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The Chemistry of After Death—or After Life

For centuries, religions all across history have tried to explain what happens to humans after we die. People tell stories of different types of afterlife experiences we have in store for us. Scientists and doctors know what happens to the human body during and after death; depending on the cause, people typically stop breathing, their hearts stop beating, and then our organs shut down. But this does not explain the question: what does our mind experience when we die? According to one study on survivors of cardiac arrest, many things can happen. The death of the body can result in many different experiences of the mind, ranging from recalling memories to full awareness of their surroundings.

What better way to research the experience of death than to ask someone who has “lived” through it? Survivors of cardiac arrest, which means they have experienced a sudden stop in the heart’s function and causes “sudden death” (AHA). People who were resuscitated through CPR after cardiac arrest said that they experienced many things like memories of family. Some said they saw the infamous “bright light”. A small number of survivors said that they were fully aware and “awake” during their resuscitation and could describe exactly what happened as they were brought back (Parnia et al.). This raises the questions: what happens to the mind if resuscitation is unsuccessful? Are we fully aware of our surroundings as our brain decomposes?

Sources

Parnia et al  
<http://www.resuscitationjournal.com/article/S0300-9572(14)00739-4/fulltext>

American Heart Association (AHA)

http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/More/CardiacArrest/About-Cardiac-Arrest\_UCM\_307905\_Article.jsp#.VsPghPk4HIU