

**HOW  
NOSTALGIA  
CAN HELP YOU  
LIVE A MORE  
MEANINGFUL  
LIFE**

**PAST  
FORWARD**

**CLAY ROUTLEDGE, PHD**



# CONTENTS

Introduction	1
<b>Part 1: The Nostalgia Revolution</b>	
Chapter 1: The New Science of Nostalgia	7
Chapter 2: Nostalgia Is about the Future	17
Chapter 3: What Makes Nostalgia Possible (and Necessary)	27
<b>Part 2: How Nostalgia Enhances the Self</b>	
Chapter 4: Nostalgia Shapes the Self-Concept	43
Chapter 5: Nostalgia Builds Healthy Self-Esteem	59
Chapter 6: Nostalgia Helps the Self Grow and Expand	71
<b>Part 3: How Nostalgia Connects You to Others</b>	
Chapter 7: Nostalgia Strengthens and Builds Relationships	87
Chapter 8: Nostalgia Connects You to Groups	105
Chapter 9: Nostalgia Helps You Care about Others	119
<b>Part 4: How Nostalgia Makes Life Meaningful</b>	
Chapter 10: Nostalgia Helps You Cope with Existential Fears	133
Chapter 11: Nostalgia Focuses You on What Gives You Meaning	147
Chapter 12: Nostalgia Inspires Existential Agency	161

**Part 5: Using the Past to Build a Better Future**

Chapter 13: Nostalgia Helps You  
Navigate a Fast-Moving World 177

Conclusion: Nostalgia and the Psychology of Progress 189

Acknowledgments 195

Notes 197

About the Author 215

## CHAPTER 1

# THE NEW SCIENCE OF NOSTALGIA

**M**y personal path to studying nostalgia began when I was an undergraduate student and started thinking seriously about how humans experience time. I have always been a fan of science-fiction movies about time travel. I'm not alone. People love thinking about what life was like in the past and what it might look like in the future.

For my first lab experiment on the subject, I designed and ran a study to figure out if time feels different when people listen to pleasant or unpleasant sounds. I found that the same amount of time feels longer if you are listening to unpleasant sounds (not a shocking discovery, I know). I probably made plenty of mistakes during this early study, but the experience of exploring ways to scientifically investigate how the human mind works (along with some encouragement from a few inspiring professors) helped me realize that I wanted to pursue psychological research as a career.

Later, as a psychology grad student, I remained fascinated with the psychology of time and how so much of human mental life involves thinking about time. We use our imagination to engage both the past and the future, and we don't just do it for pleasure. Sure, we enjoy imagining the lives of people living in ancient Rome, the Wild West of America, and even other worlds in distant futures when humans are able to travel through space like they do in *Star Trek*. But our capacity for mental time travel is also functional; it helps us learn and grow. It also helps us cope with challenges and stressors we face in the present.

Turns out I was not the only psychologist fascinated by mental time travel. Thousands of miles away in England, two social psychologists who would later become my colleagues and good friends were also thinking about time but more specifically about people's sentimental feelings about their own past. Constantine Sedikides and Tim Wildschut at the University of Southampton were launching a new research project focused on developing a science of nostalgia, while my PhD advisor, Jamie Arndt, and I were developing our own nostalgia project at the University of Missouri. Once both research teams learned about each other, we decided to combine our efforts and collaborate.

Nostalgia is a ubiquitous, crucial, and rewarding aspect of the human experience.

As we would later learn, most people regularly experience nostalgia. Even those of us who study nostalgia for a living are not immune to its pull. Nostalgia is a ubiquitous, crucial, and rewarding aspect of the human experience.

## Nostalgia's Complicated Past

Based on hundreds of studies conducted over the last two decades, this book makes the case that nostalgia improves our lives. This evidence-based view of nostalgia stands in stark contrast to how scholars and medical professionals thought about nostalgia for centuries. Until our team and a few other contemporary scholars started systematically examining how nostalgia works, the generally accepted view among scholars, mental health practitioners, and other thought leaders was that nostalgia is detrimental. The view dates all the way back to when the word *nostalgia* was first coined by Johannes Hofer, a Swiss medical student, in 1688.

Hofer created the term to indicate what he believed to be a medical illness among Swiss mercenary soldiers who were serving in European wars far from home. *Nostalgia* is the combination of two Greek words: *nostos* (return to the native land) and *algos* (pain). In other words, nostalgia was originally thought of as the pain caused by the desire to return to one's native land.

Hofer proposed that nostalgia was causing these soldiers a significant amount of psychological and physical distress. These men not only complained of constantly longing for home but they also experienced sadness, anxiety, fatigue, insomnia, irregular heartbeat, loss of appetite and thirst, indigestion, fevers, and related symptoms. Some of them were so distressed that they had to be discharged from military service. Ultimately Hofer viewed this condition as a neurological disorder that was caused by “the quite continuous vibrations of animal spirits through those fibers of the middle brain in which impressed traces of ideas of the Fatherland still cling.”<sup>1</sup>

Hofer’s view of nostalgia as a disease would become shared by other physicians of the time. But there was disagreement as to what caused this ailment. One fellow doctor proposed that nostalgia was caused by “a sharp differential in atmospheric pressure causing excessive body pressurization, which in turn drove blood from the heart to the brain, thereby producing the observed affliction of sentiment,” believing this account explained why nostalgia was afflicting Swiss soldiers fighting in regions with a much lower altitude than their homeland.<sup>2</sup> Based on the idea that nostalgia was a Swiss disease, some physicians even suggested that it was caused by clanging of cowbells in the Alps, which might be responsible for trauma to the eardrum and brain.

Nostalgia would be viewed as a disease of the brain or medical illness well into the nineteenth century, but the illness wasn’t confined to the Swiss. Nostalgia was documented among British, French, and German soldiers. During the American Civil War, Union physicians reported that many Northern soldiers fighting in Southern states required treatment for this disease. Some scholars proposed that nostalgia was not a uniquely human disease and that perhaps dogs, cats, horses, and cows could come down with it as well. It’s no surprise that nostalgia would become a global illness because the homesickness that was believed to be at its core was not specific to any one group of people. But eventually the view that nostalgia was a disease started to fall out of favor as physicians failed to find any link between nostalgia and bodily processes.

It's worth noting that a few scholars challenged the mainstream view of nostalgia by observing that the longing for the past often involved positive emotions. For example, Charles Darwin, when describing people's recollections on the past, wrote, "The feelings which are called tender are difficult to analyze; they seem to be compounded of affection, joy, and especially of sympathy. These feelings are in themselves of a pleasurable nature, excepting when pity is too deep, or horror is aroused, as in hearing of a tortured man or animal."<sup>3</sup> However, for the most part, nostalgia was still viewed as a negative experience.

With the rise of psychology in the early twentieth century came a new way of framing nostalgia as a sickness, but this time a mental one. Some psychologists saw nostalgia as a form of depression and entertained ideas such as nostalgia representing stunted mental growth arising from a failure to let go of childhood, or nostalgia reflecting a subconscious desire to return to one's fetal state. In other words, nostalgia was still a problem—a problem of the mind as opposed to one of the body.

During this time, there was another change in how experts thought about nostalgia. Originally nostalgia was tied to homesickness. To suffer from nostalgia meant to be separated from one's home and long to return. But during the twentieth century, psychologists began recognizing that just as people could attach their longing for the past to a specific place—home—they could also attach it to a range of objects, people, and even abstract aspects of the past. For instance, someone can long for the days of their youth when they felt freer. This feeling might involve places (missing home), but it could also reflect missing people, hobbies, the structure (or lack of structure) of daily life, and one's previous state of mind.

At this point, nostalgia and the concept of homesickness started to become differentiated. Scholars and practitioners who were focused on the anxiety and related emotional states associated with separation from home began building a narrower area of research on homesickness. This paved the way for a broader analysis of people's more general nostalgic longing for various aspects of their past. Whereas homesickness

is clearly tied to psychological distress, nostalgia was beginning to be understood as something more emotionally complex.

Psychologists started to see that yearning for the past has a positive emotional dimension. It isn't solely about the pain of something or someone that isn't present. It's also about the pleasant feelings that come to mind when thinking about those past experiences and people. Once this deeper and more complex understanding of nostalgia as pleasure mixed with pain began to emerge, the view of nostalgia as a mental illness started to fall out of favor.

Nostalgia helps people make sense of their lives.

It was then that scholars and practitioners began to imagine the upside of nostalgia. If nostalgia was an experience that could generate positive emotions, then perhaps it had psychological value. In 1979, the sociologist Fred Davis published a book on the sociology of nostalgia in which he proposed that nostalgia helped people cope with major life changes by “encouraging an appreciative stance toward former selves; excluding unpleasant memories; reinterpreting ‘marginal, fugitive, and eccentric facets of earlier selves’ in a positive light; and establishing benchmarks of one’s biography.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, nostalgia helps people make sense of their lives. Later in the book I’ll describe research that supports the idea that nostalgia helps us create and maintain a continuous self-story.

Clinical psychologists were also beginning to entertain therapeutic benefits of nostalgia. Some proposed that older adults suffering from dementia could benefit from nostalgic reminiscence, that it might help them restore or maintain a sense of identity—a possibility that recently has gained scientific support. Nostalgia was also proposed as a resource that might help people deal with loss and trauma—another idea that is now supported with scientific research.

Even though nostalgia’s reputation was changing among psychologists and other academics, there was still little actual scholarly research on the topic, and the potential mental health benefits of nostalgia were largely speculative. To truly understand how people experience nostalgia and what it does to help or harm them, systematic scientific work was needed.



## Nostalgia in the Age of Marketing

Quantitative approaches to studying nostalgia first occurred in the field of marketing and consumer psychology. These researchers observed that throughout people's lives, they are especially attracted to products and media they consumed in their late teens and early twenties. For example, studies show that people like music that was popular in their teens and early twenties more than music that was popular before or after that time in their lives. The same goes for favorite movie stars, films, and automobile models (especially for men).

Think about your own consumer choices and habits. Do you feel that music today isn't as good as music from your youth? Do you wonder why they quit making such good movies? When you look back and have a laugh at some of the ridiculous fashion choices you made as a teen, is there a part of you that favors the styles of that time?

Even if you like new music, movies, and fashions, most people remain biased toward pop cultural trends from their youth. Modern internet streaming music and movie companies are well aware of this, which is why you can find old TV shows, movies, and music albums using these digital services.

Such research further casts doubt on the idea that nostalgia is a form of mental distress. Many people clearly have positive feelings about experiences from their youth and will spend their time and money in ways that allow them to revisit specific periods of their lives, even if they do so in ways that bring a modern touch.

In fact, several film franchises and television programs were explicitly created to serve the nostalgia market, combining nostalgia with the technological progress that improves the viewing experience. New *Star Wars* movies and shows revisit old characters but have the benefit of improved special effects, for example. Of course, they also introduce

new characters and story lines, but connecting new material to people's nostalgia for past characters and narratives is a crucial part of the recipe for big profits. Though companies such as Disney create new franchises, their overall success relies heavily on the continuation of stories and characters that hooked people decades ago.

Not to mention that a considerable amount of advertising uses nostalgia to encourage people to desire and ultimately purchase a product. And it works. Studies find that advertisements that induce nostalgia increase positive attitudes toward brands and intentions in consumers to purchase those brands. Research also finds that using nostalgia to advertise a product increases how much attention people pay to the ad as well as how favorably they view the ad and the brand being advertised. These days, retro-marketing is a huge deal.

Studies that examine how nostalgia influences consumer decision-making and how marketers use nostalgia to sell products help us better understand the role that nostalgia plays in human decision-making. They reveal that nostalgia entails emotionally pleasing qualities and motivational power. People appear to enjoy buying things that take them back to the good old days. But these studies give us little detail about what goes on inside people's minds when they experience nostalgia, and they don't answer broader questions about why people experience nostalgia in the first place or how nostalgia ultimately impacts well-being.

From the late 1600s to the late 1900s, nostalgia went from being thought of as a horrible and even life-threatening brain disease to a major source of pleasure and entertainment that has likely generated billions in revenue for companies large and small. And yet at the beginning of the twenty-first century, little was known about the psychology of nostalgia. Using the tools of modern behavioral science, psychologists were studying various dimensions of human mental life, but they weren't studying nostalgia. That would soon change. And I had the privilege of being one of the researchers pioneering this new field within psychological science.

## The Modern Science of Nostalgia

In the first two decades of this new century, the science of nostalgia has exploded. There are now hundreds of published scientific studies exploring a wide range of questions about how humans experience nostalgia and the different roles it plays in daily life. Scholars from all over the world are now conducting diverse studies about the ways nostalgia influences our lives.

Keeping in mind the history of nostalgia, it's amazing what we are now learning. Nostalgia is certainly not a disease and it's far more than just a source of entertainment. By using the gold standard of science—experiments in which research participants are randomly assigned to different treatment conditions—we've been able to answer a number

Nostalgia lifts  
our spirits  
and offers  
stability and  
guidance when  
life becomes  
chaotic and the  
future feels  
uncertain.

of key questions. What causes people to experience nostalgia? How does nostalgia impact how people feel about their current lives? Does nostalgia influence our interests, goals, and behavior? If so, in what ways? Do the effects of nostalgia differ from person to person?

In addition to experimental studies, we have now conducted rigorous survey studies observing how nostalgia naturally occurs and what psychological characteristics, life experiences, and behaviors it tends to be associated with. This has helped us answer other intriguing questions. Are some individuals naturally more nostalgic than others? Is there a nostalgic personality type? Are people more or less nostalgic at different ages? Are people more or less nostalgic when experiencing different life changes such as moving away from home, starting a new career, facing personal tragedy and loss, or experiencing major life disruptions such as a global pandemic?

Over the last two decades, we have asked thousands of people to document their nostalgic memories. This has given us a great deal of insight into the more qualitative experience of nostalgia, which has in turn helped us develop a more complete picture of what happens inside a person's mind when they take a nostalgic trip

down memory lane. These personal stories have guided a lot of my research questions on the topic.

Combining these different approaches to researching nostalgia, my colleagues and I have made a number of discoveries that cast this old emotional experience in a brand-new light. We've put nostalgia under the microscope, and what we've discovered is that nostalgia doesn't cause problems as proposed by past scholars, physicians, and psychologists. On the contrary, problems cause nostalgia.

When people are down because they feel sad, lonely, meaningless, uncertain, or even just bored, they often turn to nostalgia. Nostalgia lifts our spirits and offers stability and guidance when life becomes chaotic and the future feels uncertain. Even though nostalgia contains sentiments of loss, it ultimately makes people feel happier, more authentic and self-confident, more loved and supported, and more likely to perceive life as meaningful. In addition, nostalgia inspires action. Nostalgia starts with people self-reflecting on cherished memories, but it also drives people to look outside of themselves, help others, create, and innovate.

Though I've been researching nostalgia for a couple of decades now, I've remained excited about the topic because there is still so much to learn and so many ways to apply the knowledge we've gained to helping people improve their lives and the world we all share.

Get out a pen or pencil and a piece of paper; or use a digital device, such as a phone, tablet, or computer. Briefly jot down your reactions to the following questions: How would you define nostalgia? Do you consider yourself to be highly nostalgic, moderately nostalgic, or rarely nostalgic? Do you think the activities in which you engage in the present—from your work to your personal hobbies—are meaningfully influenced by nostalgia? Do you think nostalgia can help you pursue your current goals and make plans for the future? Finally, what is

a nostalgic memory that really stands out as special to you? Describe this memory and how it makes you feel. Then revisit these questions and this memory once you've completed reading this book.

## Summary Notes for “The New Science of Nostalgia”

- Johannes Hofer coined the term nostalgia in 1688 to describe a neurological illness in Swiss soldiers. Nostalgia was considered a disease of the brain or medical illness well into the nineteenth century.
- In the early twentieth century, psychologists began framing nostalgia as a sickness not of the body but of the mind.
- Eventually psychologists acknowledged that nostalgia had a positive emotional dimension that could generate positive emotions and help people make sense of their lives.
- The fields of marketing and consumer psychology were the first to engage in quantitative approaches to studying nostalgia, which helps explain why advertising has long employed nostalgia to get people to buy certain products.
- Hundreds of scientific studies on nostalgia reveal that nostalgia doesn't cause problems; problems cause nostalgia.
- Nostalgia improves our moods, offers stability and guidance when life gets rough, and makes us feel happier, more connected, and more inspired to action.