

Nostalgia

A Bittersweet Emotion that Confers Psychological Health Benefits

Constantine Sedikides and Tim Wildschut

Nostalgia is, by its very nature, bittersweet, the happiest memories laced with melancholy. It's that combination, that opposition of forces, that makes it so compelling. People, places, events, times: we miss them, and there's a pleasure in the missing and a sadness in the love.

Walk Like a Man: Coming of Age with the Music of Bruce Springstein,
Robert J. Wiersema

Positive Clinical Psychology is concerned with balancing positivity and negativity in human experience and clinical treatment (Wood & Tarrier, 2010). We are focusing in this chapter on the emotion of nostalgia, which is inherently positive and negative, and its implications for psychological health. We discuss depictions of bittersweetness or ambivalence in lay definitions of nostalgia, in narrations of nostalgic experiences, and in its affective signature. Further, we consider nostalgia's psychological health benefits: social, self-related, and existential. We conclude with a speculative link between nostalgic ambivalence and the health benefits that the emotion confers.

The Ambivalence of Nostalgia

The *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998) defines the emotion of nostalgia as “a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past” (p. 1266). This definition implies bittersweetness or ambivalence. The nostalgizer feels both good and bad.

Speculations on Nostalgic Ambivalence

Speculative quests depict nostalgia as an ambivalent emotion. Although Davis (1979) argued that nostalgia “is infused with imputations of past beauty, pleasure, joy, satisfaction, goodness, happiness, love” (p. 18), other authors (Best & Nelson, 1985; Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 1989; Hertz, 1990) maintained that it is filled with sadness, as the nostalgizer comes to the realization that the past is irrevocably lost. Although Kaplan (1987) regarded nostalgia a “warm feeling about the past ... one of joyousness, producing an air of infatuation

and a feeling of elation” (p. 465), Peters (1985) asserted that it ranges from “a fleeting sadness and yearning to an overwhelming craving that persists and profoundly interferes with the individual’s attempts to cope with his present circumstances” (p. 135). And although Chaplin (2000) claimed that nostalgia reflects appreciation and re-enjoyment of past experiences, other authors (Fodor, 1950; Socarides, 1977) added that it involves psychological pain. Nostalgia, Werman (1977) stated, is “wistful pleasure, a joy tinged with sadness” (p. 393).

The nostalgizer, then, is presumed to feel negatively for a bygone way of life, for the passing of treasured moments, and for the current absence of persons significant to them. At the same time, the nostalgizer feels positively for having had the opportunity to share defining life events with those significant others. Davis (1979) mused extensively, if not poetically, on the ambivalence entailed in yearning for an experience while conceding to its irredeemable loss.

Empirical Support for Nostalgic Ambivalence

We will capitalize on four sources of empirical support for ambivalence: lay conceptions of nostalgia, content analysis of nostalgic narratives, comparisons of experimentally-induced nostalgic and ordinary autobiographical memories, and juxtaposition of positive and negative events in nostalgic narratives.

Lay conceptions of nostalgia We (Hepper, Ritchie, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2012) examined lay conceptions of nostalgia by adopting a prototype approach, according to which nostalgia is regarded as a fuzzy category with more representative members (i.e., features) labeled as central and less representative members labeled as peripheral. Participants listed all descriptors that came to mind while thinking about nostalgia, and then two judges coded these descriptors into thirty-five features (Study 1). Another set of participants rated each feature for centrality or peripherality, that is, for level of semantic proximity to their view of nostalgia (Study 2). Central nostalgia features were positive (fond, rose-colored, and personally important recollections of childhood or relationships) and negative (missing, wanting to return to the past). Likewise, peripheral features were positive (warmth, calm, success) and negative (regret, lethargy). In both cases, though, the positive features outweighed the negative ones. We (Hepper et al., 2014) obtained similar findings in eighteen countries spanning five continents. In all, lay conceptions of nostalgia are characterized by a degree of ambivalence.

Content analysis of nostalgic narratives Ambivalence can also be studied by asking participants to narrate a nostalgic event from their lives, and then coding the narratives for the extent to which they express positive or negative emotions. As a case in point, Holak and Havlena (1998) instructed participants to describe their feelings concerning, and circumstances surrounding, three nostalgic occasions that referred to persons, events, or objects. Judges rated the ensuing descriptions on several emotions. The narratives reflected both positive (warmth, joy, elation, tenderness, gratitude) and negative (sadness, irritation, fear) emotions, although the former outnumbered the latter.

We (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006, Studies 1–2) used a similar methodology. Study 1 relied on forty-two nostalgic essays (1,000–1,500 words) published in the periodical *Nostalgia* between 1998 and 1999. Two judges rated the extent to which the essays reflected each of the twenty adjectives of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). The essays reflected both positive and negative affect, albeit more positive than negative. We established the replicability of these findings in Study 2, in which participants generated nostalgic narratives in the laboratory in response to the

prompt “Please try to think of an important part of your past (e.g., event or episode) that makes you feel *most nostalgic*.”

Comparisons of experimentally-induced nostalgic and ordinary autobiographical narratives Another approach to examining nostalgic ambivalence entails experimental manipulations of nostalgia and ratings of the produced narratives. Abeyta, Routledge, Sedikides, and Wildschut (2014) used the event reflection task (ERT) (Sedikides, Wildschut, Routledge, Arndt, Hepper, & Zhou, 2015), pioneered by Wildschut et al. (2006, Study 5), to manipulate nostalgia. Participants in the experimental condition were instructed to bring to mind “a nostalgic event in your life. Specifically, try to think of a past event that makes you feel most nostalgic. Bring this nostalgic experience to mind. Immerse yourself in the nostalgic experience. How does it make you feel?” Participants in the control condition were asked to bring to mind “an ordinary event in your life. Specifically, try to think of a past event that is ordinary. Bring this ordinary experience to mind. Immerse yourself in the ordinary experience. How does it make you feel?” In both conditions, participants contemplated briefly how the experience made them feel and then listed four keywords relevant to it. Finally, they spent a few minutes writing a narrative. Judges rated the nostalgic (relative to the ordinary) narratives as reflecting more feelings in general, and also more positive than negative feelings.

Juxtaposition of positive and negative events in nostalgic narratives Is the structure of nostalgic narratives indicative of ambivalence? Davis (1977) emphasized the juxtaposition of positive and negative affective states in nostalgic accounts. He maintained that, when nostalgic episodes comprise negative elements, these “hurts, annoyances, disappointments, and irritations ... are filtered forgivingly through an ‘it was all for the best’ attitude” (p. 418). Work by McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, and Bowman (2001) is relevant to this point. These authors articulated two narrative sequences: redemption and contamination. In a redemption sequence, the narrative progresses from affectively unpleasant stages to affectively pleasant ones. As McAdams et al. put it: “The bad is redeemed, salvaged, mitigated, or made better in light of the ensuing good” (p. 474). In a contamination sequence, the narrative follows a reverse trajectory. As McAdams et al. put it: “The good is spoiled, ruined, contaminated, or undermined by what follows it” (p. 474).

We wondered whether redemption versus classification is more typical of nostalgic narrative structure. To answer this question, Wildschut et al. (2006) subjected the stories that readers had submitted to the periodical *Nostalgia* (Study 1) and the events that participants had generated in the laboratory under a nostalgia writing prompt (Study 2) to content analyses. In both studies, nostalgic narratives manifested a predominantly redemptive (rather than contaminative) trajectory. The structure of nostalgic narratives is characterized by redemption, a pattern that Shakespeare (1996) captured sublimely in Sonnet 30 (p. 47):

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time’s waste; ...
But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restor’d and sorrows end.

The Psychological Health Benefits of Nostalgia

Based on four sources of empirical evidence (lay conceptions of nostalgia, content analysis of nostalgic narratives, comparisons of experimentally-induced nostalgic and ordinary autobiographical narratives, juxtaposition of positive and negative events in nostalgic narratives),

we have concluded that nostalgia is an ambivalent, yet predominantly positive, emotion. Below, we review research on the psychological health benefits of nostalgia. We then return to the possible implications of ambivalence for nostalgia's health benefits.

We conceptualize nostalgia as a resource that can be implemented to cope with distress. At the very least, this conceptualization requires evidence of an association between nostalgia and the fundamental approach-oriented action tendency. We have obtained such evidence (Stephan et al., 2014). Nostalgia (induced through the ERT) instigates approach motivation, as assessed by the Behavioral Activation System (BAS) subscale of the BIS/BAS Scales (Carver & White, 1994). Nostalgia is an approach-oriented emotion. Below, we engage in a more detailed discussion of nostalgia's health benefits.

Social, Self-Related, and Existential Benefits

We will consider three classes of health benefits that nostalgia bestows: social, self-related, and existential.

Social health benefits Nostalgic evocation refers to momentous events (e.g., family traditions, graduations, wedding anniversaries) or significant persons from one's past (e.g., relatives, friends, romantic partners) (Wildschut et al., 2006, Studies 1–2; Abeyta et al., 2014). Nostalgic experiences, then, are replete with social themes. In nostalgic reverie, “the mind is ‘peopled’” (Hertz, 1990, p. 195), and one reinstates symbolic connections with figures of the past who are brought to life and become part of one's present (Batcho, 1998; Wildschut, Sedikides, Routledge, Arndt, & Cordaro, 2010). It follows that nostalgizing may entail social health benefits.

We have provided empirical evidence for this proposition. Nostalgia (induced via a prototype-based manipulation, scents, or the ERT) boosts social connectedness, that is, feelings of being loved, protected, connected to loved ones, and trustful of others (Wildschut et al., 2006, Study 5; Hepper et al., 2012, Study 7; Reid, Green, Wildschut, & Sedikides, 2014); compared with corresponding control conditions. Likewise, nostalgia (induced via the ERT) fosters stronger perceptions of social support (e.g., “I can count on my friends when things go wrong,” “I can talk about my problems with my friends”) (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988) than control (Zhou, Sedikides, Wildschut, & Gao, 2008, Studies 2–3). Finally, ERT-induced nostalgia (versus control) reinforces the security of the attachment system by decreasing attachment anxiety (e.g., “I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them”) and attachment avoidance (e.g., “I am very uncomfortable with being close to romantic partners”) (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000; (Wildschut et al., 2006, Study 6).

Self-related health benefits The self occupies a prominent place in nostalgic narratives. Put differently, the self is invariably the protagonist of the event (Wildschut et al., 2006, Studies 1–2). It follows that nostalgizing may have implications for the self. We tested this idea by focusing on two classes of self-related health benefits, self-esteem and optimism.

Nostalgia augments self-esteem; that is, nostalgic participants report higher levels of self-esteem than control participants. This finding emerges regardless of whether nostalgia is induced via the ERT (Wildschut et al., 2006, Studies 5–6), by asking participants to compose stories that rely on central (versus peripheral) prototypical features (Hepper et al., 2012, Study 7), by requesting participants to listen to a nostalgic (versus control) song (Cheung, Wildschut, Sedikides, Hepper, Arndt, & Vingerhoets, 2013, Study 3), or by instructing participants to smell various scents (e.g., Chanel No. 5, apple pie, fresh-cut roses) (Reid et al., 2014). This finding also emerges regardless of whether self-esteem is assessed with validated scales (e.g., the Rosenberg [1965] Self-Esteem Scale; Wildschut et al., 2006, Study 6) or with preselected,

face-valid items (e.g., “value myself,” “feel good about myself”) (Wildschut et al., 2006, Study 5; Cheung et al., 2013; Hepper et al., 2012, Study 7).

In addition, nostalgia raises optimism. Nostalgic narratives (resulting from the ERT) contain more references to optimism than control narratives (Cheung et al., 2013, Study 1). Scent-induced nostalgia increases optimism (e.g., “optimistic about my future”) (Reid et al., 2014). Moreover, nostalgic participants report being more optimistic (e.g., “feel like the sky is the limit”) than their control counterparts (Cheung et al., 2013, Study 2). Importantly, self-esteem mediates the effect of nostalgia on optimism: nostalgia raises optimism by lifting self-esteem (Cheung et al., 2013, Study 3).

But where does self-esteem come from? Theories converge on social connectedness as a key source of self-esteem. These theories include attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2004), contingencies of self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001), sociometer (Leary, 2005), and terror management (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). On that basis, we hypothesized an extended causal sequence, according to which nostalgia nurtures social connectedness, which elevates self-esteem, which in turn raises optimism. The results were consistent with the hypothesis (Cheung et al., 2013, Study 4).

Existential health benefits As stated above, nostalgic memories pertain to momentous events or significant persons from one’s past (Wildschut et al., 2006, Studies 1–2; Abeyta et al., 2014). Such memories may serve to reassure the individual of life’s meaningfulness (Lambert, Stillman, Baumeister, Fincham, Hicks, & Graham, 2010). Nostalgia may “keep the wolf of insignificance from the door” (Bellow, 1970, p. 190) or “quiet our fears of the abyss” (Davis, 1979, p. 41). Nostalgia, then, is likely to serve as a reservoir of meaning in life. We have tested and supported the hypothesis that nostalgia amplifies perceptions of life as meaningful.

Scent-evoked nostalgia breeds meaning in life (e.g., “life has a purpose”) (Reid et al., 2014). Following the ERT, nostalgic participants regard life as more meaningful (e.g., “sense of meaning,” “sense of purpose”) than control participants (Van Tilburg, Igou, & Sedikides, 2013, Study 5). After a prototype-based induction, nostalgizers report higher meaning (e.g., “life is worth living,” “there is greater purpose to life”) than controls (Hepper et al., 2012, Study 7). Finally, a nostalgic-event condition renders life more meaningful than an ordinary-event condition or a desired-future-event condition (Routledge, Wildschut, Sedikides, Juhl, & Arndt, 2012, Experiment 1), and decreases the quest for meaning – presumably because meaning has been found – relative to a positive-past condition (Routledge et al., 2012, Experiment 2).

Given the prevalence of social themes in nostalgic narratives, it is likely that the sociality of nostalgia undergirds its existential health benefits. Social themes (e.g., family, relationship partners, friends) are key sources of meaning in life (Hicks, Schlegel, & King, 2010; Lambert et al., 2010). In addition, experimental evidence indicates that, when individuals confront existential threat, social connectedness strengthens well-being and promotes adaptive functioning (Arndt, Routledge, Greenberg, & Sheldon, 2005). In all, the literature points to social connectedness as a mechanism through which nostalgia elevates meaning. We proceeded to test this idea. In particular, we (Routledge et al., 2012, Study 2) induced nostalgia (via song lyrics), measured sociality with the Social Provisions Scale (Cutrona & Russell, 1987; sample items: “There is someone I could talk to about important decisions in my life”- “I feel part of a group of people who share my attitudes and beliefs”), and then assessed meaning with the Presence of Meaning in Life subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006; sample item: “I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful”). Sociality mediated the effect of nostalgia on meaning; that is, nostalgia cultivated meaning through its capacity to foster sociality. We replicated these findings with a song-based induction of nostalgia (Routledge et al., 2012, Study 1).

The Buffering Role of Nostalgia

Nostalgia not only grants psychological health benefits, but it may also buffer against psychological threat. We conceptualize the regulatory role of nostalgia as follows. Threat (e.g., noxious stimulus or aversive psychological state) impacts negatively on the social, self-related, or existential aspects of psychological functioning. However, threat also triggers nostalgia. In turn, nostalgia alleviates or counteracts this negative impact. Stated otherwise, the negative direct impact of the noxious stimulus or aversive state is attenuated or offset by its positive indirect impact through nostalgia.

We (Stephan et al., 2014, Study 2) tested a general version of this regulatory model in the domain of avoidance and approach motivation. First, we induced avoidance motivation (*noxious stimulus or aversive psychological state*). In the experimental condition, participants wrote down five events they wanted to avoid in the future, whereas, in the control condition, they wrote down five ordinary and likely future events. Next, we measured nostalgia. Participants filled out a state version of the Nostalgia Inventory (Batcho, 1995): they rated the extent to which they missed twenty aspects of their past (e.g., “my family house,” “my childhood toys,” “the way people were”). Lastly, we assessed approach motivation. Participants completed the BAS (Carver & White, 1994). Avoidance (versus control) motivation tended to decrease approach motivation. However, avoidance motivation also triggered nostalgia. In turn, avoidance-triggered nostalgia strengthened approach motivation. We discuss next specific ~~test~~ of the regulatory model as they pertain to nostalgia’s capacity to buffer assorted psychological threats.

Buffering against social threat We examined whether nostalgia buffers against the social threat of loneliness, a discrete emotion defined in terms of negative thoughts or feelings (e.g., pessimism, unhappiness, self-blame, depression, lack of desired relationships) (Cacioppo et al., 2006). We hypothesized that loneliness (aversive state) would decrease sociality (i.e., perceptions of social support), but also trigger nostalgia. In turn, nostalgia would combat loneliness through its social health benefits, that is, by increasing perceived social support.

We (Zhou et al., 2008, Study 2) obtained support for this hypothesis. We induced loneliness with a procedure developed by Wildschut et al. (2006, Study 4). All participants read statements drawn from the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980). However, the response options to these statements varied depending on condition. In the experimental condition (high loneliness), we rigged the response options to maximize agreement (e.g., “I *sometimes* feel isolated from others”) and, hence, engender in participants the sense of high loneliness. In the control condition (low loneliness), we rigged the response options to maximize disagreement (e.g., “I *always* feel isolated from others”) and, hence, foster the sense low loneliness. On the ostensible basis of their responses to the UCLA Loneliness Scale, participants received feedback indicating that, compared with their peers, they were either high on loneliness (experimental condition) or low on loneliness (control condition). A manipulation check confirmed that participants in the experimental condition felt lonelier than those in the control condition.

Following the successful induction of loneliness, we assessed nostalgia and social support. For nostalgia, we used the state version of the Southampton Nostalgia Scale (Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2008; Barrett, Grimm, Robins, Wildschut, Sedikides, & Janata, 2010), which comprises items referring to the proneness, frequency, and personal relevance of nostalgia. For social support, we used the state version of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (e.g., “I can count on my friends when things go wrong”) (Zimet et al., 1988). We found, as hypothesized, directionally opposite causal effects of loneliness on nostalgia and social support. Lonely participants felt socially unsupported but also nostalgic. In turn, their feelings of nostalgia combated loneliness by fostering a sense of social support.

Buffering against self-threat We asked whether nostalgia buffers the self-threat inherent to negative performance feedback (Sedikides, 2012). Nostalgia increases self-esteem and optimism (Wildschut et al., 2006, Study 5; Hepper et al., 2012, Study 7; Cheung et al., 2013), and we hypothesized that these self-related health benefits act as barricades that deflect self-threat. Our findings were consistent with this hypothesis (Vess, Arndt, Routledge, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2012, Experiment 2). We instructed participants to complete the Remote Associates Test (Mednick, 1962), an alleged assessment of analytic reasoning, and then gave them false feedback (negative versus positive). Subsequently, we induced nostalgia with the ERT. Lastly, we collected the dependent measure: Participants indicated the extent to which they attributed their test performance to their ability. Prior research shows that people respond defensively on this measure. That is, they deny that failure was due to their low ability (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999). In replication of this past research, participants were more likely to assume reduced personal responsibility (i.e., denied lack of ability) in the case of failure feedback than success feedback. However, their responses were contingent on how nostalgic they were. Nostalgic participants took more responsibility for their failure than control participants did, although the two groups did not differ in their assumed responsibility for success. Nostalgia lowered defensiveness to self threat, which implies that nostalgia fortifies the self (Sedikides, 2012).

Buffering against existential threat Being told that life is meaningless communicates threat (Becker, 1971). We wondered whether nostalgia buffers against this existential threat, and we hypothesized that it does so through its existential health benefits, that is by increasing meaningfulness. We (Routledge et al., 2011, Study 3) manipulated meaninglessness in the laboratory. In the experimental (meaning-threat) condition, participants read an essay, written allegedly by a philosophy professor at the University of Oxford, which argued that life has no meaning. An excerpt read as follows: “There are approximately 7 billion people living on this planet ... The Earth is 5 billion years old and the average human life span across the globe is 68 years. What is 68 years of one person’s rat-race compared with 5 billion years of history? We are no more significant than any other form of life in the universe.” Participants in the control condition (no meaning-threat) read an essay arguing that computers had limitations. An excerpt read as follows: “the computer never understood a word of this text. A computer does not comprehend what is stored in its ‘memory’ any more than a book in the library understands what it contains.” The essays were equal in length and rated similarly on interest, engagement, and originality. Following the manipulation of meaninglessness, we measured state nostalgia with a three-item scale (e.g., “I feel nostalgic at the moment”). Participants in the meaning-threat condition reported feeling more nostalgic than those in the control condition. Meaninglessness spontaneously evoked nostalgia.

Our regulatory model stipulates that, following threat (i.e., meaninglessness), nostalgia will surge to diffuse it. But how so? According to existential psychologists, one of the most common strategies to diffuse threat involves derogation of the message and its source (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Greenberg et al., 1990). We relied, once again, on the principle that if a psychological resource protects against threat, then strengthening this resource will lower defensiveness toward the threat (Pyszczynski et al., 2004; Sherman & Hartson, 2011). We proposed that nostalgia is a psychological resource that can protect against threat. If so, nostalgic engagement will lower defensiveness toward meaning threat. Following the ERT, we (Routledge et al., 2011, Study 4) exposed participants to the same meaningless manipulation as above (i.e., life has no meaning versus limitations of computers). Next, we assessed defensiveness through participants’ responses to items that referred to the quality of the essay (e.g., “The essay is convincing in its points”) and the competence of its author (e.g., “The author is a reliable source”). In the meaning-threat condition, nostalgic participants derogated the

essay and its author to a lesser extent than control participants. The two groups did not differ in the control condition. Thus, an infusion of nostalgia curbed the intensity of defensive responding to meaning threat.

Meaning can be conceptualized as “presence of meaning in life” or as “search for meaning in life,” but also as understanding the world in terms of basic relations between events or objects (Arndt, Landau, Vail, & Vess, 2013). Surrealist art is an example (Proulx, Heine, & Vohs, 2010). This kind of art violates accepted links between objects and events, thus imposing a threat to meaning. Surrealist art is structure-threatening in contrast to representational art, which is structure-preserving. We (Routledge et al., 2012, Study 3) used Surrealist versus representational art to manipulate meaning. In the experimental (meaning-threat) condition, we presented participants with a Surrealist painting (*The Son of Man* by René Magritte). In the control (no meaning-threat) condition, we presented them with a representational painting (*Landscape With a Double Rainbow* by John Constable). Next, we induced nostalgia with the ERT. Finally, we assessed meaning in life. Participants in the Surrealist (compared with representational) art condition reported lower meaning in life. However, nostalgia moderated this effect. In the Surrealist art condition, nostalgic participants evinced higher meaning in life than controls, whereas, in the representational art condition, the two groups did not differ in their perceptions of meaning in life. Once again, nostalgia buffered against reductions in life meaningfulness.

Buffering against well-being threat We consider the regulatory role of nostalgia in respect to two domains of well-being threat: stress and boredom.

People vary at the dispositional level in their perceptions of meaning in life. Those with meaning deficits are especially vulnerable to experiencing stress in demanding circumstances (Park & Folkman, 1997). We (Routledge et al., 2011, Study 6) hypothesized that induced nostalgia would exert a palliative influence by assuaging their stress. First, we assessed dispositional levels of meaningfulness (e.g., “My life has meaning”). Then, we manipulated nostalgia via the ERT. Subsequently, we induced stress with the Trier Social Stress Test (TSST) (Kirschbaum, Pirke, & Hellhammer, 1993). This is validated stress-induction procedure that includes the impromptu delivery of a speech. Lastly, we measured stress (e.g., “jittery,” “fearful”) immediately following the TSST. In general, and in replication of past research (Park & Folkman, 1997), participants with meaning deficits reported higher levels of stress than their counterparts. However, this finding was qualified by nostalgia. In particular, nostalgia reduced the level of stress among participants with low dispositional meaning in life, but not among those with high dispositional meaning in life. Nostalgia buffered against stress.

We asked whether nostalgia also buffers against boredom. This unpleasant state is characterized by negative affect, dissatisfaction and, importantly, lack of meaningful engagement (Van Tilburg & Igou, 2012). As such, boredom is likely to prompt a search for meaning in life. Nostalgia may come to the rescue. Our findings lent support to these notions (Van Tilburg et al., 2013). First, we showed that boredom leads to nostalgia. We induced boredom by having participants copy ten (high-boredom) versus two (low-boredom) references about concrete mixtures (Study 1), or trace a line across either nine (high-boredom) or three (low-boredom) large spirals (Studies 2–3). In both cases, participants in the high-boredom condition reported greater levels of nostalgia (e.g., “Right now, I am feeling quite nostalgic”) than those in the low-boredom condition. Next, we (Van Tilburg et al., 2013, Study 4) examined the meaning-regulation function of nostalgia. We manipulated boredom (with the reference-copying task), measured search for meaning (by asking participants if they were intended to engage in something meaningful or purposeful), and then measured nostalgia (through the retrieval and self-rating of nostalgic recollections). Boredom intensified the search for meaning and also triggered nostalgia. Further, search for meaning mediated the effect of boredom on nostalgia.

Does Ambivalence Account (Partially) for the Psychological Health Benefits of Nostalgia?

The ambivalence of nostalgia may, at least in part, be responsible for its psychological health benefits. The rationale for this proposition derives from the literature on mixed, that is, positive and negative, emotions (“taking the good with the bad”). Larsen, Hemenover, Norris, and Cacioppo (2003) took a favorable view on the experience of mixed emotions. They argued that the presence of positive emotions thwarts the influence of negative emotions in making meaning out of challenging or distressing life events, a process beneficial to well-being. If their reasoning is correct, then individuals who experience mixed emotions ought to show improved well-being over time (Zautra, Reich, Davis, Potter, & Nicolson, 2000). Empirical evidence has been consistent with this idea. For example, bereaved adults who display positive emotions during their grieving period report lower grief over time (Bonanno & Keltner, 1997). Individuals who visualize a stressful event along with their emotional responses to it manifest improved coping (e.g., greater acceptance of the event, more positive reinterpretations of it) (Rivkin & Taylor, 1999). Widows who report more positive emotions on stressful days show more successful adaptation later in life (Ong, Bergeman, Bisconti, and Wallace (2006). And the concurrent experience of positive and negative emotions among persons undergoing psychotherapy predicts higher well-being above and beyond other potential predictors (e.g., unique effects of positive and negative emotions, personality traits, the passage of time) (Adler & Hershfield, 2012). Nostalgia, with its signature affective ambivalence, may also be related to better adaptation and higher well-being in the long run.

We argued that the narrative structure of nostalgic episodes is also ambivalent. Past research has demonstrated that redemption (as opposed to contamination) is associated with well-being and improved health. For example, redemption-oriented life stories are positively associated with psychological maturity (Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005) and identity maturity (McLean & Pratt, 2006). Moreover, redemptive life stories are positively related to well-being both concurrently (Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011) and longitudinally (Tavernier & Willoughby, 2012). Further, more-improved (compared with less-improved) psychotherapy patients are particularly likely to remember their therapeutic sessions in a redemptive manner (Adler, Skalina, & McAdams, 2008). Nostalgia, given its redemptive narrative structure, may also be associated positively with these indices of psychological adjustment. Future research will do well to focus on whether nostalgic ambivalence underlies, at least partially, the emotion’s health benefits.

Coda

Nostalgia has long been considered a brain disease, a psychiatric illness, or a clinical disorder (for a review, see Sedikides, Wildschut, & Baden, 2004). Contemporary research has rehabilitated the image of nostalgia (Sedikides et al., 2015). It is now regarded a self-conscious and social emotion that is prevalent and universal. Nostalgia is a psychological resource with implications for psychological health. More relevant for the objectives of this chapter, nostalgia is an ambivalent (albeit predominantly positive) emotion, and this ambivalence may be partially responsible for nostalgia’s health benefits. Consistent with the agenda of Positive Clinical Psychology (Wood & Tarrier, 2010), nostalgia showcases how “taking the good with the bad” in human experience can be advantageous for psychological health.

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