

Reply to ‘Recalled experiences of death: need for empirical research without prejudice’



We thank Parnia and colleagues for their interest in our Review (Martial, C. et al. A neuroscientific model of near-death experiences. *Nat. Rev. Neurol.* <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41582-025-01072-z>; 2025)¹. However, several claims in their Correspondence (Parnia, S. et al. Recalled experiences of death: need for empirical research without prejudice. *Nat. Rev. Neurol.* <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41582-026-01186-y>; 2026)² rely on conceptual misunderstandings, mischaracterizations of our work or unsupported assertions. We welcome the opportunity to clarify these points.

First, the suggestion that the term ‘recalled experiences of death’ (REDs) is more accurate than ‘near-death experiences’ (NDEs) is incompatible with established international agreement on the medical definition of death. The term RED – and its underlying rationale³ – presupposes that the experiencers were dead. However, according to longstanding medical and legal standards, death corresponds to the irreversible cessation of all brain functions (that is, brain death). Individuals who report NDEs might undergo cardiac arrest or other severe physiological crises, but these states can be reversed and are, therefore, fundamentally distinct from death as medically defined. Because the RED concept relies on scientific inaccuracies, it cannot replace the term NDE⁴.

Second, the authors’ suggestion that we claim that NDEs can occur in non-near-death circumstances² is incorrect. We make no such claim; rather, we highlight multiple studies showing that certain phenomenological features overlap with those observed under conditions such as psychedelic drug use^{5,6} or vasovagal syncope⁷. These overlaps are empirically documented and reflect reproducible observations across clinical, experimental and neurobiological research. In science, standardized, psychometrically validated instruments are essential for reproducibility and robust comparisons. For NDE research, the Greyson NDE scale⁸ and the NDE Content scale⁹ remain the only instruments that meet these criteria. Although these scales have known limitations, there is no evidence that their usage constitutes misuse or systematically generates false positives⁴.

The claim that similarities between NDEs and other states are ‘manufactured’ through superficial lexical overlap also misrepresents the methodology. The cited studies (for example, ref. 5) use validated, large-scale semantic similarity analyses that rely not on cherry-picked keywords but on data-driven comparisons across entire narrative datasets, thereby avoiding subjective bias¹⁰. The 50 themes proposed by Parnia et al.³ were not derived using comparable rigorous methods, thereby weakening their critique. Moreover, semantic overlap does not imply shared ontological status; rather, it supports the value of examining neurobiological mechanisms that could give rise to partially convergent phenomenologies. Like all human experiences, including emotions, the presence of neurobiological correlates does not diminish their subjective reality. Our goal is not to question the meaningfulness of NDEs, but to understand the neurobiological mechanisms that support highly vivid, emotionally salient conscious states.

Last, the authors’ suggestion that dormant neural pathways² might become activated during profound ischaemia extends far beyond the available evidence. No empirical evidence from either humans or animals demonstrates the existence of such putative pathways and their activation during physiological crises. By contrast, the mechanisms discussed in our Review, such as transient hyperexcitability, altered thalamocortical dynamics and neurotransmitter dysregulation, are firmly grounded in established neurophysiology and are supported by convergent experimental findings.

Together, Parnia et al.’s arguments rely on speculative mechanisms and misinterpretations of our Review. We appreciate their engagement with this topic and hope that these clarifications contribute to a more precise, empirically grounded discussion.

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Competing interests

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