

Researchers investigate 'life-review experience' in near-death people

February 1 2017, by Bob Yirka



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(Medical Xpress)—A trio of researchers with Hadassah Hebrew University Medical Center in Israel has found that many people do experience unusual memory events near death. In their paper published in the journal *Consciousness and Cognition*, Judith Katz, Noam Saadon-Grosman and Shahar Arzy describe the study they carried out and how their findings compare to descriptions of the phenomenon in literature

and art.

Most people have heard of the phrase "life passing before your eyes" and recognize it as something they have likely seen in a movie—a dying person experiences a succession of memories of major life events, generally moving one way or the other in time. In this new effort, the researchers sought to find out if the phenomenon is real or whether it is something created by writers and filmmakers.

The team started by examining documentation of interviews with seven people who had experienced a near-death experience. They developed a questionnaire that they sent out to 264 other people who medical reports suggested had also had near-death experiences.

From the questionnaires, the researchers concluded that unusual [memory](#) events did occur among those who had approached death—but not in the way depicted in movies. There was no chronological timeline, for example. Instead, people experienced random memories that they described as occurring without the feeling of time passing. Some described memories as feeling as if they were happening simultaneously, like a video collage of sorts, though they were able to separate the events they experienced. Many of the memories were described as exceptionally vivid and emotional.

Many of the responders also reported experiencing what they described as memories from the perspective of other people—they would feel as if in the mind of another person as events transpired that were actually from their own memories.

All of the respondents reported that their near-death experiences had a profound impact on them, and that it caused them to have a different outlook on life and death, most particularly in how they viewed or felt about the people in their lives.

The researchers did not attempt to find the source of the unusual memories, but suggest they may be due to the fact that they occur in parts of the brain that hold autobiographical information and processing—such as the medial, prefrontal and temporal cortices, all of which are the least impacted parts of the brain during blood-flow loss.

More information: Judith Katz et al, The life review experience: Qualitative and quantitative characteristics, *Consciousness and Cognition* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.concog.2016.10.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2016.10.011)

Abstract

Background

The life-review experience (LRE) is a most intriguing mental phenomenon that fascinated humans from time immemorial. In LRE one sees vividly a succession of one's own life-events. While reports of LRE are abundant in the medical, psychological and popular literature, not much is known about LRE's cognitive and psychological basis. Moreover, while LRE is known as part of the phenomenology of near-death experience, its manifestation in the general population and in other circumstances is still to be investigated.

Methods

In a first step we studied the phenomenology of LRE by means of in-depth qualitative interview of 7 people who underwent full LRE. In a second step we extracted the main characters of LRE, to develop a questionnaire and an LRE-score that best reflects LRE phenomenology. This questionnaire was then run on 264 participants of diverse ages and backgrounds, and the resulted score was further subjected to statistical analyses.

Results

Qualitative analysis showed the LRE to manifest several subtypes of

characteristics in terms of order, continuity, the covered period, extension to the future, valence, emotions, and perspective taking. Quantitative results in the normal population showed normal distribution of the LRE-score over participants.

Conclusion

Re-experiencing one's own life-events, so-called LRE, is a phenomenon with well-defined characteristics, and its subcomponents may be also evident in healthy people. This suggests that a representation of life-events as a continuum exists in the cognitive system, and maybe further expressed in extreme conditions of psychological and physiological stress.

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Citation: Researchers investigate 'life-review experience' in near-death people (2017, February 1) retrieved 19 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-02-life-eyes-near-death-people.html>

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