, in which one demonstrates one's beliefs and experiences through observable actions. According to Driver, in this way, one performs one's becoming and becomes what one is performing. Such outward performance, perhaps even amplified through *ritual*, can have a liberating function and can change the relation between self and the world and allow the confessed/performed quality to reach beyond the individual and become that of the community. Such outward manifestations increase the reality of what is confessed/professed. Driver's ideas are relevant to EHEs in that through acknowledging and confessing our own experiences, we may grow in understanding them and change our very identity. Not only that, but disclosure may somehow increase the reality of our experiences to ourselves, to others, and perhaps to the physical world as well.

Barbara Fredrickson's "Broaden and Build" Theory of Positive Emotion

Barbara Fredrickson and her coworkers have been engaged in theoretical and empirical work exploring the accompaniments and aftereffects of positive emotions. According to the *broaden-and-build* theory developed by Fredrickson (e.g., 2002), negative emotions narrow whereas positive emotions broaden persons' momentary thought and action repertoires; positive emotions also allow the more gradual building, over time, of processes that can become enduring personal resources that can facilitate coping, problem solving, and well-being.

Fredrickson and Losada (2005) reviewed empirical evidence for the beneficial role of positive affect. According to their review, positive affect increased intuition and creativity; positively influenced various physiological indicators of health and well-being; and was associated with increased resilience to adversity, happiness, psychological growth, and longevity. The authors also reviewed Marcial Losada's work of translating the principles and predictions of the broaden-and-build theory into a mathematical nonlinear dynamic systems model that predicted and found that higher ratios of positivity to negativity were linked with broader behavioral repertoires, greater flexibility and resilience to adversity, more social resources, and optimal functioning.

In the work described above, positive emotions included amusement, awe, compassion, contentment, gratitude, hope, interest, joy, love, pride, and sexual desire; negative emotions included anger, contempt, disgust, embarrassment, fear, guilt, sadness, and shame. A series of studies at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, reviewed below, indicate that EHEs may have broadening and building qualities, similar to those of the positive emotions studied by Fredrickson and her coworkers.

Life Impacts: Findings Regarding Accompaniments and Outcomes

Together, the theorizing and empirical results of the five approaches mentioned above consistently suggest beneficial accompaniments and aftereffects of EHEs. This section details

some of these benefits, especially those relevant to physical, psychological, and spiritual health and well-being. In some cases, these benefits will be treated for EHEs considered generically; in other cases, the benefits of specific types of EHEs will be examined.

Research projects exploring EHEs are relatively few, compared with those devoted to more familiar psychological experiences, and in these rare projects, the investigators' typical emphasis has been on exploring or establishing the "reality" of the experiences, rather than the subjective experiences themselves or their impacts on the experiencer's lives, work, or relationships. However, a small number of studies have been conducted in which the subjective nature, emotional reactions, accompaniments, and outcomes of EHEs have been explored. The coverage, here, of health and wellness benefits of EHEs is representative, rather than exhaustive. A sampling of relevant findings is presented below, in chronological order of the studies.

Milton's Findings

In an early small-scale study, Milton (1992) surveyed 22 persons—mostly members of British and Scottish psychical societies—about their subjective experiences and reactions to psychical experiences that they had had at least 5 years earlier. Participants addressed their first psychical experience or a later experience that affected them strongly. Their emotional reactions during and immediately after their psychical experience included amazement, surprise, curiosity, puzzlement, fear, joy, and elation. Many of the participants reported that they wanted someone to talk to them, advise them, explain the experience, understand them, or believe them. The variety of life impacts was great, ranging from little impact to extremely life-changing (including being saved from suicide and embarking upon a path of spiritual inquiry). The experiences had the effect of confirming, strengthening, or creating belief in psychical experiences or in a more complex and rich view of the nature of the mind, enhancing the participant's spiritual or philosophical outlook, fearing death less, and increasing their belief in life after death.

Findings of Kennedy and Coworkers

Kennedy, Kanthamani, and Palmer (1994) surveyed 500 Duke University students about their self-reported EHEs and their accompaniments and outcomes. Participants were asked about two types of EHEs—*transcendent* or spiritual experiences (overwhelming feelings of peace and unity with the entire creation or profound inner sense of Divine presence) and *psychical* experiences (ESP, precognition, telepathy, mind-over-matter, and out-of-body experiences). Of the 105 (21 %) returns, 41% reported psychical experiences and 42% reported transcendent experiences. Ninety-one % of those reporting transcendent experiences and 46% of those reporting psychical experiences considered the experiences valuable or very valuable. Only 2% (one person) reported a transcendent or psychical experience to be detrimental. Persons reporting these EHEs tended to have a greater overall sense of meaning in life. Among different factors that can give life meaning and purpose, expressing artistic creativity and observing spiritual beliefs were positively related to reports of EHEs, whereas obtaining wealth was negatively related.

In a related study, Kennedy and Kanthamani (1995) surveyed 120 persons who had an active interest in parapsychology and who reported having at least one psychical or transcendent

experience. Results indicated that these experiences increased their interest and beliefs in spiritual matters and increased their sense of well-being. A majority of respondents indicated that their EHEs resulted in increased belief in life after death, belief that their lives are guided or watched over by a higher force or being, interest in spiritual or religious matters, sense of connection to others, happiness, well-being, confidence, optimism about the future, and meaning in life. They also indicated decreases in fear of death, depression or anxiety, isolation and loneliness, and worry and fears about the future. A large majority of respondents indicated that these effects resulted from a combination of more than one psychical and/or transcendent experience. The magnitude of changes in well-being and spirituality were positively associated with the number of EHEs. Measures of current well-being and current importance of spirituality were positively associated with reported changes in well-being and spirituality resulting from EHEs. Although 45% of the respondents indicated that a psychical experience had made them very afraid, this fear appeared to be temporary or mixed with positive feeling because only 9% indicated that their experiences had been scary with no positive value.

Zangari and Machado's Brazilian Survey

Zangari and Machado (1996) studied the nature and outcomes of psychical EHEs in a sample of 181 Brazilian university students. Percentages of participants reporting these experiences ranged from 14% to 64% for various types of psychical experiences. Of greatest interest for present purposes were the reported life impacts (what they called the "social significance") of these experiences. Twenty-six % of their participants indicated that their particular psychical experience saved them or could have saved them from a serious or tragic event such as illness, severe emotional crisis, accident, or death. The experiences were credited by participants with changing their attitudes toward a variety of topics, especially regarding spiritual beliefs (58%), the self (48%), the meaning of life (40%), death (37%), and humanity (35%). Their psychical experiences influenced their decision-making, especially in areas of lifestyle (49%), school (44%), friends (42%), and health (21%).

Findings of Brown and White

Brown and White (1997) performed a qualitative content analysis of the triggers, concomitants, and aftereffects of various types of EHEs in a sample of 50 participants. Only results relevant to health and well-being are presented here. The most frequent *psychological* accompaniments of EHEs were perceptual/cognitive shifts, amazement, boundaries dropping away, conviction, illumination/aha!, wonder, connectedness, mental clarity, thinking/thought, and imaging/not thinking. The most noted *spiritual* accompaniments were surrender of ego, overwhelming wonder, awe, and joy, surprise, sensing a being of light, feeling of overwhelming love, beingness and a sense of greater Self, rapture/ecstasy, feeling astounded/dumbfounded, and unconditional love. The most commonly noted *aftereffects* of EHEs were altered outlook, awareness of more than body, changed attitudes, personal growth, joy, new meaning, wonderment, fuzzier edges, increased spiritual interest, awe, and increased well-being.

In terms of differential results for different types of EHEs, experiencers of mystical/unitive experiences were most apt to report positive affect aftereffects, long-term aftereffects, and that their experiences were life-changing. Psychical EHEs were associated with intellectual insight,

often via a personally meaningful connection that ties together separate/remote events, persons, times, or ideas/concepts. Mystical/unitive EHE experiencers emphasized light, illumination, and their refinements more than experiencers of any of the other EHE classes.

Findings of Institute of Transpersonal Psychology Projects

Palmer and Braud (2002) studied the nature, accompaniments, and life impacts of five types of EHEs (mystical, psychical, unusual death-related, encounter, and exceptional normal) in a sample of 70 U.S. participants using correlational and qualitative analyses. Additionally, an experimental design and standardized assessments were used to explore possible beneficial outcomes of working with and disclosing EHEs, either individually or in psychoeducational groups. EHEs occurred frequently, were perceived as meaningful and important, and their disclosure was perceived as beneficial. Correlational results indicated that frequent and/or profound EHEs were positively and significantly related to high levels of meaning and purpose in life, high levels of spirituality, “thin” or permeable boundaries, and a tendency toward transformative life changes. Disclosure was positively and significantly associated with meaning and purpose in life, positive psychological attitudes and well-being, and reduced stress-related symptoms. Qualitative analyses revealed that EHEs and their disclosure were accompanied by themes of well-being, meaning, openness, spirituality, need-satisfaction, and transformative change.

Braud and Associates (2007) reported the results of two studies involving EHEs—one exploring quantitative and qualitative features of imaginally relived EHEs, compared with imagined typical experiences; the other exploring accompaniments and outcomes of actual EHEs that had occurred in the participants’ lives. In the first study, involving 144 participants, correlational results suggested that, like positive emotions, the incidence of actual EHEs in everyday life was associated with greater broadening, expansiveness, and openness of responsiveness in the particular imaginal-reliving context of the study. Greater EHE experiencing and greater broadening, expansiveness, and openness of responding, following the imaginal evocation of EHEs, also were associated with a greater *transpersonal* aspect of self-schema (as assessed by Friedman’s, 1982, Self Expansiveness Level Form instrument). This is suggestive of still another form of “broadening”—a more extensive and inclusive appreciation of self identity. The qualitative results of this same study indicated that the responses of participants following imaginal reliving of *typical* experiences tended to describe the outer physical environment and physical body; physical activities; physical things in general; experiences with temporal aspects; ordinary, mundane, routine roles and activities; and intentions to do more of the same thing. Following imaginal reliving of *exceptional* experiences (EHEs), participants reported fewer of the tendencies just mentioned and, instead, made responses having transpersonal and spiritual qualities. These response pattern differences are consistent with a “broadening” hypothesis (initially proposed by Fredrickson, 2002, for positive emotions) in that the responses following evocation of typical experiencing are suggestive of more ordinary, “business as usual” functioning, whereas the responses following evocation of exceptional experiencing are suggestive of opening up to a “More”—especially in the case of transpersonal and spiritual qualities.

The second study explored the possible “building” aspects of EHEs (see the “Broaden and Build” theoretical section, above) spontaneously experienced in everyday life by 50 new research participants. This was a qualitative study in which participants answered questions about the nature, triggers, accompaniments, meaning, and aftereffects of their most important, dramatic, or profound EHE. Of greatest relevance to the “building” aspect were questions about possible *coping* (whether the experience had any short- or long-term influence on their personal resources and on their ability to cope or deal effectively with stress or adversity or to solve problems) and *well-being* (whether the experience, on either a short- or long-term basis, influenced their physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual well-being) accompaniments or aftereffects of that EHE. Nine major themes emerged, for ways in which EHEs had helped participants cope and deal more effectively with stress or adversity and solve problems. The experience(s) prompted other beneficial actions and practices; fostered trust and provided strength, protection, and guidance; provided a larger and deeper context in which to place and frame current experiences; fostered more adaptive attitudes and ways of being; helped by reminding participant of positive feelings that had accompanied the original experience; reminded participant that all will be well; helped participant prioritize more appropriately and effectively; prompted recognition of, and openness to, the “More”; and provided increased meaning, understanding, and purpose. In addition, participants mentioned eight areas in which they thought their EHEs had helped improve their well-being: overall, spiritual, emotions/feelings, mentally, mindfulness and awareness, physical, relationships, feelings of safety and security. Only two participants indicated no improvement in well-being. *Spiritual well-being* was the area most influenced by the exceptional experiences.

Palmer and Braud (2010) explored the possible life and work impacts of the psychical class of EHEs in a sample of 65 members of the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology community— faculty, student, alumni, and administrator/staff. A qualitative thematic content analysis of these self-reported impacts yielded 14 types (themes), 10 of which included several subthemes. Relevant to this chapter’s purposes, 83% of the participants reported impacts of increased well-being (increased overall, physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being; provided support; fulfilled a need; contributed to one’s own healing; provided increased confidence); 71% reported important life impacts (changed life, had a profound life impact, provided guidance, helped one apply lessons in life, influenced a later life interest); 66% reported increased understandings, realizations, and new self perceptions; and 43% reported enhanced growth. Other life impacts included increased understanding and confirmation of psychical experiences (38%), increased awareness and consciousness (37%), work impacts (25%), increased sense of connectedness (22%), fostered inquiry and questioning (11%), increased validation or confirmation (8%), call to action (5%), and increased love (3%), gratitude (2%), and disclosure (2%).

Wilde and Murray’s Findings

Wilde and Murray (2010) used an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research approach in studying the lived experiences and meanings associated with their 15 participants’ out-of-body experiences (OBEs) and near-death experiences (NDEs). In this particular report, they emphasized three major themes that emerged from their participants’ accounts—the art and practice of disclosing an anomalous experience, the integration of the experiences and its transforming impact on the self, and the embodied nature of the experiences. The participants

placed high value on their experiences, considering them as things to be treasured and protected. The experiencers described their meaning-making process of shifting from initial confusion about these unforeseen experiences to interpreting them as positive, life-affirming occurrences with adaptive significance. They reported the transformative impacts of their OBEs and NDEs on their sense of self, identity, views regarding relationships, and general life directions, along with the challenges they faced and the learnings they experienced in determining how best to disclose these experiences to others.

Findings Related to Out-of-Body and Near-Death Experiences

A number of investigators have reported on the beneficial aftereffects of specific types of EHEs. For out-of-body experiences (OBEs), percentages of experiencers who reported beneficial changes in their lives, beliefs, attitudes, and activities were found to vary from 10% to 88% in samples of U.S., U.K., and Icelandic survey respondents (see Alvarado, 2000; Blackmore, 1984; Gabbard & Twemlow, 1984; Osis, 1979; Wiedman & Haraldsson, 1980). In terms of more specific changes, in the Osis study, 50 % reported improvements in their mental health and 60% reported improved functioning in daily life. In the Gabbard and Twemlow study, 86% reported greater awareness of reality and 78% reported lasting benefits of their OBEs. In both of these studies, the major specific life impacts included changes in attitudes toward death and spirituality, reduced fear of death, and increased beliefs in the possibility of life after death. Additional OBE-related outcomes, reported by Wilde and Murray (2010), were described above.

Regarding near-death experiences (NDEs), the most commonly self-reported aftereffects include *increases* in spirituality, concern and compassion for others, appreciation of life, one's sense of purpose and meaning of life, coping, valuing of love and service, and belief in survival of bodily death, and *decreases* in fear of death, valuing of personal status, success, fame, and material things, competitiveness, and approval by others (Bauer, 1985; Flynn, 1982; Grey, 1985; Greyson, 1983, 1992; Noyes, 1980; Ring, 1980, 1984; Sabom, 1982). These directional changes suggest benefits for one's psychological and spiritual well-being.

Aftereffects of other specific types of EHEs are treated in Cardeña, Lynn, and Krippner (2000). These additional EHE types include psi-related experiences (already addressed above), alien abduction experiences (one type of "encounter" experience previously identified by White, 1993), past-life experiences, anomalous healing experiences, and mystical experiences. Regarding mystical experiences, a recent report (Richards, 2009) indicates the useful accompaniments and aftereffects of entheogenically-facilitated mystical experiences for terminal cancer patients, persons addicted to narcotics or alcohol, persons with severe anxiety or depression, and persons with sociopathic tendencies. Mystical EHEs, and some other types of EHEs, also can have *noetic* (knowledge-related) qualities that can be of great importance and use to the experiencer (James, 1902/1985; Richards, 2009; Waldron, 1998).

Contributions to the Well-being of the Environment, Society, and Culture

Thus far, this chapter has addressed the possible health and well-being benefits of EHEs *for individuals*. Not often considered or addressed are parallel contributions of EHEs to the well-being of the environment, society, and culture.

Dowdall (1998) explicitly addressed influences of nature-related EHEs upon beneficial ecological attitudes and actions, psychological health and well-being, and spiritual perspectives, in a quantitative and qualitative study of 126 participants using seven standardized assessments along with questionnaires, narratives, and interviews. There were significant positive intercorrelations among ecologically-supportive actions, positive environmental attitudes, exceptional and mystical/unitive experiences occurring in nature, spirituality, and psychological well-being. Greater degrees of positive ecological action and positive environmental attitudes were especially strongly related to a greater density of EHEs occurring in the context of nature and to greater psychological well-being, as reflected in reduced stress and increased positive attitudes to life. Enhanced physical, psychological, and/or spiritual well-being, and heightened ecological interests and actions were reported by 83% of participants as outcomes of their EHEs.

Space limitations do not permit a detailed discussion of the many ways in which, historically, various types of EHEs have influenced the health, well-being, and growth of society and culture at large. However, a few general areas in which such influences have occurred can be mentioned:

- Mystical experiences, encounter experiences, and other EHEs of their founders and later adherents have informed many, if not all, of the great wisdom, spiritual, and religious traditions in many lands and times.
- Important inventions and innovations have been inspired by the special dreams and visions of their originators.
- Discoveries and insights in archeology, mathematics, medicine, science, and other areas have been informed by the special dreams, visions, intuitions, and other EHEs of practitioners in these disciplines.
- Accidents have been avoided, crimes have been solved, and important items have been found, based on inputs provided by psychical experiences.
- Dreams, visions, and other EHEs of writers and composers have informed great works of literature and music.

Practical Applications

This chapter has provided a sampling of findings that suggest that EHEs may have accompaniments and aftereffects that are beneficial to the physical, psychological, and spiritual health and well-being of the experiencer. However, it also is true that EHEs can be associated with fears, apprehensions, and misunderstandings. Some EHEs themselves may be frightening because they are unexpected, involve profound feelings, or have negative associations due to particular beliefs and conditioning of the experiencer. Real or anticipated negative reactions of others to one's revealed EHEs can contribute additional sources of distress, and in some cases may threaten or disrupt important relationships. Concerns, often misguided, about the nature of EHEs may lead experiencers to keep such experiences secret. For example, Davis, Lockwood, and Wright (1991) found that slightly over 51% of 256 participants in their study had been reluctant to report their peak experiences (one form of EHEs) for fear of having the experience devalued by others, being seen as crazy or imbalanced, or losing independence or personal power by telling others.

It is important that therapists, counselors, spiritual guides and spiritual directors, life coaches, educators, and other practitioners become more fully informed about the nature, accompaniments, and possible outcomes of EHEs so that they might better help and advise persons who might be concerned about their EHEs. For practitioners, and for the general public, five resources are especially useful. A recent compendium edited by Cardeña, Lynn, and Krippner (2000) provides rich and trustworthy information about a great variety of EHEs, along with clinically relevant recommendations. Hastings (1983) and Siegel (1986) provide very useful suggestions for helping persons who have had psychical experiences. The published proceedings of an international conference on psychical experiences and clinical practice (Coly & McMahon, 1993) provides additional detailed information about the nature and impacts of psychical experiences. Although these latter three resources explicitly address psychical experiences, the provided information and recommendations can easily be generalized to other types of EHEs. A fifth resource consists of the writings of Rhea White that address the entire range of EHEs; specific details, references, and some full-text online papers by White and her coworkers can be found on the Exceptional Human Experience Network website: <http://www.ehe.org>; of special interest are the recommendations regarding the preparation and benefits of writing an EHE autobiography.

Particularly instructive and useful are suggestions provided by Hastings (1993) and Siegel (1986). For helping persons who have had EHEs, it is not likely that one can find better recommendations than these, offered by Hastings:

1. Ask the person to describe the experience or events.
2. Listen fully and carefully, without judging.
3. Reassure the person that the experience is not "crazy" or "insane," if this can be appropriately said.
4. Identify or label the type of event.
5. Give information about the event—what is known about this kind of situation or process.
6. Where possible, develop reality tests to discover if the event is a genuine psychical experience [or EHE] or if there are alternative explanations.
7. Address the psychological reactions that result from the experience, or the emotional disturbances that contribute to it [whether the experience is veridical or not]. (1983, pp. 164-165)

Siegel (1986) provides a useful service by listing six patterns of response to spontaneous psychical EHEs, along with suggestions for addressing each pattern. The patterns and Siegel's recommendations are quoted or slightly paraphrased below:

1. Fear of personally being hurt. Explain what is known about the phenomenon or experience, recommend counseling if appropriate, explore general feelings of control over one's life and ways to gain control over small areas at a time, mention that there are no scientific cases in which an individual has been hurt, explore whether something is trying to be communicated.
2. Fear of being crazy. If the person is functional, explain that unusual experiences do occur to normal people and offer reassurance.
3. Fear of someone being hurt or feeling responsible for protecting others (especially in precognitive psychical experiences). Point out that sensing a danger does not make it

inevitable and that they were not divinely selected (and, therefore, do not have a special responsibility), examine possible reasons why the particular event was precognized.

4. Loss of control. Determine if events are truly out of control or if there is just a fear of them becoming so, explore what the person fears might occur (especially if the experience might recur).
5. Feeling divine or gifted. Discuss how such experiences occur in everyday life, explain they are not alone, avoid invalidating their feelings (if they are very ego-involved).
6. Interest in developing further abilities. Determine reasons for seeking to develop these and what expectations and intentions the person might have. (pp. 173-174)

Another helpful procedure, regarding any EHE, is to recommend disclosure of the experience, but with care and discernment. One can disclose further information about an EHE and the feelings that accompany it to oneself, through contemplating the experience more fully in a safe setting, by expressing the experience and associated feelings creatively (through artwork, collage, movement, music, poetry), by exploring possible meanings of the experience, by journaling about the experience, and by preparing one's EHE autobiography. Further, one can disclose the experience and one's associated feelings to appropriate others, at appropriate times, and to an appropriate degree.

Implications

Exceptional human experiences and their concomitants and sequelae have important implications that extend well beyond the psychological and healing disciplines and professions to which they are most directly relevant. For the natural and human sciences, they point to the existence and power of phenomena and processes beyond those currently recognized and understood within those disciplines. For philosophy, transpersonal psychology, and the spiritual and religious disciplines, they provide confirmations and support for the possibilities and potentials with which these areas of inquiry and study are concerned—touching upon the More that William James addressed more than a century ago (1902/1985, p. 508).

It is the hope of researchers and practitioners in the areas of EHEs that continued and deeper studies, conceptualizations, and recognition and support of increasing numbers of persons having and sharing these experiences might eventually result in a situation in which the term *exceptional* for these experiences will lose its meaning of *rare* or *anomalous* yet continue to hold its meanings of *exceedingly special* and *of great value*, not only to the individual experiencer but to humanity as a whole.

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