

More Than Just Being a Sentimental Fool: The Psychology of Nostalgia

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In the 17th and 18th centuries, nostalgia was viewed as a medical disease, complete with symptoms including weeping, irregular heartbeat and anorexia. By the 20th century, nostalgia was regarded as a psychiatric disorder, with symptoms such as insomnia, anxiety and depression and was confined to a few groups (e.g. first year boarding students and immigrants). Only recently have psychologists begun focusing on the positive and potentially therapeutic aspects of nostalgia, report University of Southampton psychologist Constantine Sedikides and his colleagues in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

Recent studies examining nostalgia have shown that it occurs in all cultures and among all age groups. Despite this wide range, there are some features that are common to the majority of nostalgic experiences. For example, nostalgic thoughts will usually feature a person we are close to, a significant event or a place important to us. In addition, we play a starring role in our nostalgic scenes, although we are generally surrounded by family and friends.

Research suggests that nostalgia can promote psychological health. Inducing nostalgia in a group of study volunteers resulted in overall positive feelings in this group, including higher self-esteem and an increase in the feeling of being loved and protected by others. Recent work has also shown that nostalgia counteracts effects of loneliness, by increasing perceptions of social support. In addition, that same study found that loneliness can trigger nostalgia.

Another important function of nostalgia may be in providing a link between our past and present selves—that is, nostalgia may provide us with a positive view of the past and this could help to give us a greater sense of continuity and meaning to our lives. The researchers surmise that nostalgia may also acquire greater significance in old age—elderly adults are especially vulnerable to social isolation and nostalgia may help them overcome feelings of loneliness.

The authors note that “nostalgia is now emerging as a fundamental human strength”. They conclude that “nostalgia is uniquely positioned to offer integrative insights across such areas of psychology as memory, emotion, the self and relationships. Nostalgia has a long past and an exciting future.”