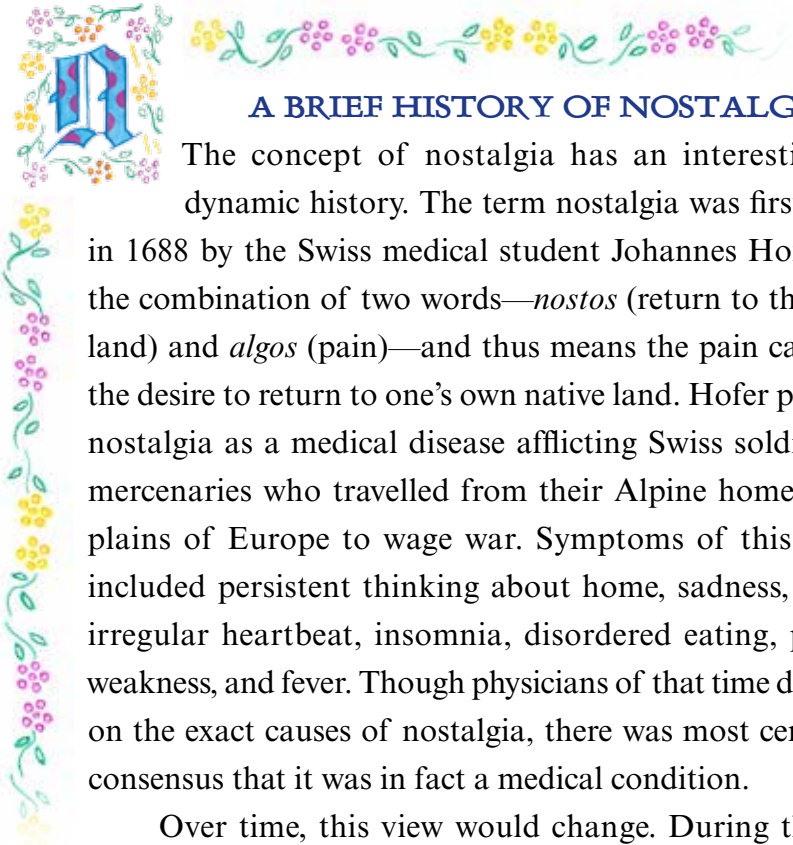


Nostalgia: A Therapeutic Resource



A BRIEF HISTORY OF NOSTALGIA

The concept of nostalgia has an interesting and dynamic history. The term nostalgia was first coined in 1688 by the Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer. It is the combination of two words—*nostos* (return to the native land) and *algos* (pain)—and thus means the pain caused by the desire to return to one's own native land. Hofer proposed nostalgia as a medical disease afflicting Swiss soldiers and mercenaries who travelled from their Alpine homes to the plains of Europe to wage war. Symptoms of this disease included persistent thinking about home, sadness, anxiety, irregular heartbeat, insomnia, disordered eating, physical weakness, and fever. Though physicians of that time disagreed on the exact causes of nostalgia, there was most certainly a consensus that it was in fact a medical condition.

Over time, this view would change. During the early 20th century, for instance, nostalgia was no longer treated as a medical condition, but instead viewed as a psychological disorder associated with a longing to return to childhood or even the womb. By the mid-20th century, the view of nostalgia

as any kind of illness or disorder had already begun to wane. Scholars began to distinguish homesickness (the longing for home) from the more general longing for the past that characterizes nostalgia. Psychologists became particularly interested in homesickness and the distress associated with young people's transitions away from the home environment, and largely neglected the concept of nostalgia. By the late 20th century, most scholars no longer equated nostalgia with homesickness. In fact, researchers in marketing and consumer psychology viewed nostalgia as a positive state that contributed to preferences for products associated with one's past.

Fast forward to the early 21st century, and views on nostalgia have dramatically changed. What was considered a medical disease or mental pathology now is treated as an important psychological resource for adaptive functioning. Nostalgia was not the problem. It was in fact the solution. But how did this change in perception come to happen?

First, it is important to note that for most of its history nostalgia was not well studied. Physicians and therapists observed people experiencing unpleasant states, while also

expressing a longing for home or the past. However, these practitioners were not conducting controlled empirical research. Some of these patients were probably experiencing homesickness, not nostalgia, and this distinction was not made until the mid-20th century. Secondly, some of these patients were probably experiencing nostalgia as a result of feeling anxious, sad, or lonely. In other words, nostalgia was not the cause of these conditions. It was the psychological resource people were using to cope with these conditions.

Critically, the view that nostalgia is a healthy (and helpful) response to distressing states, and not the cause of them, is now supported by a large growing body of empirical literature.

THE EXPERIENCE OF NOSTALGIA

To form a more complete understanding of what nostalgia is and how it is experienced, research psychologists have conducted a number of studies utilizing participants of all ages and from nations representing a wide range of cultures (e.g., the United States, England, China, Germany, India, Greece, Uganda, Ethiopia, Israel, Turkey, Romania). Using a number of distinct methodologies, these researchers have sought to answer the question of lay conceptions of nostalgia. In other words, how do regular people all over the world conceptualize nostalgia? These researchers observed that there is a striking consensus on what nostalgia means across cultures. People

view nostalgia as a largely positive but somewhat ambivalent emotion. Specifically, nostalgia is associated with warm feelings and happy memories, but it also is associated with feelings of both loss and longing.

But how do people actually experience nostalgia? That is, what kind of cognitions and emotions characterize the experience of nostalgia? Researchers have answered this question by having participants detail in writing their own personal experiences with nostalgia. In these studies, participants are prompted to bring to mind and spend some time writing about an experience that makes them feel nostalgic. Researchers then transcribed these nostalgia narratives and had both trained human raters and computer software programs code their content. These analyses revealed common characteristics of nostalgic memories.

First, nostalgic memories are largely focused on personally meaningful memories, or the life experiences that people report as personally cherished or momentous (e.g., family holidays or gatherings, vacations or special trips, religious or cultural rites of passage, graduations, weddings, etc.). Thus, nostalgic memories are more often than not special memories.

Further, though nostalgic memories prominently feature the self, they tend to be highly social in nature. It is rare for a nostalgic memory to not involve close others, such as family members, romantic partners, and good friends. In

terms of emotion, nostalgic memories typically contain both positive and negative emotions—but the positive emotions far outweigh the negative ones. For example, a person may indicate being sad that a grandparent has died, but will also spend more time describing all of the good times he or she had with that grandparent. In addition, these narratives tend to follow an emotionally redemptive sequence, in which negative feelings eventually give way to positive ones. In other words, when people indicate being sad or feeling a sense of loss, they subsequently express feelings of gratitude or appreciation for that time.

In short, nostalgic memories are meaningful memories that both highlight the importance of the self but also predominantly feature close others. In addition, though nostalgic memories feature both negative and positive emotional states, the net result tends to be positive.

WHAT CAUSES NOSTALGIA?

To test the proposal that nostalgia is a natural means of coping with distress and not the cause of it, researchers began by determining if negative psychological states increase nostalgic feelings. There have now been dozens of experiments considering a range of unpleasant states that could trigger nostalgia. In this kind of research, participants are typically brought into a laboratory and presented with information that temporarily causes unpleasant feelings. Participants

in a control condition are not exposed to this information. Subsequently, participants complete a validated scale that assesses current nostalgic feelings.

For example, in one early study, researchers manipulated mood by having participants read one of three news stories. One story detailed the loss of life and property caused by a tsunami. The story was unpleasant to read, and participants who read it displayed increased levels of negative mood. One story detailed the birth of a panda bear at a zoo, which was used to help induce a positive mood. The third and final story was a scientific article about a probe being sent into space, which was used as a neutral mood manipulation. After reading one of these three stories, participants completed the nostalgia measure. The researchers proposed that if nostalgia is a resource people deploy to cope with negative psychological states, then people who read the sad article subsequently should feel more nostalgic than people who read the positive or neutral article. This hypothesis was later supported, as the participants in the negative mood condition displayed the highest levels of nostalgia.

Other studies now have established that a range of negative states trigger nostalgia. Feelings of loneliness, meaninglessness, and boredom all have been shown to increase nostalgia. It also is important to note that nostalgia can be directly triggered by more innocuous reminders of the past. For instance, familiar sights and smells, music, or social

encounters also have been shown to provoke nostalgia. But for psychologists interested in nostalgia as a coping resource, it is particularly interesting that nostalgia appears to be a common response to distressing experiences. But what exactly does nostalgia do to counter these states?

THE FUNCTIONS OF NOSTALGIA

If nostalgia is a coping resource, then it should lead to positive psychological states. Dozens of experiments have now revealed this is in fact the case. In these studies, researchers experimentally induced nostalgia in a number of ways.

Commonly, nostalgia is induced by having participants spend a few minutes writing about an experience that makes them feel nostalgic. Participants in a control condition also complete a writing task, but instead write about something such as an ordinary recent event. Having participants listen to music that makes them feel nostalgic is also a common manipulation tool used in research. Depending on the focus of the study, after completing the nostalgia or control task, participants complete measures that tap positive and negative emotions, self-esteem, perceptions of meaning in life, and feelings of belongingness.

The results of these studies reveal the psychological benefits of nostalgia. Nostalgia inductions, compared to control conditions, increase positive mood (but do not increase negative mood), self-esteem, and feelings of both

personal meaning and belongingness. More complex cognitive experiments have revealed that nostalgia makes it easier for people to access positive cognitions about the self. Nostalgia also has been shown to reduce defensive responses to negative feedback.

More recent work also reveals that nostalgia increases feelings of authenticity, optimism about the future, inspiration, and creativity. In short, when people reflect on or are reminded of the life experiences that generate nostalgia, they experience a boost in well-being. Nostalgia makes people feel good, hopeful, and inspired.

NOSTALGIA AND MOTIVATION

One of the more recent and exciting lines of research on nostalgia relates to its potential to motivate behavior.

The basic idea is that if nostalgia makes people feel meaningful, good about the self, and optimistic about the future, then it also may help to energize them. In support of this idea, studies have found that nostalgia increases people's desire to meet new people, their willingness to help others (even strangers), their empathy towards others, their confidence that they can resolve relationship problems, and charitable giving. What appears to be going on is that nostalgia serves to remind people that they have had meaningful and successful social experiences. This reminder instills confidence. And this confidence in turn energizes goals. It makes people want to

pursue new opportunities, particularly ones that will facilitate new and meaningful social memories.

Nostalgia isn't about living in the past or refusing to experience the present. Instead, nostalgia is a way to reach into the past and use one's most cherished memories to counter unpleasant states in the present, thus mobilizing oneself for future opportunities. In this way, nostalgia is as much about the future as it is about the past.

HOW TO USE NOSTALGIA

Many reminiscence-based therapies naturally use nostalgia because they involve people sharing their life experiences and stories with others. In fact, nostalgia has a lot of therapeutic potential because it is a low-cost and flexible activity. For instance, people could keep a nostalgia diary that involves daily writing exercises about important memories. People also could create nostalgia music playlists, create photo albums that represent their most cherished memories, or even plan nostalgia trips or parties that involve revisiting special places or preparing dishes that generate nostalgia. Creative or artistic activities could easily include a nostalgia component by inviting participants to share memories or incorporate important aspects of the past into their artwork. The possibilities in this regard are truly endless.

The Internet also affords a number of nostalgia opportunities. For example, social media platforms such as

Facebook offer a relatively easy and accessible way to connect with people from one's past and to share common memories. Throwback Thursday is currently a popular nostalgia activity on Facebook. It involves people sharing a photo from the past so that others can comment on it and share their memory of that same shared experience. Other social media platforms also allow people to share photos and stories from their pasts. I suspect online nostalgia opportunities will continue to grow in the future.

As a cautionary note, it is also important to acknowledge that nearly all of the research on nostalgia to date has been conducted on nonclinical populations. That is, though studies have certainly looked at how people experiencing negative states such as loneliness and meaninglessness use nostalgia to restore well-being, these studies have not focused on clinical samples (i.e., participants with more severe pathologies, such as chronic depression or anxiety). Now that nostalgia has been established as a psychological resource that generally benefits personal well-being, an important goal of future work is to more explicitly test the effects of nostalgia on people facing severe psychological problems.

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Clay is a social psychologist and professor of Psychology at North Dakota State University in Fargo. He earned his doctorate from the University of Missouri and worked at South Hampton University in England. His research focuses on the many ways that people gain and maintain perceptions of meaning in life and how these perceptions contribute to their psychological and physical health. He has published over 85 scientific papers, co-edited a book on the psychology of meaning, and authored the book *Nostalgia: A Psychological Resource*. He also was a contributing author for the books *The Walking Dead Psychology: Psych of the Living Dead* and *Star Wars Psychology: Dark Side of the Mind*. His research has been funded by the National Science Foundation, the John Templeton Foundation, and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. Dr. Routledge's work has been featured by many media outlets, such as *The New York Times*, *CBS News*, *ABC News*, *BBC News*, *CNN*, *MSNBC*, *Men's Health*, and *The New Yorker*. Dr. Routledge writes a popular online column for *Psychology Today* called "More than Mortal," has served as a guest blogger for *Scientific American*, and frequently serves as a guest expert for national and international radio programs.

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