

# Longing for the Past as a Barrier to Personal Growth

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## ABSTRACT

Longing for the past is a common human experience that can serve as a source of comfort, identity, and social connection. However, excessive attachment to nostalgic memories may hinder personal growth and the ability to adapt to present circumstances. This paper examines the psychological dimensions of nostalgia, drawing on studies in experimental psychology, and cognitive neuroscience to focus on how nostalgia can support or block personal growth. Research indicates that nostalgia can enhance emotional well-being and provide a sense of social support, yet when individuals become fixated on the past, it may distort temporal perception, reinforce rumination, and impede adaptive coping strategies. By acknowledging both the comfort and limitations of nostalgic reflection, individuals can cultivate a balanced relationship with the past that supports personal growth and future-oriented engagement.

## INTRODUCTION

The Oxford dictionary, published by Oxford University Press, defines human nature as “The general psychological characteristics, feelings, and behavioral traits of humankind, regarded as shared by all humans” (*Oxford Languages*, n.d.). Thus, human nature is inevitable, especially regarding humans naturally being inclined to fixate on the past. Longing for the past is a natural coping mechanism for many people, but its psychological roots and functions remain complex.

The emotional pull toward the past can be reflected in personal memories and experiences which are known to preserve memories and trigger nostalgic feelings. These personal memories and experiences take many forms. In particular, acts of remembrance, whether personal or collective- are deeply rooted in human nature’s longing for the past as a means of finding meaning, healing, and understanding. Although these are meaningful connections to the past, they also highlight a complex aspect of human nature: people tend to start reminiscing as a way to cope with their situations, and although this coping may be healthy, it can also become a place of emotional stagnation if we hold onto the past too tightly. Often, people tend to create a barrier when dealing with conflict and hyperfixate on specific problems. Thus, creates a mental shield which can prevent the process of moving on. Understanding this balance is essential when trying to draw the line between healthy ways of moving forward and being stuck in the past. This raises the question: To what extent does longing for the past serve as a potential barrier to personal growth and moving on?

## **METHODS**

This paper uses a qualitative review approach to examine the relationship between nostalgia and personal growth. Sources were selected from peer reviewed psychological and neuroscience journals, focusing on studies that investigate the emotional, cognitive and social effects of nostalgia. The analysis involved comparing findings across studies and examples to identify patterns in how nostalgia can both enhance emotional well being and, when excessive, can act as a barrier to personal growth. By combining psychological research with cultural insights, this paper provides a comprehensive view of how longing for the past can influence or hinder individual development.

## **HISTORY**

At the beginning of the 20th century, nostalgia was classified as a psychiatric disorder, including symptoms such as anxiety, sadness, and insomnia. Contemporary research, however, suggests that nostalgia is not inherently pathological (Allison & Green, 2020). Instead, it can enhance psychological resilience by reinforcing a sense of identity and social connectedness, demonstrating the nuanced role of longing for the past in human development. As time progressed, by the mid-20th century, psychodynamic approaches considered nostalgia as a subconscious desire to return to an earlier life stage, and it was also known as a repressive compulsive disorder (Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt & Routledge, 2008, p. 304). Further proving the argument that when people are asked to recall nostalgic memories, they feel a sense of comfort and reassurance. Although nostalgia was considered an “unhealthy preoccupation” in the past, new research contradicts this by revealing that it improves people's moods and is a sign of emotional well-being. Yearning for the past has been misunderstood or stigmatized in psychological disclosure when it is a very common thing for many people and can even act as a coping mechanism (Gebauer & Sedikides, 2010, p. 307). This is exemplified in a 2006 study conducted at the University of Southampton in England by asking participants to recall a nostalgic memory and found that this increased the sense of social support and independent cultural background. Further proving the argument that when people are asked to recall nostalgic memories, they feel a sense of comfort and reassurance (Sedikides et al., 2008, p. 306).

## **BACKGROUND**

Without a clear vision of the future, we tend to long for a time that feels safe and comforting. For many, this comes in the form of revisiting personal memories, reflecting on experiences or simply reminiscing the past. The tension between remembrance and progress arises when people become fixated on the past as those who struggle with loss, grief or mourning, often find themselves emotionally anchored to the past. This can be through how humans perceive experiences, and how it can shape one's mindset. Glickshn and Ron Avni from the Journal of Experimental Psychology suggest that the way individuals perceive time significantly affects their ability to cope with hardship. Their research shows that individuals who naturally viewed time as static, and changed their mindset in which they are actively

moving through time, were more likely to get over a hardship vs people who feel as though they are stuck in that moment. It is also suggested that those who naturally viewed time as static (i.e., ego-moving perspective) made shorter duration estimates for temporal tasks than those who viewed time in motion (i.e., time-moving perspective), suggesting that time seems to pass more quickly to people who perceive themselves moving through time. Together, these perspectives suggest that one's mindset can be a psychological strategy for coping with uncertainty but can also obscure reality and prevent personal growth.

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL LENS**

Longing for the past is often viewed through a psychological lens, seen as a mindset that is shaped by a person's perspective (Lee & Ji, 2014, p. 21). Psychoanalysts have described sentimental yearning as a pathological form of melancholy, relating it to terms like “immigrant psychosis” to describe the emotional toll when longing for an old home or place. (Gebauer, & Sedikides, 2010, p. 309) Expanding on this idea, behavioral and neural studies suggest that nostalgia is not solely internal but can be influenced by one's experiences and social environment. Specifically, loneliness can affect how individuals perceive themselves and the world, and lonely individuals are more likely to be introverted and remain isolated rather than seeking social support (Blaut, Kłosowska, & Wiecha, 2022, p. 560). Although this is true, nostalgic thoughts can be crucial for the process of grieving and can also help us overcome these hardships. It is only when a person starts to get fixated on their situation that causes these obsessions and the inability to move on. This connection is further demonstrated in a study conducted by Tim Wildschut from the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, where researchers asked the test subjects to fill out a questionnaire and told them it would address their loneliness and the participants were then misled on their levels of loneliness. It was concluded that those told that they were abandoned reported feeling more emotionally vulnerable, illustrating how mental framing and perceived isolation can significantly alter one's emotional response (Gebauer, & Sedikides, 2010, p. 32). This relates to Pierre Janet's understanding that “Healthy psychological functioning depends on the proper operation of the memory system” and when this system becomes fragmented, it distorts one's memory and future outlook. Together, these reveal how our emotional and psychological mindset are able to predict and shape how we respond to the past and see our future (Van Der Kolk, & Van Der Hart, 1991, p. 426).

## **LIMITATIONS**

In addition, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. First, much of the psychological research is drawn from limited demographics, often college students or selected participants. This makes it difficult to include findings from different ages, cultures and experiences. Which goes to say that nostalgia is a highly subjective subject; what offers comfort to one may evoke sadness in another. This makes it hard to generalize findings or draw conclusions about how longing for the past affects everyone, as people move on in different ways. Lastly personal agency is taken into account, which helps conclude that not everyone has equal ability to move on—especially those who are

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facing systematic challenges or trauma. Since nostalgia is highly subjective, not everyone will cope in the same way and have different speeds of moving forward.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research shows the dual nature of nostalgia: while it can increase a sense of social support and emotional security, it can also distort our perception of time and make us feel stuck. While many view nostalgic memories as a form of comfort and coping, they can hinder their ability to heal and move forward. Given that the research highlights both positive and negative impacts of nostalgia, it is important to consider its implications.

Grief is a crucial part of processing loss, whether a person, time, or event; grieving allows individuals to let go and reflect. However, when an individual focuses on the grieving process too much, it can shape how they experience the future. Rather than encouraging growth, it may act as a barrier to moving forward. In addition, the challenge of moving forward is also a key implication to this process, as excessive clinging to the past can help emotional support, but may also prevent people from embracing change.

Ultimately, longing for the past is a human response, and as this research shows, nostalgia creates emotional comfort and complications at the same time. Whether being a coping mechanism or hindering a barrier to growth, one's relationship with the past is complicated and multifaceted. Recognizing this tension helps us understand how to grieve the past and honor it without letting the past consume us. By acknowledging both the power and limitations of longing for the past, we can begin to learn to create a healthier relationship from the past that allows us to keep moving forward.

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