

Meaning and Effect of ELEs on Patients

One of the most important questions we can answer on ELEs is why they are so important. For that, we look to two different things: (1) the meaning that patients can make out of their dreams and (2) the overall effect that an ELE can have.

It is important when discussing meaning to remember how subjective that term is. What is meaningful to one person may potentially have no meaning for a different person. Many of our patients view their dreams and visions from a religious or spiritual lens. While our research cannot and does not try to prove the existence of an afterlife, we do not discredit patients who feel that this is what their ELE points to. We emphasize that people should not impose their own beliefs about ELEs on the patient, but rather they should allow the patient to make sense of the experience in their own way. Some patients ascribe other meanings to these experiences, such as reminding them of important things that still need to be done before they pass or letting them know that they do not need to fear what's to come. We must always keep in mind that it is the dreamer who gets to ascribe meaning to the experience for themselves, not any other person.

Having an ELE can affect a person in many different ways. As our research has shown, it can provide the dying with comfort as they move closer to the end of life. For some, it can have positive psychological effects such as an increase in personal strength and a deeper spiritual connection. Our patients often feel many positive emotions during and after an ELE. Both patients and caregivers have reported that dreamers are happy, animated, excited, and even “more alive” when thinking about or talking about their experience. For some individuals, dreams may bring about a great sense of nostalgia, especially when dreams are of deceased loved ones and past meaningful experiences. We have even been told that some patients can't wait to get back to sleep to see who they will dream of next. For others, dreams can also be scary, upsetting, or even anxiety-inducing. However, these experiences can provide as much meaning as good dreams and can lead to more positive emotions if an individual is comfortable revisiting the ELE in question.

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CITATIONS

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