What happens after death, no one knows for sure. It is a question of theory and imagination mixed with ancient wisdom and intuitive guesses. However, most of us can agree that the human being is a soul which lives for a time in a physical body. The soul feels infinite, and records of near-death experiences clue us into the possibility that some greater journey begins the moment the body dies.

It may seem that the realms of science and spirit are at odds with each other, but when examining the greatest questions of human existence, such as what happens after we die, the two
disciplines converge. Even Einstein concluded that science and spirit are intrinsically inter-related, noting:

“Every one who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the Universe—a spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble.” —Albert Einstein

In his book *The New Science of Psychedelics: At the Nexus of Culture, Consciousness, and Spirituality*, author and researcher David Jay Brown asked several contemporary leaders in the fields of consciousness, spirituality, and science how they would answer the question. Their replies exemplify the broad possibilities, the hopes, and the

1. Ram Dass, Psy.D

Spiritual teacher, former Harvard professor, pioneer of the LSD movement and author of the seminal book *Be Here Now*, Ram Dass shares his thoughts, referring to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

I think it jumps into a body of some kind, on some plane of existence, and it goes on doing that until it is with God. From a Hindu point of view, consciousness keeps going through reincarnations, which are learning experiences for the soul. I think what happens after you die is a function of the level of evolution of the individual. I think that if you have finished your work and you’re just awareness that happens to be in a body, when the body ends it’s like selling your Ford—it’s no big deal. I suspect that some beings go unconscious. They go into what Christians call purgatory.

They go to sleep during that process before they project into the next form. Others I think go through and are aware they are going through it, but are still caught. All the Bardos in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* are about how to avoid getting
caught in the afterlife.

“Those beings are awake enough for them to be collaborators in the appreciation of the gestalt in which their incarnations are flowing. They sort of see where they’re coming from and where they’re going. They are all part of the design of things. So, when you say, did you choose to incarnate? At the level at which you are free, you did choose. At the level at which you are not, you didn’t. Then there are beings who are so free that when they go through death they may still have separateness. They may have taken the bodhisattva vow which says, “I agree to not give up separateness until everybody is free,” and they’re left with that thought. They don’t have anything else. Then the next incarnation will be out of the intention to save all beings and not out of personal karma. That one bit of personal karma is what keeps it moving. To me, since nothing happened anyway, it’s all an illusion—reincarnation and everything—but within the relative reality in which that’s real, I think it’s quite real.” ~The Tibetan Book of the Dead

2. Alex Grey

Visionary artist, a consciousness researcher, and psychedelic advocate Alex Grey also looks at this issue with reverence to Tibetan philosophy.

I accept the near-death research and Tibetan Bardo explanations.

Soon after physical death, when the senses shut down, you enter into the realms of light and archetypal beings. You have the potential to realize the clear light, our deepest and truest identity, if you recognize it as the true nature of your mind and are not freaked out.

If you don’t, you may contact other less appealing dimensions. No one can know, of course, until they get there.
Some people have had experiences which give them certainty, but consciousness is the ultimate mystery. I’d like to surrender to the process on its deepest level when death occurs, but I will probably fail, and be back to interview you in the next lifetime.

3. Peter Russell, M.A., D.C.S.

Peter Russell is a leading consciousness researcher, presenter, and faculty member of the Institute of Noetic Sciences. His views center around the nature of human consciousness.

I have no idea what happens to life after death. I’ve studied the near-death experience a bit, and it fascinates me. It would seem that one way of understanding it is that the individual consciousness is dissolving back into the infinite consciousness.

The consciousness that I experience has this individual limitation because it is functioning in the world through my body, through my nervous system, through my eyes and ears. That’s where our sense of being a unique individual comes from. When we begin to die and let go of our attachment to the body, consciousness lets go of that identity which it gained from its worldly functioning, and reconnects with a greater infinite identity. Those who’ve had near-death experiences often report there seems to be this dissolving of the senses, and a moving into light. Everything becomes light after death.

There’s this sense of deep peace and infinite love. Then they come to a threshold after death, beyond which there is no return. But we don’t know what happens beyond there, if there is indeed life after death, because the people who come back haven’t gone beyond it. When I think of my consciousness, when I think of “me-ness,” it seems to be something that is
created during this life through this interaction with the world, but doesn’t exist as an independent thing. I think that a lot of our concerns about life after death come from wanting to know what is going to happen to this “me” consciousness. Is “me” going to survive? I believe that this thing we call “me” is not going to survive. It’s a temporary working model that consciousness uses, but in the end it’s going to dissolve. A lot of our fear of death is that we fear this loss of “me-ness,” this loss of a sense of a separate unique identity. It’s interesting that people who’ve been through the near-death experiences and experienced this dissolving of the ego and realized that everything is okay when that happens, generally lose their fear of death. They feel incredible liberation in life.

4. Bernie Siegel, M.D.

Bernie Siegel is a pediatric surgeon and author of *Love, Medicine, and Miracles* expresses the conviction that consciousness continues after death.

What I am sure happens to consciousness after death is that it continues on. I don’t see it in a sense of saying, “Oh, I’m going to be reincarnated.” No, your body is gone, but what you have experienced and are aware of will go on in the life after death. So somebody will be born with your consciousness, and it will affect the life they live.

I know people who see life’s difficulties as a burden and say, “Why is God punishing me?” and “Why am I going through this?” Maybe these people ought to be asking “What am I here to learn, experience, and change?” Rather than sitting there whining and complaining. “What can I do?” and “What am I here to learn?” Now, I don’t criticize these people because I remember Elisabeth Kübler-Ross saying that if you’re in high school you don’t get mad at somebody in first grade. So I think we’re at different levels of consciousness based upon
our experience and what we are born with. But I personally believe from my experience, for instance, that one of the reasons I’m a surgeon in this life is because I did a lot of destruction with a sword in a past life—killing people and animals. This is not conscious, like the answers I gave you earlier, but at a deeper level I chose to use a knife in this life to cure and heal with rather than kill with. I often say to people, “Think about things that affect you emotionally, that you have no explanation for. This may be due to some past-life experience, and that is why you’re acting the way you’re acting.” Now, whether I’m right or wrong, I have to say that, as long as it’s therapeutic that’s what I’m interested in. But on a personal level, I believe that consciousness is nonlocal, and it can be carried on and picked up by people and so I believe in life after death. I think this shows in animals too. There’s a certain wisdom that they have.

5. Larry Dossey, M.D.

Author of *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer*, Larry Dorsey is a doctor and consciousness researcher.

If we acknowledge that consciousness is nonlocal—that it’s infinite in space and time—then this really opens up all sorts of possibilities for the survival of consciousness following physical death, that is, for experiencing life after death. If you reason through this and follow the implications of these studies, you begin to realize that consciousness that’s nonlocal and unrestricted in time is immortal. It’s eternal. This is as hopeful as the current view of the fate of consciousness is dismal. This totally reverses things. So we are led to a position, I think, where we see that even though the body will certainly die, the most essential part of who we are can’t die, even if it tried—because it’s nonlocally distributed through time and space. Our grim vision of the finality of death is revised.
Death is no longer viewed as a gruesome annihilation or the total destruction of all that we are. So there are tremendous spiritual implications that flow from these considerations, in addition to the implications for health.

In fact, I believe that the implications for health are the least of it. A lot of people who encounter this area take a practical, bare-bones, utilitarian approach to it. They say, “Wow, now we’ve got a nifty new item in our black bag—a new trick to help people become healthier. Certainly these studies do suggest that this is a proper use of healing intentions and prayer, and I’m all for that, but the thing that really gets my juices flowing is the implication of this research for immortality. For me, that’s the most exciting contribution of this entire field. The fear of death and whether there is life after death has caused more pain and suffering for human beings throughout history than all the physical diseases combined. The fear of death is the big unmentionable—and this view of consciousness is a cure for that disease, that fear of death.

6. Rick Strassman, M.D.

Well-known for his research into DMT, as presented in the documentary The Spirit Molecule, Strassman leans on Zen philosophy while expressing his uncertainty.

I think life continues after death, but in some unknown form. I think a lot depends upon the nature of our consciousness during our lives—how attached to various levels of consensus reality it is. My late/former Zen teacher used to use the analogy of a lightbulb, with electric current passing through it. The lightbulb goes out, but the current continues, “changed” in a way, for its experience in the bulb. He also referred to like gravitating toward like in terms of the idea of the need for certain aspects of consciousness to develop further, before it can return to its source. That is, doglike
aspects of our consciousness end up in a dog in a life after
death, humanlike aspects get worked through in another human,
plantlike aspects into plants, and so on.

7. Dean Radin, Psy.D.

Psychologist Dean Radin is the author of *Supernormal: Science, Yoga, and the Evidence for Extraordinary Psychic Abilities*, and an outspoken pioneer of consciousness research with the [Institute of Noetic Sciences](https://www.noetic.org/). He questions the origins of thoughts and personal identity, wondering if that information is produced by the body or by something greater.

I expect that what we think of as ourselves—which is primarily personality, personal history, personality traits, and that sort of thing—goes away, because most of that information is probably contained in some way in the body itself. But as to some kind of a primal awareness—life after death—I think it probably continues, because it’s not clear to me that that’s produced by the body. In fact, I think that elementary awareness may be prior to matter. So when you go into a deep meditation and you lose your sense of personality, that may be similar to what it might be like to be dead. On the other hand, if you’re not practiced at being in that deep state, or don’t know how to pay attention to subtle variations in what might at first appear to be nothingness, it’s not clear that your consciousness would stay around very long. In other words, you might have a momentary time when you have this sense of awareness, and then it just dissolves. It goes back and becomes part of the rest of everything. So it’s like a drop that settles into the ocean and disappears into it. On the other hand, some people who either spend a lifetime preparing in meditation, or who are naturally adept, may be able to sustain being a drop. They may be able to settle into that ocean of life after death and still have a sense of their “dropness,” even though they’re also now part of the ocean. Then maybe one’s sense of
awareness would expand dramatically, and yet still have a sense of unity. I imagine that all this probably occurs in a state that is not bound by space and time as we normally think about it. So, presumably, you would have access to everything, everywhere. I imagine that something like that is the reason why ideas of reincarnation have come about, because people remember something about it. They may even remember something about the process of coming out of this ocean into a drop in the life after death, into a particular incarnation, because a drop is embodied in a sense. . . . If there’s anything that psychology teaches it’s that people are different. So I imagine that there may be as many ways of experiencing after-death as there are people to experience it. And no one explanation is the “correct” one.

8. Rupert Sheldrake, Ph.D.

Known for his theory of morphic resonance, Rupert Sheldrake is a biologist, biochemist, parapsychologist, and author of Science Set Free. He leans on the importance of considering human experience when answering this question.

For me the best starting point for this question of whether or not there is life after death, is experience.

We all have the experience of a kind of alternative body when we dream. Everyone in their dreams has the experience of doing things that their physical body is not doing. When I dream I might be walking around, talking to people, even flying, yet these activities in my dreams, which happen in a body, are happening in my dream body. They’re not happening in my physical body, because my physical body’s lying down asleep in bed. So we all have a kind of parallel body in our dreams. Now, where exactly that’s happening, what kind of space our dreams are happening in, is another question. It’s obviously a space to do with the mind or consciousness, but we can’t take for granted that that space is confined to the
inside of the head. Normally people assume it must be, but they assume that all our consciousness is in our heads, and I don’t agree with that assumption. I think our minds extend beyond our brains in every act of vision, something I discuss in my book *The Sense of Being Stared At, and Other Aspects of the Extended Mind*.

So I think this idea of life after death, then, relates to out-of-the-body experiences, where people feel themselves floating out of their body and see themselves from outside, or lucid dreams, where people in their dreams become aware they’re dreaming and can will themselves to go to particular places by gaining control of their dream. These are, as it were, extensions of the dream body.

Now, when we die, it’s possible, to my way of thinking, that it may be rather like being in a dream from which we can’t wake up.

This realm of consciousness that we experience in our dreams may exist independent of the brain, because it’s not really a physical realm. It’s a realm of possibility or imagination. It’s a realm of the mind. It’s possible that we could go on living in a kind of dream world, changing and developing in that world, in a way that’s not confined to the physical body. Now, whether that happens or not is another question, but it seems to me possible. The out-of-body experiences and the near-death experiences may suggest that’s indeed what’s going to happen to us when we die. But the fact is that we’re not really going to find out until we do die, and what happens then may indeed depend on our expectations. It may be that materialists and atheists who think that life after death will just be a blank would actually experience a blank. It may be that their expectations will affect what actually happens. It may be that people who think they’ll go to a heavenly realm of palm oases and almond-eyed dancing girls really will. It may be that the afterlife is heavily conditioned by our expectations and beliefs, just as our
Final Thoughts

The exploration of human consciousness is the next frontier in science and spirituality. Cutting-edge ideas lead to revolutions in human thought, science, and the arts. What do you think? What does happen after we die?

About the Author

Dylan Charles is a self-mastery coach, the editor of Waking Times, and host of the Battered Souls podcast. His personal journey is deeply inspired by shamanic plant medicines and the arts of Kung Fu, Qi Gong, and Yoga. After seven years of living in Costa Rica, he now lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains, where he practices Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and enjoys spending time with family. He has written hundreds of articles, reaching and inspiring millions of people around the world.

Dylan is available for interviews and podcasts. Contact him at WakingTimes@gmail.com.

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