

# Wistful thinking

We are wired to see the past through rose-tinted spectacles and there are good reasons why, finds Teal Burrell





**E**NDLESS movie remakes. Throwback Thursdays on social media. The return of baby names last in fashion a century ago. Politicians who seem to want to turn the clock back to that era. It seems the past has never been more popular than at present.

At times harmless, perhaps even mawkish, nostalgia can also be a powerful motivator of all that is good and bad in humanity. It is not a static feeling, pinned to the past, but a galvanising force, shaping the future. Nostalgia can provoke political upheaval, xenophobia and bitter tribalism, yet, as psychologists are coming to understand, it can also promote well-being, tolerance and a sense of meaningfulness in life. By better understanding its influence, we are now finding ways to harness its benefits and, just as importantly, anticipate its harms.

The word nostalgia – from the Greek *nostros*, to return home, and *algos*, meaning pain – was coined by medical student Johannes Hofer in 1688, when he described a disorder observed in homesick Swiss mercenaries stationed in Italy and France. Like many people after him, Hofer saw nostalgia as a disease whose symptoms included weeping, fainting, fever and heart palpitations. He advised treating it with laxatives or narcotics, bloodletting or – if nothing else worked – by sending the soldiers home. Later it was claimed that the unrelenting clanging of cowbells in the Alps had caused the problem by damaging the soldiers' brains.

While people's awareness of nostalgia of course predated Hofer's label, his classification of it as a disease shaped how it was thought of for more than 150 years. One 1938 paper in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* referred to "immigrant psychosis": a condition marked by a combination of homesickness, exhaustion and loneliness.

But by the second half of the 20th century, the notion of nostalgia shifted away from one of illness. And in the past 20 years, researchers have come to understand that nostalgia is not

some rare affliction, but an emotion found in all cultures. At once a mixture of happiness and longing, its bittersweet nature is unique – but universal. "All over, people have a similar conception and understanding of what nostalgia is," says Clay Routledge at North Dakota State University in Fargo. "It is something inherent in us, something that's part of our human nature."

While some of us are more prone to nostalgia than others (See "How nostalgic are you?", page 38), most of us experience it at least once a week, according to research by Tim Wildschut and colleagues at the University of



CATHERINE MACBRIDE/GETTY

**Sentimental mood: music is a potent way to evoke nostalgia**

Southampton, UK. That makes it all the more odd that we may have been getting the emotion wrong all this time. Nostalgia is an antidote to loneliness, not its cause. It springs up when we are feeling low, and in general boosts well-being. Wildschut and colleagues have found that reflecting on nostalgic events you have experienced forges bonds with other people, and enhances positive feelings and self-esteem.

When Routledge evoked "personal nostalgia" in volunteers, by having them listen to songs that had particular meaning to them, the emotion increased perceptions of purpose in life. And when volunteers were asked existential questions about the point of

it all, nostalgia ramped up. "When people feel uncertain or uncomfortable or unsure, they might use their memories as a stabilising force," says Routledge.

One theory to explain this is that nostalgia gives us a sense of continuity in life. While so much in our lives can change – jobs, where we live, relationships – nostalgia reminds us that we are the same person we were at our seventh birthday party as on our wedding day and at our retirement celebration. "It is the glue that keeps us together, gives us continuity, and we need that, ever more so, in times of change," says Krystine Batcho of Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York.

Fred Davis, a sociologist who studied nostalgia back in the good old 1970s, compared being nostalgic to applying for a bank loan. Looking back at our past is like checking our credit history: if the past was good, it suggests more of the same will follow. Indeed, other researchers have shown that reflecting on nostalgic memories boosts optimism and leaves people more inspired to pursue their goals.

In some ways, nostalgia is a by-product of how we remember. Memories are inaccurate: we routinely filter them to focus on the positive. Each time we recall something, we reactivate the memory, making it susceptible to alteration – a process called reconsolidation. So whenever we summon a memory, we might lose some nuances and add misinformation, says Julia Shaw, author of *The Memory Illusion*, who studies the fallibility of memory at London South Bank University.

Nostalgic memory is all about the emotion, not what really happened, says Batcho. "The specific details are either not accurate at all or we confabulate them," she says. We might not remember the precise details – what dress our mother wore, what time it was – but we remember the confidence she gave us on our first day of school.

This bias towards positive emotions is at the heart of theories about why we feel



nostalgia at all. Nostalgic memories tend to be of the best days: family trips, summer vacations, celebratory events. If we fixate on the negative instead, as depressed people sometimes do, "it would leave us, from an evolutionary perspective, in a worse state in terms of adapting and surviving", says Shaw.

When a group shares an airbrushed vision of the past – something known as "collective nostalgia" – it promotes a sense of belonging and strengthens in-group bonds, which may have had survival benefits in early, tribal societies. But that cohesion comes at the cost of driving discrimination towards outsiders. In an unpublished study, Wildschut has found that after Greek students heard Greek songs, boosting their collective nostalgia, they preferred Greek TV clips and food, and rated foreign products more negatively.

In a study of Dutch adults, high levels of collective nostalgia correlated with prejudice towards immigrants. "National nostalgia has the tendency to exclude people who were not part of this very happy, safe and secure past," says Anouk Smeeke, who led the study at Utrecht University in the Netherlands.

The trouble is, that carefree past "never really existed", says Smeeke. In recent months, nativist political campaigns in the UK, France and the US have all hearkened back to a fabled golden time – as epitomised by Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan – but these "good old days" had worse standards of living, higher infant mortality rates, lower life expectancies and plenty of other troubles. Holding up the ideal of a more homogeneous past also makes it easy to



Part of personal nostalgia is missing a time with less worry

scapegoat those who weren't part of it.

But nostalgia isn't behind Brexit or the rise of Trump, says Wildschut. "It's just like any other emotion, like love and hate. It can manifest itself in various forms and people can use it for different purposes."

In particular, a certain kind of individual nostalgia can also do more harm than good. Called anticipatory nostalgia, it happens when we miss the present before it has passed. People who often experience it are more prone to sadness and worry, and have a harder time enjoying the moment, Batcho has found. Ongoing research aims to find out whether

anticipatory nostalgia increases worry, or if those who are more anxious are more likely to experience it.

Getting to grips with the harms and benefits of nostalgia is the first step towards shaping its influence. Being aware that you are prone to anticipatory nostalgia can help. "Instead of indulging in it, flip it and say: 'I really should make the most of this now'," Batcho says.

Similar strategies could mitigate the harms of collective nostalgia. When two companies merge, for example, Smeeke suggests they could nip hostility in the bud by promoting group cohesion with activities involving staff from both sides.

Beyond countering harms, we can also channel nostalgia for specific benefits. As advertisers know well, evoking it is an effective selling strategy. Charities, too, should take note: one study found that there were more donations when appeals on behalf of young victims of an earthquake spoke of "restoring the past" rather than "building their future".

In recent research, Wildschut and colleagues found that thinking about an experience shared with someone from a stigmatised group, such as those with mental illness, improved attitudes towards that group. "Nostalgia can be very humanising," says Wildschut. Evoking nostalgia could even offset the social alienation that can lead some young people to radicalisation, says Routledge.

He also hopes nostalgia's benefits will lead to therapies for conditions such as depression. Reminiscence therapy, often used to treat elderly people with depression or dementia, includes a nostalgia component, but more research is needed to see whether it provides a benefit on its own. If it does, treatment could be as simple as keeping a nostalgia journal: asking people to think of happy memories and reflect on them in writing.

Whether exploited in the clinic or on the campaign trail, nostalgia won't be a thing of the past any time soon. If it now seems more common than ever, that's because there is evidence of a genuine trend. For the last 20 years, Batcho has used a scale to measure nostalgia based on people's ratings of how much they miss things from their past. Recent results suggest it is indeed on the rise, with more respondents noting that they, and people they know, are feeling nostalgic.

This makes it all the more important that we appreciate nostalgia's powerful influence – for good and bad. "There is an idea of nostalgia as this regressive, ossifying force," says Wildschut. "But it's not just sitting and musing about the past. It's a very forward-looking, motivational emotion." ■

## HOW NOSTALGIC ARE YOU?

Psychologists measure different types of nostalgia, such as collective, national and anticipatory (see main story). There's also historical nostalgia, which is longing for a past you never knew, and vicarious nostalgia, longing for someone else's past (such as your grandfather's childhood).

Most research looks at personal nostalgia: longing for elements of your own past. Since 1995, Krystine Batcho at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York, has used a "nostalgia inventory". She asks volunteers to rate from one to nine how much they miss 20 things from their youth, such as "toys", "holidays" and "having someone to depend on". The average of all 20 scores gives an individual's nostalgia rating. (You can test yourself in the online version of this story.)

The average score in Western countries is 5. The higher your nostalgia rating, the more likely you are to be emotionally intense, look

for meaning in life, seek help from others in hard times and have strong relationship and coping skills.

The lower you score, the more likely you are to see yourself as very independent, feel less connection to others and use less healthy coping skills. "Less nostalgic people tend to deal with loneliness less effectively," says Batcho. They are also more likely to deal with problems in an escapist fashion – "I'll just go to the gym and work out a lot and when I get back the problem will be better."

Despite stereotypes, Batcho has found that nostalgia tends to peak in early adulthood – and it isn't higher in women. "Men and women score about the same."

Nostalgia is a resource, she says. Whether or not you are very nostalgic, you can reap the emotion's benefits by triggering it: listen to music that has meaning to you, look at old pictures or jot down happy memories.

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