

# Life Cycle Events

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

You are somewhere along the trajectory of your life cycle. Maybe you have gone through a whole series of lifecycle transitions, such as puberty, adolescence, parenthood, et cetera. Everyone passes through transitions like this. All people will die on some unknown day in the future. All were born to mothers. This lesson covers life cycles in relation to religion. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Lifecycle Events
2. Transformative Nature
3. Other Lifecycle Events

## 1. Lifecycle Events

Some cultures have formal, even ritualistic, ways of recognizing and supporting transitions. In general, typical Western industrialized countries have tended to lose conscious contact with the religious and spiritual significance of the transitions that make up, and are part of, **lifecycle events**. Instead, the markers of great change from one phase of life to another are blended into society's conventions. They are accepted and facilitated with minimal reference to the hovering existential spiritual questions that are likely to surround the subject going through the changes.

However, there are still plenty of examples of lifecycle events that are heartily acknowledged and affirmed in many cultures and religious faiths in every part of the globe. In Judaism, there's something called a **Brit Milah**. This is a customary ritual circumcision of all males on the eighth day of life. The removal of the foreskin symbolizes the covenant, or agreement, between God and the Jewish people. In the first book of the Hebrew Bible, Genesis, God commanded Abraham to circumcise himself and his male descendants.

In the Middle Ages, there were many Jewish philosophers, such as Maimonides, Spinoza, and Philo of Alexandria before them, who justified this ritual and encouraged its continuation. They argued that it was a sign of the covenant between God and the Jewish people, it is more hygienic, and it aids in limiting the distractions of lust.



*The Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek* by Peter Paul Rubens, circa 1626

In this painting by Peter Paul Rubens circa 1625, you see a depiction of Abraham and the high priest, Melchizedek, the son of Noah and sometimes called Shem. According to the Jewish tradition, the high priest was present at the circumcision of both Abraham and Isaac, formally recognizing the practical action as a religious covenant. Abraham is returning victorious from battle, and he's given bread from Shem. This is the origin of this lifecycle event in Judaism, which solidifies the commitment between the people and God.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Lifecycle Event**

A rite of passage or significant event in the life of an individual.

##### **Brit Milah**

A Jewish ritual circumcision.

## 2. Transformative Nature

Among the variety of traditions, religions, and ritual practices around lifecycle events, there are many commonalities. These have more to do with the spiritual intention, purpose, and meaning. The forum looks very different across the religions, but the spirit, you might say, is the same.

A lifecycle event then, is a transition from one's state, or period of life, to another. It is a passage filled with both opportunities and dangers, much like a pilgrimage is a passage filled with potential dangers and unexpected blessings. Both are transformative experiences in which one's identity is dissolved, in part, and then reconstituted.

#### IN CONTEXT

In some Native American cultures, especially those of the Plains and Great Lakes regions, young adults in mid-teenage years have traditionally gone on **vision quests** marking their coming of age into adulthood. A vision quest is typically a one- to five-day solo journey into the land in search of purpose, meaning, and guidance. If a vision appears, often the vision questor will integrate this wisdom with follow-up support from a tribal elder upon returning to the group.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Vision Quest

A coming-of-age event in some Native American traditions.

## 3. Other Lifecycle Events

There are many lifecycle events recognized by religions. Many cultures also have ceremonies to recognize the onset of puberty. In Bali, they mark this event with a parade through town. It is called the Menek Kelih.

Marriage is very often understood as a religious and spiritual acknowledgment of the union between two individuals and their mutual commitment to support each other's life purpose.

Death rituals and customs mark, perhaps, the most dramatic end of a life cycle and transformative process. All cultures and religions have very specific rituals and practices surrounding death.



#### SUMMARY

Looking at **lifecycle events**, you learned about the Jewish practice of Brit Milah, which is a ritual circumcision of males at eight days of age. You then learned about the tradition of vision quests in some Native American religions, to demonstrate the transformative nature that most lifecycle events have in common. There are many **other lifecycle events**, such as marriage and death.



## TERMS TO KNOW

**Brit Milah**

A Jewish ritual circumcision.

**Life Cycle Event**

A rite of passage or significant event in the life of an individual.

**Vision Quest**

A coming-of-age event in some Native American traditions