

Is There Neuroscientific Evidence of Burst of Lucidity in Dying People?

Asgeir Short*

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU), Geschwister-Scholl-Platz 1, D-80539 München, Bavaria, Germany

*: All correspondence should be sent to: Dr. Asgeir Short

Author's Contact: Dr. Asgeir Short, PhD, E-mail: asgeir.short@outlook.com

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Reports of dying individuals exhibiting brief episodes of unexpected clarity, known as terminal lucidity or end-of-life rallies, have intrigued physicians, caregivers, and families for centuries. These moments, when people with advanced dementia, neurological decline, or prolonged unresponsiveness suddenly regain coherent speech, recognition, or purposeful behavior, raise profound questions about the brain at the threshold of death. Neuroscientific investigations into this phenomenon remain limited but increasingly suggest plausible mechanisms. Emerging evidence points to surges of neural activity, altered neurotransmitter dynamics, and cortical disinhibition during the dying process. Studies of near-death experiences, electroencephalographic recordings in humans, and experimental work in animals all reveal transient bursts of organized brain activity in the minutes surrounding cardiac arrest. While definitive proof is elusive, these findings indicate that lucidity in dying people may not be purely anecdotal but rather linked to measurable neurobiological processes. Understanding this mystery could illuminate consciousness itself and reshape perspectives on dying.

Keywords: Burst of Lucidity; Dying Period; Neuroscientific Evidence; Cognition; Consciousness

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THE OBSERVATION that some dying individuals display a brief but striking return of mental clarity before death has been documented in literature, medical records, and oral histories for centuries. Family members of patients with advanced dementia often describe a final moment when their loved one suddenly recognizes them, speaks coherently, or behaves in a way that had seemed impossible in the preceding

weeks or months (Klapwijk et al., 2014). Clinicians have noted similar events in patients with psychiatric disorders, neurological conditions, or terminal illness (Chin et al., 2024). This phenomenon, often called terminal lucidity, poses a puzzle for neuroscience: how can a severely deteriorated brain suddenly generate a burst of coherent consciousness at the very edge of life?

The possibility of lucidity at the end of life invites skepti-

cism because it seems to defy the progressive loss of brain function associated with degenerative diseases. Alzheimer's disease, for example, destroys neurons and disrupts synaptic networks, impairing memory and cognition over years. In severe stages, patients may become mute, unresponsive, and unable to recognize close family (Iturria - Medina & Evans, 2015). The idea that such a damaged brain could suddenly produce meaningful conversation challenges conventional assumptions about irreversible decline. Yet anecdotal accounts are too widespread and consistent to ignore. If there is neuroscientific evidence for this phenomenon, it may lie not in the restoration of lost structures but in the dynamic reorganization and release of residual capacity during the dying process.

Neuroscience has begun to uncover clues through studies of the brain in extreme states. One line of evidence comes from electroencephalographic (EEG) recordings at or near the time of death (Charpier, 2023). In a few rare cases where patients in intensive care were monitored during cardiac arrest, researchers observed unexpected surges of organized brain activity in the minutes following circulatory collapse (Chawla & Seneff, 2013). Instead of a simple decline into silence, the brain exhibited bursts of gamma oscillations—patterns associated with attention, memory recall, and conscious awareness. These oscillations were highly coordinated across cortical regions, suggesting that even as oxygen supply diminished, the brain briefly entered a state of hyper-synchronization (Xu et al., 2023). Such findings provide a possible physiological basis for the moments of clarity reported in dying patients.

Animal studies lend further support. Experiments in rodents have shown that shortly after cardiac arrest, the brain undergoes a transient increase in high-frequency activity before deteriorating into flatline (Zhang et al., 2019). This burst of organized activity appears paradoxical but may reflect the last coordinated firing of neuronal networks as they respond to metabolic crisis. If similar mechanisms occur in humans, they could account for sudden episodes of lucidity, as the brain briefly taps into remaining reserves of connectivity before collapsing.

Another possible explanation involves neurotransmitter dynamics. During the dying process, stress responses flood the brain with chemicals such as glutamate, dopamine, and endorphins (Koch, 2023). These surges may transiently enhance synaptic transmission or release inhibitory constraints on certain networks, allowing suppressed pathways to reemerge. In individuals with dementia, residual circuits for recognition or language may still exist but remain blocked by dysfunctional inhibition (Migliaccio et al., 2020). As the neurochemical environment shifts dramatically at the end of life, these circuits could briefly regain activity, producing fleeting but meaningful communication.

Disinhibition is another important hypothesis. Much of brain function relies on a balance between excitation and inhibition. In neurodegenerative disease, this balance is disrupted, often leading to excessive inhibition of damaged circuits (Lopatina et al., 2019). The breakdown of inhibitory control during dying could paradoxically unleash latent neural activity, allowing memories or speech patterns to surface despite structural degeneration (Vicente et al., 2022). In this view, lucidity does not represent a restoration of the healthy brain but rather a

transient lifting of constraints that permits fragments of identity to emerge.

The study of near-death experiences offers additional perspective. Survivors of cardiac arrest often describe vivid perceptions, heightened clarity, or life reviews in the moments when their brains were assumed to be shutting down (Borjigin et al., 2013). Although these experiences differ from terminal lucidity in presentation, both involve paradoxical preservation or intensification of consciousness during severe physiological compromise (Batthyány & Greyson, 2020). Neuroscientific models increasingly suggest that the dying brain may enter a state of transient hyperactivity, providing a window into otherwise inaccessible aspects of cognition.

Despite these intriguing findings, definitive neuroscientific evidence remains scarce. Most accounts of terminal lucidity are anecdotal, gathered from families or caregivers, and occur in contexts where EEG or neuroimaging is unavailable (Nahm, 2009). Ethical and logistical challenges make it difficult to study dying patients in controlled settings. As a result, much of what is known relies on small case reports rather than systematic data (Shlobin et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the convergence of human, animal, and theoretical evidence supports the plausibility that end-of-life lucidity has a neurobiological basis rather than being merely wishful interpretation.

The implications of this possibility extend beyond science. For families, episodes of lucidity can provide comfort, closure, or the chance to exchange meaningful words before death. For clinicians, acknowledging the possibility of such moments may shape approaches to end-of-life care, encouraging sensitivity to the potential significance of late-stage communication. For neuroscientists and philosophers, the existence of lucidity at the brink of death challenges assumptions about consciousness and its dependence on structural integrity. If even a severely damaged brain can momentarily generate coherent awareness, what does this reveal about the resilience and mystery of conscious states?

Skeptics argue that terminal lucidity may be misinterpreted improvement, or that observers attribute more coherence than actually exists because they are emotionally invested. Subtle changes in arousal, medication effects, or random utterances could be misperceived as intentional (Mashour et al., 2019). Rigorous documentation and objective measurement will be required to separate genuine lucidity from wishful perception (Batthyány & Greyson, 2020). Yet the persistence of reports across cultures, centuries, and disease types makes it unlikely that the entire phenomenon can be dismissed as illusion.

Future research faces daunting but important challenges. Advances in portable EEG technology and noninvasive monitoring may allow researchers to capture more data from patients in hospice or palliative care. Large-scale collection of caregiver reports, combined with physiological monitoring, could build a clearer picture of the prevalence and mechanisms of terminal lucidity (Krooupa et al., 2022). Animal models may continue to illuminate how dying brains generate bursts of activity. Ethical frameworks must ensure that such research respects dignity while pursuing knowledge that could ultimately deepen understanding of life's final stage.

In the broader context of neuroscience, the phenomenon

of lucidity in dying people highlights the complexity of consciousness. It suggests that awareness is not a linear function that simply declines with structural damage but rather a dynamic interplay of circuits, chemicals, and states that can reconfigure under extreme conditions. This perspective may encourage new ways of thinking about consciousness in dementia, coma, anesthesia, and other altered states. Perhaps the dying brain, far from fading silently, passes through a last blaze of activity that reveals both its vulnerability and its extraordinary adaptability.

Ultimately, the question of whether there is neuroscientific evidence for bursts of lucidity in dying people touches both

science and humanity. Evidence from EEG, animal studies, neurotransmitter dynamics, and clinical reports suggests that such episodes are indeed plausible, though not yet fully understood. These bursts may represent the brain's final act of coordination, a fleeting window when suppressed capacities briefly reemerge. For families, they are moments of profound significance; for science, they are clues to the enigma of consciousness itself. While definitive proof remains elusive, the growing body of evidence points toward the conclusion that lucidity at the end of life is not simply a comforting story but a real phenomenon grounded in the extraordinary biology of the dying brain. ■

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