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Why Do We Feel We Have Lived Through a Momen

Ideas y experimentos · 10/11/2026 · Por Camilo Calderón

Have you ever felt that a completely new situation had already happened to you? Discover what research says about déjà vu, how memory is involved, and why the brain may produce this curious sensation.

Why Do We Feel We Have Lived Through a Moment Before? The Science Behind Déjà Vu

Have you ever been talking with someone, visiting a place, or experiencing a seemingly new situation and suddenly felt that it had all happened before?

It is not simply recognizing a place or remembering an experience. It is a more specific feeling: for a few moments, you have the impression that you are reliving exactly the same moment, even though you know you have never experienced it before.

This experience is known as déjà vu, a French expression meaning “already seen.”

Although many people are familiar with the sensation, it continues to raise questions among researchers in memory and neuroscience. Why does it happen? What does it have to do with our memories? Is it a brain error?

Let us look at what we actually know.

What Is Déjà Vu?

Déjà vu is a subjective feeling of familiarity that occurs in a situation that is objectively new.

Curiously, two seemingly contradictory sensations can coexist: we feel that we already know what is happening, while also knowing that we should not recognize it.

A scientific review published in 2023 by Aitken, Jentzsch, and O’Connor describes the phenomenon as a conflict between the subjective feeling of familiarity and the judgment that the situation is new.

You can read the original article here: Towards a conflict account of déjà vu, published in Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews.

What Does Memory Have to Do With This Feeling?

To understand déjà vu, we first need to distinguish two experiences related to memory: recognizing something and remembering the circumstances around it.

Imagine seeing someone and feeling that you know them. However, you cannot remember where you saw them, when it happened, or what their name is.

There is a feeling of familiarity, but no specific memory appears to explain it.

This distinction matters because recognition-memory research studies processes such as:

Familiarity: something feels known, even though we cannot retrieve the details of the earlier encounter.

Recollection or information retrieval: we can retrieve details of an experience, such as where and when it happened or the circumstances around it.

These processes are studied in models of recognition memory. A review and meta-analysis of their electrophysiological correlates, published in 2023, examined evidence from 41 experiments and about 1,000 participants.

You can read the research here: A meta-analysis of event-related potential correlates of recognition memory.

This distinction helps explain why we can experience familiarity without retrieving a specific memory, although it does not by itself prove that this is the only mechanism behind déjà vu.

A Scientific Explanation: Conflict Between Familiarity and Novelty

One current proposal is that déjà vu may occur when our cognitive system produces a feeling of familiarity that conflicts with the information we have about the present situation.

In other words, one part of our experience says “I know this already,” while another recognizes that we are facing something new.

The 2023 review by Aitken and colleagues discusses this possibility and connects the phenomenon with recognition-memory and cognitive-control processes.

The authors also review neuroimaging findings involving brain regions related to conflict detection and monitoring.

It is important to clarify that this is a proposed and studied explanation, not a definitive answer that has resolved every aspect of the phenomenon.

How Often Do We Experience Déjà Vu?

Not everyone experiences it equally often, but research suggests that it is common.

A systematic review with meta-analysis published in 2024 by Hadzic and Andersson brought together 46 studies of different forms of déjà vu.

The authors estimated that about 74% of healthy people in the studies had experienced déjà vu unrelated to an epileptic seizure.

This result is interesting, but it should be interpreted carefully: it is a combined estimate from studies with different methods and characteristics, not a universal figure that applies to every population.

You can read the open-access study here: Non-ictal, interictal and ictal déjà vu: a systematic review and meta-analysis, published in Frontiers in Neurology in 2024.

Is Déjà Vu Always Normal?

For most people, occasional déjà vu is an everyday experience and is not, by itself, a health

problem.

However, research also distinguishes experiences of déjà vu that can occur in specific neurological contexts, such as some temporal-lobe epileptic seizures.

The review by Hadzic and Andersson distinguishes non-ictal, interictal, and ictal experiences and shows that they should not be treated as identical phenomena.

This does not mean that occasional déjà vu is a sign of epilepsy.

If the experiences are very frequent or occur with loss of consciousness, confusion, involuntary movements, or other neurological symptoms, it is advisable to seek medical evaluation.

So Why Do We Feel We Have Lived Through Something That Is Happening for the First Time?

The most honest answer is that there is still no single definitive explanation.

Research points to the involvement of processes related to familiarity, recognition, memory retrieval, and cognitive control.

Déjà vu is especially interesting because it lets researchers study how we build a feeling of familiarity and distinguish what we remember from what we are experiencing in the present.

Perhaps the most curious part of the experience is that, for a few seconds, we can feel that we know a moment perfectly well even though we know it has never happened before.

This reminds us of something important: memory is not a perfect replay of reality; it is a set of processes that helps us interpret, recognize, and reconstruct our experiences.

Scientific References

Aitken, C. B. A., Jentzsch, I., & O'Connor, A. R. (2023). Towards a conflict account of déjà vu: The role of memory errors and memory expectation conflict in the experience of déjà vu. Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews, 155, 105467. View scientific publication.

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