

Post-Death Experiences and the Emotion of Hope

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Abstract: This paper briefly defines the emotion of hope and considers its role in anomalous post-death experiences. From what research is available, some findings suggest that hope may be present in the aftermath of after-death communication (ADCs), along with many other positive outcomes. All of which may affect percipients psychologically and physiologically, when having been suffering with grief and bereavement. Some links between post-death experiences and hope are presented which the author intends to investigate further.

Introduction

The word hope is often thought of in a religious context and paired with other words such as faith and love, which are typically understood in psychology as emotional states. However, if we single out hope from these other states, we are left with an emotion which is possibly more powerful than any of the others combined, and hope is a relatively new area of research for psychology. Stotland (1969, p.2) describes hope as “a shorthand term for an expectation of goal attainment.” In other words, if a person has hope, he or she will act on this emotion, move and achieve their goal. It is a powerful psychological drive towards whatever is expected or desired. While on the other hand, Day (1969) discusses the issue of whether hope can be considered an emotion, for which, there are several arguments for and against. However, hope is a direct passion and the opposite of fear, alongside other direct passions such as desire and aversion, and, joy and grief. David Hume (1739) proposed hope to be an emotion from this argument of direct passions, while Day personally disagreed with hope being an emotion, it was agreed that hope was formed by - and connected to - belief. This is because, hope includes a probability-estimate of things to happen, and a probability-estimate is exactly a believed-probability. Hope therefore combines desire, probability and belief, and hope may be increased when events in life support personal beliefs, desires and the probability of things to come.

Before psychology began to investigate hope as an emotional state, it was, and still is, used in the psychiatric setting. Schrank, Stanghellini and Slade (2008)

reviewed the psychiatric literature on hope and its applications in the clinical setting. It was found that in numerous applications of hope in the clinical and mental health setting, the results were varied and empirical evidence was lacking in its predictive power, however some scales for determining hope in patients were found to show a promising level of consistency (e.g. Miller & Powers, 1988). Quite often, applications of hope have been used by nurses in the hospital setting to help terminally ill patients (Adams & Proulx, 1975; Herth, 1990). In many of these cases, fostering hope has helped to reduce death anxiety in patients and maintain levels of hopefulness and optimism.

Death, Anomalous Experiences and Hope

When we look for similar places in which applications of hope maybe explored and apply, one of the key fields dealing with the subject of death and dying is that of parapsychology (Rogo, 1974). Those who have died may have developed their own sense of hope for continuation of life beyond death, before they actually died, especially if hope was fostered in the hospital setting with the help of clinicians and nurses. But is hope then fostered by friends and loved ones who are left behind in a state of bereavement? Spontaneous anomalous experiences surrounding death may be the stimulus for fostering hope and overcoming grief. These experiences may involve; a sense of presence, seeing apparitions, poltergeist type activity, dreams of interacting with the dead, and so on. In fact, anything assumed by the experient to be a link or form of communication with the dead, could be considered to be a post-death experience, even if the reported phenomena has perfectly natural causes. How the experience is interpreted and influences those involved, is one issue, determining paranormality in the reported phenomena is another.

We must ask ourselves, in the case of post-death experiences which are suggestive of survival, what would be the stimulus for hope? Quite simply, the suggestion that consciousness may continue in some form beyond bodily death is likely to be the stimulus for fostering hope. Grief is often the result of personal loss, and thinking over death as a definite finality to a particular individual's existence can only make the bereavement stage worse in some cases. Bereavement is a natural process, but it is psychologically and physiologically damaging over prolonged periods (Clayton, 1975; Schulz, 1978), and therefore some form of motivation is required to overcome grief. If we turn to the testimonies of those who have had anomalous experiences following the loss of someone close, there is evidence to suggest that hope is

present in some percipients, owing to possible personal acceptance that consciousness does not simply stop at the point of death. Many people that have had post-death experiences, whether they are a sceptic or a believer in the paranormal, enter some form of transition of thought, and outlook on life, from having such experiences. It all depends on how dramatic and meaningful the experience was for the individual(s) involved.

In a study by Drewry (2003) seven research participants were interviewed regarding post-death experiences they'd had (40 experiences in total collectively). Several themes were found from their reported experiences, including experiences commonly assuming themselves to be delusional about their experiences, before accepting them for what they were. Most interestingly, the bereaved individuals reported relief and comfort from the experiences, and several other emotional states, including, hope. A common response from the participants was that their experiences had given them enough grounding to get through their grief.

In another study which explored relationships between death anxiety and afterlife beliefs, participants were asked to write down their thoughts on what the afterlife would be like. Various feedback from participants was analysed, while also taking into account age, gender, race, and religious backgrounds. In some cases when participants described what they believed an afterlife would be like, it was noted that a small number of participants specifically expressed 'hope' that not only would they continue on into an afterlife at the point of death, but so would their children, family and friends (Cooper, 2011). It could be concluded from this that not only can hope from post-death experiences help to combat grief, but fostering hope before the point of death - maybe even from previous anomalous experiences - can assist in reducing death anxiety.

There are a number of texts discussing people's encounters with death and post-death communications, in which various positive emotions are expressed as being obtained following these events, which at first, terrified certain individuals in some cases. However, it is more commonly reported that the post-death experience - though startling for the experient - is a comforting experience (e.g. Arcangel, 2005, Devers, 1997, Wright, 2002). Additionally, people have reported feeling some form of connectedness to the dead and a sense of closure over any unsettled business or final goodbyes that were never had. Nowotny-Keane (2009, p.192) in her study of after-death communications (ADCs) stated that "The reports of ordinary people can provide glimpses of an

afterlife that give hope and confidence for our journey to the world of spirit.’’ In a summary of doctoral research into ADCs and discussing various individuals experiences, Devers (1997, p.143) states ‘‘In the days that followed, Dee experienced her father through dreams and a sense of his presence. These experiences further added to her sense of hope and helped to ease her through a terribly difficult time.’’ With these statements, we do have to question whether in this context the word hope is being casually used, or whether those who had post-death encounters were discovering and fostering hope emotionally from the result of their experiences. This could only be confirmed when, and if, we pursue a descriptive analysis of hope, and implications relating to those persons who would likely apply the analyses to the conditions of their own lives (Butler, 1962), i.e. those who claim to have had post-death experiences. In several cases discussed by Devers, percipients fostering hope does seem to be taken literally, for example, ‘‘The actions of the deceased fostered hope for the future’’ (p. 153).

Without actually applying scales of measuring hope within a sample of participants to investigate it’s level of involvement, Devers (1997) does acknowledge hope as a healer in her study of ADCs from certain participants that either consciously or unconsciously described hope’s involvement in their experiences. As previously mentioned, bereavement can lead to a decline in psychological and physiological health if grief continues for too long and an individual loses hope, which Snyder (1994) refers to as learned hopelessness. Devers describes ADCs as ‘‘full of hope’’ adding that ‘‘a hopeful belief system has the power to strengthen and heal’’ (p.150). This leads us back to the descriptions of hope by Day (1969) and David Hume, in that fear is present when a person believes that death terminates all form of existence, while Devers believes that fear is replaced by joy when an ADC is experienced, suggesting to the bereaved that they will be reunited in an afterlife with their loved ones at the point of death. Hope and fear are considered opposites, and yet closely linked with joy and grief, when fear and grief are dissolved by a post-death experience, some form of emotion must replace them, the closest being that of hope.

The therapeutic value of post-death experiences has been noted by various researchers, predominately since the 1970s. With the phenomenon of sensing the presence of the dead, a spiritual connection between the living and the dead is often accepted by the bereaved, and seems to help ease the grief of loss. The deceased can therefore be understood by the bereaved, not as ceasing to be, but

having entered a transformation into what we may call a spiritual form. In a study by Steffen and Coyle (2011), a thematic analysis was carried out on participant's accounts of sensing the presence of deceased loved ones, which found seven overarching themes, with three central themes. For example, participants reported to have found meaning in their experiences, spiritually and religiously, and found benefit in accepting continuation of the deceased and a sense of a continued relationship with them. It is apparent, therefore, that post-death experiences can promote dramatic changes in a person's views of life and death, as Devers (1997, p.132) stated that "ADCs hold the power to alter the negative into the positive; communication with the deceased can transform anger and hatred into forgiveness and love."

Conclusion

It is reasonable to hypothesise, from what research findings are available, that the emotion of hope is a key player in post-death experiences and the road to recovery from bereavement. The research findings which have been briefly presented here, and much more in the parapsychology and thanatology literature, demonstrate that the underlying mechanisms of post-death experiences should be explored further. In doing so we could understand the exact personal transformations that take place for the percipients, emotionally and motivationally. Only then will we be able to fully understand the extent of the involvement of hope in such experiences, as an aid to bereavement and as a healer. Something as negative as death, when investigated, may hold more positive outcomes than many would first care to presume. These issues will be investigated further.

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