

Fact Sheet: Past-Life Memory (PLM)

In a past-life memory (PLM), a person recalls having lived a previous lifetime. Although such memories are sometimes elicited under hypnosis or in guided imagery, this fact sheet addresses spontaneously occurring, involuntary PLMs.

What forms do PLMs take?

PLMs, which look and feel like autobiographical memories of another time and place, may take various forms that may or may not appear together:

- simple autobiographical memory flashbacks
- longer episodic memories
- recognition memories
- emotional memories
- behavioral memories
- PLMs may involve physical traits carried over from, or influenced by events in, the previous life. These traits are thought to be psychogenic—produced by the reincarnating mind acting on its new body, with the help of psychokinesis, the influence of mind on matter. They may include:
 - facial structure and physical stature
 - birthmarks
 - birth defects
 - internal diseases
- PLMs may appear in various states of consciousness:
 - in the waking state
 - while falling asleep, in dreams during sleep, and while awakening from sleep
 - in meditation
 - in other altered states, including near-death experiences (NDEs)
- PLMs often are triggered by places or people, by seeing, hearing, or doing things reminiscent of the previous life.
- PLMs may have an influence unconsciously even when there are no conscious memories.

Who has PLMs?

Children are more likely to report PLMs than adults, but adults may have them, too.

- PLMs in childhood
 - Children as young as 12-18 months may say things that turn out to relate to previous lives they remember.
 - The most common age at which to speak of previous lives is 2-3 years, although older children may recall things, as well.
 - Many children make only one or two comments about the previous life, whereas others say a great deal.
 - Even when childhood memories are extensive, they may fade by late childhood or early teen years.
- PLMs in adulthood
 - There are often childhood precursors to adult PLMs.
 - Compared to childhood PLMs, those in adulthood are more likely to come in dreams or altered states.
 - Adult PLMs are rarely well developed and often lack behavioral features.
 - Adult PLMs often appear to reflect unresolved psychological conflicts or other “unfinished business.”
- With both children and adults, there may be emotional or behavioral memories, but no imaged, autobiographical memories.
- PLMs may be enhanced following NDEs; they can sometimes be an NDE aftereffect.
- A substantially larger number of males than females report PLMs, although the proportions vary somewhat by culture.

- PLMs are associated with violent deaths more often than such deaths actually occur in a given population, perhaps because they are more memorable than natural deaths.

Are PLMs hallucinations?

PLMs do not appear to be psi-mediated hallucinations or social constructions.

- In over 1,700 cases, researchers have identified a deceased person related to the PLM; these are called “solved” cases.
- In about three dozen solved cases, records exist from *before* the previous person was identified, ensuring that the memories were not fabricated.
- PLM cases include a range of personality and behavioral traits, and often physical traits, that cannot be explained by psychic processes.
- “Before” and “after” cases, and “solved” and “unsolved” cases, have very similar features, indicating the likelihood that all have the same source.

What are the effects on PLMers?

PLMs may have a variety of effects on those who experience them whether or not the memories are conscious.

- When the previous life ended violently, the child or adult PLMer may experience phobias or PTSD symptoms that would be expected had the previous person survived.
- Children may continue to feel emotional attachments to people from the life they remember, even after their conscious memories have faded. These continuing attachments may interfere with their development and adjustment to their present lives.

- Not all effects are negative. Psychological studies have shown that, compared to children without PLMs, peers with PLMs are often precocious in various ways, are better adjusted socially, and do better in school and in their adult lives.
- Adults who retain PLMs from childhood rarely remember everything, and their remaining memories may be less clear. The stronger their memories were in childhood, the more likely they are to retain memories into adulthood.
- Follow-up cross-cultural studies of adults who recalled past lives as children are consistent in suggesting an overall positive impact of the childhood memories. When the memories come first in adulthood, they may be more difficult to deal with, however.

Suggestions and Resources:

- Reading about PLMs can be helpful. Some recommended books are:
 - Haraldsson, E., & Matlock, J. G. (2016). *I saw a light and came here: Children's experiences of reincarnation*. White Crow Books.
 - Matlock, J. G. (2019). *Signs of reincarnation: Exploring beliefs, cases, and theory*. Rowman & Littlefield.
 - Ohkado, M. (2024). *Katsugoro and other reincarnation cases in Japan*. Afterworlds Press.
 - Stevenson, I. (2001). *Children who remember previous lives: A question of reincarnation*. McFarland.
 - Tucker, J. B. (2021). *Before: Children's memories of previous lives*. St. Martin's.
- Online resources include:
 - Matlock, J. G. (2017). Patterns in reincarnation cases. *Psi encyclopedia*. <https://psi-encyclopedia.spr.ac.uk/articles/patterns-reincarnation-cases>
 - Matlock, J. G., & Haraldsson, E. (2017). Psychological studies of children with past-life memories. *Psi encyclopedia*. <https://psi-encyclopedia.spr.ac.uk/articles/psychological-studies-children-claiming-past-life-memories>

The information in this Fact Sheet is based on the suggested resources listed above and on numerous studies published in professional peer-reviewed journals.

Written by: James G. Matlock, PhD