

Nostalgia: Deploying the Past to Improve the Future

Abstract

Nostalgia is a complex, self-conscious emotion largely associated with positive feelings and positive effects. Nostalgia is elicited by a variety of circumstances, including through various senses (scents, tastes) as well as by negative states such as loneliness and boredom. For centuries, people observed correlations between nostalgia and these negative states and falsely assumed that nostalgia might cause these states. However, twenty-first-century scientific research has revealed that nostalgia is actually activated by these states and then helps to alleviate them. Nostalgic reverie confers additional psychological benefits, including enhanced social connectedness, self-continuity, and well-being.

Keywords: nostalgia, memory, emotion, self-conscious, mental health, well-being

Introduction

You have felt this way, even if you don't know the term for it: being jolted back to your past, perhaps by seeing a picture from your sixteenth birthday party or receiving a call from an old friend. You smile and laugh at those fond memories, though the positive feelings are perhaps mixed with a twinge of wistfulness or sadness for days gone by or old friends lost. The term for this wistful state about our past is called *nostalgia*. The word is five hundred years old, though the concept can be seen in works that are millennia old, such as the Bible and the *Odyssey*. However, solid scientific research on this rather complex emotional state is shockingly new—the vast majority of sustained and systematic work is only about fifteen to twenty years old (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2022; Wildschut et al., 2006).

Like many psychological concepts, such as self-esteem or subjective well-being, nostalgia can be considered a fairly stable personality trait, with some people typically high on nostalgia and others typically low on nostalgia. However, nostalgia is also a state, with almost everyone feeling nostalgic in particular circumstances, such as at a reunion. The following review focuses largely on studies that have examined the *state* of nostalgia. This article defines nostalgia, discusses various sources of nostalgia, and focuses on the crucial issue of the psychological outcomes of experiencing nostalgia.

Nostalgia Defined: A Complex and Self-Conscious Emotion

Dictionary and lay definitions of nostalgia vary, but all focus on thinking about the past. Not just any past but one's personal past or autobiographical memories. Typically, people feeling nostalgic report a mixture of both positive and negative emotions—the word bittersweet is prominent in many definitions—but people almost always report more positive than negative emotions (Sedikides et al., 2015). Often, a yearning or wistfulness is felt. There may be a desire to not simply engage in mental and emotional time travel but to actually return to a cherished moment in one's past in order to relive a particular personal event, such as a vacation, personal accomplishment, such as winning a race or award, or a social event such as a first kiss. Odysseus laboring for a decade after fighting in the Trojan War to return to his beloved homeland and family is a poignant example—and particularly apt because, as we will see, nostalgia is an amalgam of two Greek words (see Figure 1). The nostalgic events that people typically conjure from memory are social in nature and momentous in scope (Wildschut et al., 2006), for instance, graduations, the birth of children, and weddings.

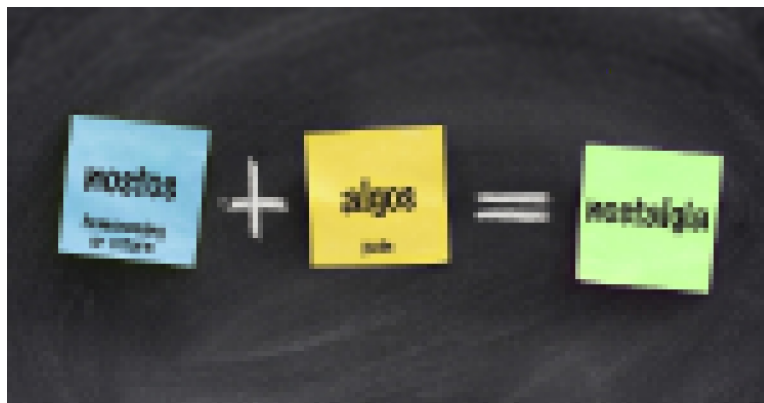


Figure 1: Defining nostalgia.

Thus, nostalgia is a rather complicated emotion. It is not the only complex emotion; emotions vary quite widely on multiple dimensions, and that might be one reason why there are many theories of emotion that fit some types of emotions better than other types. It might seem like there are more theories of emotion as there are discrete emotions studied by researchers! Some emotion theories are evolutionary in nature, emphasizing how emotions are adaptive in motivating individuals to quickly address interpersonal challenges (Ekman, 1992). Others are more cognitive in nature, such as appraisal theory (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985), which emphasizes the interpretation of situations, such as sadness resulting from interpreting a negative event as uncontrollable or anger resulting from disapproving of another's behavior and its negative consequences toward you (Green & Sedikides, 1999). You may recall from a psychology textbook that bodily changes are emphasized in some classic theories of emotion, with William James (1890) and others saying that our emotions follow directly from physiological changes (we're afraid because our heart is pounding), though others like Walter Cannon (1927) have disagreed, saying that both the feelings and the physiological changes flow from an external event). Nostalgia researchers have pointed out that reflecting on one's autobiographical past is a uniquely human experience, but at the same time, they have proposed evolutionary explanations for nostalgia, suggesting that it serves a homeostatic function for us both psychologically and physiologically (Sedikides et al., 2015), as we will see when we talk about the buffering or repair functions that nostalgia serves when people feel lonely or cold or bored.

Some emotions are called *self-conscious* because they inevitably involve and require a self-concept and self-reflection in order to be experienced (Tangney & Tracy, 2012). A dog might feel anger or happiness but can't feel pride because dogs do not possess reflexive self-consciousness. The emotions of shame, guilt, and pride all involve comparing one's behavior or experience to certain personal or societal standards. We feel guilty because we let down a friend, and we feel pride because we achieved an important personal goal. Nostalgia is quintessentially self-conscious because it requires us to reflect on the narrative of our lives.



When a person experiences nostalgia, they reflect on their past and the narrative of their life. Some emotions, such as nostalgia, are considered self-conscious emotions, as they necessitate the experience of self-reflection and a self-concept. Photo courtesy Getty Images.

However, an interesting exception can be found in the concept of *collective* nostalgia, defined as the sentimental or wistful longing for events or values from a past *shared* with group members (Smeekes et al., 2023). Collective nostalgia is focused on a group identity rather than on a personal identity. In fact, some forms of collective nostalgia may not even refer to the actual past but rather a simplified or distorted collective past (collective false memories, in a sense), such as *national* nostalgia for the “good old days” of a country that may not be very accurate (Behler et al., 2021), a concept that has been linked to right-wing populist ideologies (Smeekes et al., 2023). However, other forms of collective nostalgia are much closer to the profile of personal nostalgia in terms of its positive effects on social connectedness, such as nostalgia for one’s university days (Green et al., 2021). Henceforth, we will focus on *personal* nostalgia and its effects.

What Makes Us Nostalgic?

What triggers nostalgia? All sorts of sensory inputs and experiences have been shown to increase feelings of nostalgia, from popular songs (Barrett et al., 2010) to rereading a favorite book (Kneuer et al., 2022). Smells have always been powerfully linked to memories. For instance, think about those special family foods, especially those enjoyed at Thanksgiving or other holidays. People report that many smells, particularly of food, can make us nostalgic (Green et al., 2023; Reid et al., 2015). As you might expect, the related sense of taste can also trigger nostalgia, which is a particularly positive form of nostalgia at that. While most experiences of nostalgia include some negative feelings mixed with the more predominant positive feelings, descriptions of food-induced nostalgia are almost entirely “sweet,” perhaps because people can choose what they eat more easily than what they smell (Reid et al., 2022). Future research should address additional sources, such as the sense of touch—like feeling the texture of favorite childhood toys or dolls/action figures—or the role of technology in triggering nostalgia. Of course, directly recalling memories makes people nostalgic and has been the most widely used of several *experimental* methods successfully employed in nostalgia research (for a review, see Wildschut & Sedikides, 2022). Figure 2 illustrates the various causes of nostalgia.



Figure 2: Causes of nostalgia. Sources: Songs: Barrett et al., 2010; Favorite books: Kneuer et al., 2022; Smells: Green et al., 2023 and Reid et al., 2015; Tastes: Reid et al., 2022; Directly recalling memories: Wildschut & Sedikides, 2023. Photos courtesy Pexels and Unsplash.

Is Nostalgia Good for Us, or Is It an Unhealthy Denial of Our Present Reality?

For centuries, people thought that nostalgia was unhealthy, even dangerous. A Swiss scholar named Johannes Hofer (1688/1934) coined the term nostalgia in 1688. His neologism involved combining the Greek words *nostos* (homecoming or return) and *algos* (pain). He noted that people who experienced nostalgia were lonely and homesick, such as soldiers fighting overseas, so he proposed that it was a disease associated with sadness, insomnia, and other symptoms. Other pre-twentieth-century theories included nostalgia as a hysterical reaction to the constant clanging of cowbells in the Swiss Alps (Davis, 1979). Not until the end of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century did researchers consider other possibilities.

Unfortunately, for the subsequent four centuries, Hofer and his ilk succumbed to a classic logical and empirical error: assuming a causal relationship from a correlation. Height and weight are correlated, but one would never say that height causes weight or vice versa. Imagine conducting a survey and discovering that people feeling lonely are also feeling nostalgic—a positive correlation. A survey cannot determine whether loneliness causes nostalgia, nostalgia causes loneliness, or another variable, such as a move or a break-up, might be causing both. Nevertheless, Hofer and others inferred that nostalgia was the cause of loneliness in people like mercenaries and other travelers. While experiments can reveal insights on cause and effect, nonexperimental methods typically cannot, and one of the biggest errors in science—and for those reading science—is assuming a causal relationship from a correlation. The field of psychology, of course, has seen this before, and sometimes, it's taken decades to sort out proper relationships. For example, the assumption in the 1970s that low self-esteem caused many societal ills, including drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and academic failure, led to institutional efforts to raise self-esteem, which, of course, failed to improve those societal ills and may have made the situation worse by increasing narcissism (Baumeister & Vohs, 2018; Twenge, 2013). Recall that Hofer (1688/1934) and others focused on groups in rather extreme situations, such as soldiers far from home in stressful circumstances. While they mistakenly assumed nostalgia was a cause of loneliness and sadness, twenty-first-century experimental research has revealed a very different causal chain. An abundance of research now shows that various negative emotional and psychological states trigger nostalgia rather than being caused by it (e.g., van Tilburg et al., 2013). Moreover, nostalgia serves a regulatory function in helping ameliorate or repair a variety of these states (Wang et al., 2023; see Figure 3).

Put another way, nostalgia appears to be part of our psychological immune system, helping us to fight off aversive states. Individuals who feel bored (van Tilburg et al., 2013), lonely (Zhou et al., 2008), afraid of death or that their life is meaningless (Routledge et al., 2008; Routledge et al., 2011), or even physically cold (Zhou et al., 2012), are more likely to engage in nostalgic reverie compared to individuals in control groups who don't feel such negative states. This induced nostalgia then helps to repair these negative states, such as dampening feelings of loneliness (see Figure 3). You may think of times when you've felt lonely, and reminiscing about happy times and close friends from childhood helped you feel better. Nostalgia isn't the problem; it's at least part of the solution.

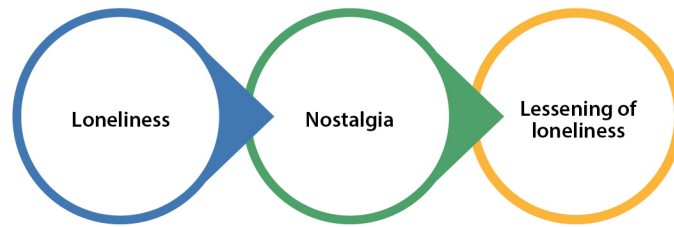


Figure 3: Nostalgia and loneliness. Current research shows that loneliness triggers nostalgia, which in turn decreases the feelings of loneliness.

Additional Effects of Nostalgic Feelings

In addition to repairing negative states such as loneliness or boredom, nostalgia seems to facilitate a variety of salubrious states (see Table 1). Among the most common outcomes are enhanced feelings of social connectedness: when we feel nostalgic, we feel stronger bonds with others (Green et al., 2021; Sedikides et al., 2015). This makes sense because we typically are reflecting back on a cherished social past, and that may help remind us about the people who have loved us and continue to love us. Self-continuity is also facilitated by nostalgia. In an era in which we have different selves, often also geographically distant from each other (for example, our high school self versus our college self), feeling like we are one person with a consistent life narrative may be an additional challenge. But feeling nostalgic helps us feel like we have a more continuous and stable identity and life story (Sedikides et al., 2008). Nostalgia also fosters increased feelings of meaning in life as well as subjective well-being (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018). We are more likely to feel that life is good (well-being) and that it's fuller of purpose and significance (meaning). These feelings of connectedness, self-continuity, and meaning in life are often the mechanisms by which nostalgia can facilitate even more positive states, behaviors, or outcomes.

Other positive states of nostalgia include enhanced optimism, inspiration, creativity, and help-seeking. Individuals directed to feel nostalgic, compared to those in a control group, felt more inspired to, for example, travel overseas or try skydiving (Stephan et al., 2015). Nostalgic individuals tend to be more optimistic as well. In both the Netherlands and UK samples, people feeling nostalgic after listening to nostalgic songs or reading their lyrics felt more hopeful about the future (Cheung et al., 2013). Nostalgia even appears to encourage healthier eating (Lasaleta et al., 2021), even though many of the foods we're most nostalgic about aren't so healthy (Reid et al., 2022). Nostalgic feelings make us more creative (Petratou et al., 2021; van Tilburg et al., 2015). Are you sometimes reluctant to ask for assistance? A series of experiments found that nostalgia, compared to a neutral state, encourages asking for help because nostalgia makes people feel more socially connected (Juhl et al., 2021). It appears that higher feelings of connection can help people overcome their hesitancy to seek support. Perhaps more importantly, and on the other side of the coin, nostalgia is also associated with greater empathy, which encourages helping others (Juhl et al., 2019). In other settings, people have uncovered the role of nostalgia in alleviating grief (Reid et al., 2021) as well as selling more products (Zhou et al., 2019).

Effect of nostalgia	Research
Feeling more socially connected	Green et al., 2021; Sedikides et al., 2015
Feeling a continuous and stable identity	Sedikides et al., 2008
Feeling life is good and full of purpose	Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018
Feeling more optimistic	Cheung et al., 2013
Feeling more creative	Petratou et al., 2021; van Tilburg et al., 2015
Feeling more empathetic	Juhl et al., 2019

Table 1: Effects of nostalgia.

Nostalgia as Panacea?

Is nostalgia the solution to all personal and perhaps societal ills? Of course not. More research is required, but we need to remember that experimental research focuses on group averages. On average, those in nostalgic conditions are somewhat more likely to feel connected or creative. Researchers also talk about “effect sizes,” which are typically moderate in nostalgia research. Effect sizes speak to the strength or potency of an effect or the size of the difference between, say, the experimental group and the control group. The differences between those groups in nostalgia research are noticeable, but simply listening to your favorite songs from childhood is not going to make you immediately write a Pulitzer Prize–winning novel or decide to donate a kidney. Research *has* identified one group that tends to show fewer or absent benefits of feeling nostalgic: those high in attachment avoidance. People who feel uncomfortable with getting close to others seem unable to reap the benefits of nostalgia, perhaps because feelings of social connectedness are so central to the nostalgia experience (Wildschut et al., 2010).

A few researchers have proposed that more “spontaneous” nostalgic experiences can be associated with more sadness, lower self-esteem, or lower well-being (Batcho, 2020; Newman et al., 2020), but this claim is still debated and not supported by the bulk of the evidence (Wang et al., 2023), and the differences arise largely from different methods. Newman et al. (2020) used a daily diary rather than experimental methods, which may have led to more diffuse and mild nostalgic states. They found that nostalgia experienced at one time period predicted negative changes in well-being at a later time period for a small minority of measures; the other measures found the opposite effect or null effects. Future research should continue to use a variety of methods and measures to further uncover these relations (Wang et al., 2023; Wildschut & Sedikides, 2022).

Can young people benefit from nostalgia, or do you have to go back decades in your mind to feel nostalgic? Absolutely. Students have no trouble reporting nostalgic experiences! You can wax nostalgic about last year or last month.

Thinking Ahead to Thinking Back

Anticipated nostalgia seems to involve particularly complex mental time travel: projecting yourself into the future and imagining yourself thinking back on the present. An example may help to clarify this concept. You probably sat at your high school graduation ceremony and thought about how one day you would enjoy the memories of the celebratory day. Consequently, you took photos and videos so that you could more easily trigger nostalgic feelings in the future. Does that mean you enjoyed the present *less* because you were not “in the moment”? On the contrary, people who engaged in more of this anticipated nostalgia actually savored the present more (Cheung et al., 2020)! Thus, the process of looking forward to looking back has a double benefit: you appreciate your present experience even more, and you also put bigger deposits in the memory banks in order to appreciate the experience again when you look back!



Anticipated nostalgia involves the practice of imagining yourself in the future and thinking back to the present moment. During your high school graduation, for example, you may have thought about how you would enjoy the memories of the celebration someday in the future, and you may have even taken photos/videos for your future self to enjoy. Engaging in anticipated nostalgia helps you to both appreciate the present moment more and enjoy the experience again when your future self looks back. Photo courtesy Getty Images.

The Future Is Our Past?

In short, nostalgia is both a positive and a negative emotion. It's experienced frequently by most of us. It has a number of positive outcomes. Could we be experiencing nostalgia *inflation* in our twenty-first-century world? World crises such as climate change, war, and the retreat of democracy and attendant rise in fascist populism may spur people to wax nostalgic about their cherished past, times that were less fraught with worry, more innocent, less divisive, and more communal. A second reason why the experience of nostalgia might be increasing is through reminders of our personal past via social media. Even though social media is often about the relentless present moment—and fear of missing out on the latest post—some platforms may facilitate regular injections of nostalgia. For example, Facebook memories can show individuals what they posted on that calendar day since they joined Facebook. Other examples include Google Photos and Apple (On This Day), which show us what we did exactly one or five years ago today. Setting reminders or alerts in order to routinely experience nostalgia may be a wise investment of just a few minutes per day.

To return to the financial analogy, when we deposit recollections into our banks of memory, we receive a high interest rate. And when we withdraw nostalgic recollections from our memory banks, there is no loss of principal. On the contrary, we can make as many withdrawals as we like in order to think back to our cherished past, leveraging the past in order to make our futures a little brighter.

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About the Author

Jeffrey D. Green is a professor of psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University. He received his BA from Dartmouth College and his PhD from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His research revolves around self-concept and emotions. He has published work on affective states such as sadness, anger, envy, and guilt. A current primary focus is on the causes and consequences of feeling nostalgic. He also studies close relationships processes, including attachment theory and forgiveness, and researches human–animal interactions. He has empirically examined various types of virtuous behavior, including gratitude, self-control, and humility, and how these processes facilitate meaning in life.

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