

Deathbed Coincidences — Nursing Survey Data

Fenwick survey findings, classification framework, reported frequency, and implications for family care

Overview

Deathbed coincidences refer to spontaneous experiences — dreams, waking visions, physical sensations, or a strong sense of presence — reported by individuals at the precise moment of a loved one's death, before any notification. These are not retrospective rationalizations; many involve contacting the family first, or noting the time and subsequently discovering it matched the time of death.

Peter Fenwick, a neuropsychiatrist at King's College London, conducted the most systematic survey of this phenomenon among hospice nurses. In his 2010 study, 80% of experienced hospice nurses reported witnessing or being told about deathbed coincidences in their clinical practice — and most had multiple examples across their careers.

Fenwick Hospice Nurse Survey (2010)

- Systematic survey of hospice nurses across the UK
- 80% reported witnessing or being told about deathbed coincidences
- Most nurses had multiple examples from their clinical careers
- Experiences included: dreams, waking visions, physical sensations, sense of presence
- Timing consistently matched the documented time of death
- Published in Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics

Types of Deathbed Coincidences

Dreams

The most commonly reported type. A family member dreams of their loved one — sometimes saying goodbye, sometimes appearing healthy and at peace — at the time of death. The dreamer often wakes with a strong conviction that the person has died, confirmed by later notification.

Waking Visions

A clear visual perception of the dying person, typically appearing healthy and sometimes surrounded by light. Occurs while the experiencer is awake and oriented. Often brief — seconds to minutes.

Physical Sensations

A sudden, specific physical sensation — warmth, touch, pressure on the hand — at the time of death. Some describe feeling the physical symptoms the dying person had been experiencing, then sudden release.

Sense of Presence

An overwhelming sense that the person is present — not visual or auditory, but a conviction of their proximity that is described as unmistakable. Often accompanied by a sense of peace or love.

Post-Death Contact Research

Related research on after-death communication experiences adds context:

- Rees (1971): 47% of 293 widowed individuals reported post-death contact experiences (British Medical Journal)
- Elsaesser et al. (2021): 27% of those reporting after-death contact were not grieving — some had never known the person
- Kamp et al. (2020): Interdisciplinary review concluded the vast majority of these experiences are benign — not pathology, not psychosis
- Context — relational, biographical, cultural — is what matters in clinical assessment

Peer-Reviewed Citations

1. Fenwick P, Lovelace H, Brayne S. *Comfort for the Dying: Five Year Retrospective and One Year Prospective Studies of End of Life Experiences. Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics. 2010;51(2):173–179.*
2. Rees WD. *The Hallucinations of Widowhood. British Medical Journal. 1971;4(5778):37–41.*
3. Elsaesser E, et al. *After-Death Communication Experiences. 2021.*
4. Kamp KS, et al. *Sensory and Quasi-Sensory Experiences of the Deceased in Bereavement. Schizophrenia Bulletin. 2020.*
5. Fenwick P, Fenwick E. *The Art of Dying. Continuum; 2006.*
6. Moody RA, Perry P. *Glimpses of Eternity. Guideposts; 2015.*
7. Brayne S, Lovelace H, Fenwick P. *End-of-Life Experiences and the Dying Process in a Gloucestershire Nursing Home. OMEGA — Journal of Death and Dying. 2008.*

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