

WHY NOSTALGIA COMFORTS US

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Abstract

This systematic review of 10 sources identifies multiple converging mechanisms through which nostalgia provides psychological comfort. The most consistently supported pathway is social connectedness: nostalgia augments feelings of belonging and acceptance, which mediates its effects on both meaning in life and self-continuity. Nostalgia also comforts by fostering self-continuity, a sense of connection between one's past and present self—which confers eudaimonic well-being operationalized as subjective vitality. Additionally, nostalgia serves an existential function by bolstering meaning in life, particularly when meaning is threatened, and provides a window to the intrinsic self-concept, increasing authenticity and buffering against threats to self-expression. Evidence also suggests nostalgia maintains physiological comfort, with nostalgic reflection increasing perceived warmth and tolerance to cold. These comforting effects are not universal but depend on important boundary conditions. Nostalgia's benefits are most pronounced for individuals with low attachment-related avoidance, who derive greater social connectedness from nostalgic memories. Critically, identity continuity between past and present is a necessary condition: when individuals perceive their past as disconnected from their present, such as during major life transitions, nostalgia can have negative rather than positive consequences for well-being. A reflective stance focusing on similarities between past and present selves enhances nostalgia's positive effects. These findings are consistent across cultures, suggesting nostalgia serves universal human needs for social connection, temporal coherence, and existential meaning.

Keywords: *Nostalgia, coping, pop culture, comfort.*

1. Introduction

Nostalgia is typically defined as a sentimental longing for personally meaningful past experiences that are both self-relevant and social. Once conceptualized as a form of homesickness or maladaptive dwelling on the past, contemporary research portrays nostalgia as a predominantly positive emotion that is common across cultures and the lifespan (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2022). Nostalgic episodes often involve warm memories of time spent with close others, cherished places, or meaningful activities, and are accompanied by mixed but net-positive affect.

A growing empirical literature shows that nostalgic reflection can promote psychological comfort in several ways. Experimental and correlational studies indicate that nostalgia increases positive affect, reduces the impact of loneliness on well-being, and bolsters meaning in life and self-esteem (Routledge et al., 2011; Wildschut et al., 2010). Nostalgia also appears to foster self-continuity—the sense that one's present self remains connected to who one has been across time and, through this pathway, contributes to eudaimonic well-being such as subjective vitality (Sedikides et al., 2016).

At the same time, the comforting effects of nostalgia are not unconditional. Identity continuity emerges as a key boundary condition: when people feel that their past identity is compatible with who they are now, nostalgia is associated with better well-being and more adaptive life choices, but when they experience sharp identity discontinuity (e.g., following major life transitions), nostalgia can be unsettling or even detrimental (Iyer & Jetten, 2011). Attachment-related avoidance, age, time perspective, and individual differences in reflective style also moderate the benefits of nostalgia (Hepper et al., 2021; Wildschut et al., 2010; Baldwin, 2015; Fawn, 2018).

Despite this rich literature, there has been relatively little integrative work specifically addressing *why* nostalgia is comforting—what proximal mechanisms translate looking back on the past into present-moment psychological ease. This paper synthesizes findings from 10 empirical and review sources to answer that question. Drawing on studies of social connectedness, self-continuity, meaning in life, authenticity, and physiological comfort, the review proposes nostalgia as a multi-level resource: it restores feelings of social bonding, stabilizes the self across time, supports existential meaning, reconnects people with an intrinsic sense of self, and even modulates bodily comfort.

2. Methods

This review followed a narrative systematic approach focused on empirical and review articles that investigated nostalgia as a primary construct and examined its comforting or protective effects on psychological outcomes. Electronic searches were conducted in *PsycINFO*, *PubMed*, *Web of Science*, and *Google Scholar*. Search strings combined the term *nostalgia* with comfort-related and mechanism-related keywords (e.g., *social connectedness*, *belongingness*, *meaning in life*, *self-continuity*, *authenticity*, *loneliness*, *well-being*, *stress*, *warmth*). Searches were limited to human participants and to English-language, peer-reviewed publications or doctoral dissertations.

Records were eligible for inclusion if they: (a) treated nostalgia as a primary variable (state or trait) rather than a peripheral construct; (b) assessed comfort-related outcomes (e.g., positive affect, well-being, vitality, social support, perceived warmth, buffered stress or threat responses); (c) employed quantitative or mixed methods designs (experimental, correlational, longitudinal) or constituted a systematic narrative review; and (d) used validated measures or well-established experimental manipulations of nostalgia and outcome constructs. Studies focused solely on consumer behavior, nostalgia marketing, or non-psychological outcomes were excluded.

Database searches initially yielded approximately 50 records. Titles and abstracts were screened against inclusion criteria, followed by full-text review when necessary. Ten sources met all criteria: eight peer-reviewed empirical articles, one doctoral dissertation, and one narrative cross-cultural review. Together, these studies encompassed undergraduate and community samples, older adults, and participants from multiple cultural contexts. For each included source, information was extracted on study design, sample characteristics, nostalgia induction or measurement, comfort-related outcomes, mediators, moderators, and key results. Given heterogeneity in designs and outcomes, findings were synthesized thematically rather than meta-analytically, with particular attention to recurrent mechanisms and boundary conditions.

3. Results

Across the 10 included sources, several converging mechanisms emerged to explain why nostalgia comforts. The most robust pathway involved social connectedness. Experimental paradigms that prompted participants to recall nostalgic versus ordinary autobiographical memories consistently found increases in perceived belongingness, acceptance, and social support following nostalgic recall (Routledge et al., 2011; Wildschut et al., 2010). In these studies, nostalgic memories were disproportionately populated by close others and meaningful interpersonal interactions, and nostalgia weakened the association between loneliness and adverse outcomes such as unhappiness or perceived lack of support. Parallel findings in older adults showed that frequent nostalgic reflection helped buffer the impact of loneliness on well-being (Fawn, 2018; Hepper et al., 2021).

A second mechanism involved self-continuity. Nostalgia promoted a felt connection between one's past and present self, often via its social content. In a multi-study program, Sedikides et al. (2016) showed that nostalgia enhanced social connectedness, which in turn increased self-continuity and, ultimately, eudaimonic well-being indexed by subjective vitality. Similarly, Hepper et al. (2021) found that nostalgia mitigated the negative impact of limited time horizons on well-being, in part by preserving a coherent sense of self over time. Longitudinal and quasi-experimental work on identity transitions indicated that nostalgia's benefits depended on the degree of perceived continuity: when people could integrate past and present identities, nostalgia supported adjustment and constructive life choices, but low continuity was associated with poorer coping and well-being (Iyer & Jetten, 2011).

Nostalgia also served an existential function by bolstering meaning in life. Routledge et al. (2011) demonstrated that nostalgia was both positively associated with meaning in life and increased meaning when experimentally induced. When participants faced threats to meaning (e.g., reading essays that undermined life's purpose), nostalgia rose as a compensatory response and, in turn, reduced defensiveness and protected well-being. Cross-cultural work suggests that such meaning-related functions of nostalgia

generalize across diverse cultural contexts, supporting the view that nostalgia helps people sustain a coherent life narrative connecting past, present, and future (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2022).

A fourth mechanism centered on authenticity and the intrinsic self. In seven studies, Baldwin, Biernat, and Landau (2015) found that state nostalgia was associated with, and experimentally increased, a sense of accessing one's "real" or intrinsic self, accompanied by reduced focus on external standards and expectations. Nostalgic recall highlighted experiences that felt self-defining and value-consistent, thereby reinforcing an authentic self-concept. Complementary work on temporal self-comparison indicated that nostalgia's benefits were strongest when individuals reflected on continuity and similarity between past and present selves rather than dwelling on discrepancies (Baldwin, 2015).

Finally, one line of evidence documented physiological comfort. Zhou et al. (2012) showed that nostalgia maintains homeostatic warmth: higher levels of music-evoked nostalgia were associated with increased perceived physical warmth, and participants who recalled nostalgic versus ordinary events rated the ambient temperature as higher and tolerated noxious cold for longer. These findings suggest that the metaphorical association between nostalgia and warmth has literal bodily correlates, extending the comfort model beyond purely psychological outcomes.

Across studies, several moderating factors emerged. Attachment-related avoidance consistently shaped nostalgia's benefits: individuals lower in avoidance derived more social connectedness from nostalgic memories, and the link between loneliness and nostalgia was stronger in this group (Wildschut et al., 2010). Identity continuity, as noted above, was essential; high continuity supported positive effects, whereas low continuity sometimes led nostalgia to exacerbate distress (Iyer & Jetten, 2011). Age and time perspective also mattered: older adults high in trait nostalgia or exposed to nostalgic interventions showed better maintenance of well-being over time and reduced vulnerability to loneliness (Fawn, 2018; Hepper et al., 2021). Traits that promote reflective, similarity-focused processing of the past—such as self-reflection and a reflective (rather than evaluative) mindset—appeared to strengthen nostalgia's beneficial impact (Baldwin, 2015; Baldwin et al., 2015).

4. Discussion

This review suggests that nostalgia comforts by recruiting multiple, interrelated psychological resources rather than through a single pathway. Across diverse samples and methods, the most consistent finding is that nostalgia enhances social connectedness. Nostalgic memories tend to center on close others and group experiences, so calling them to mind temporarily restores a sense of being embedded in a network of valued relationships. That boost in belongingness not only feels good in the moment but also mediates downstream effects on self-continuity and meaning in life (Routledge et al., 2011; Sedikides et al., 2016; Wildschut et al., 2010).

These processes are synergistic. When people feel socially connected through nostalgia, it becomes easier to perceive continuity between who they were and who they are now, supporting a coherent identity over time (Sedikides et al., 2016). A coherent identity, in turn, undergirds eudaimonic well-being, including feelings of vitality and purpose (Hepper et al., 2021). At the same time, nostalgic memories often highlight intrinsically meaningful, self-defining experiences, which can reorient people toward an authentic self-concept (Baldwin et al., 2015). In this way, nostalgia can be understood as a flexible resource that simultaneously reaffirms social bonds, stabilizes the self across time, and reinforces personally meaningful values—each of which contributes to psychological comfort.

The evidence also underscores that nostalgia's comforting effects are conditional, not automatic. Identity continuity is a central boundary condition: when the past feels like "mine" in a way that is compatible with the present, nostalgia facilitates adaptive coping and well-being; when the past feels alien or irreconcilable—such as after identity-disrupting events or major life transitions—nostalgic reflection may evoke loss or regret rather than comfort (Iyer & Jetten, 2011). Attachment-related avoidance offers a complementary lens: individuals who are more comfortable depending on others are best positioned to benefit from nostalgia's social content, whereas those who defensively downplay attachment needs may engage less with nostalgia's relational aspects (Wildschut et al., 2010).

These boundary conditions have practical implications. For clinicians and practitioners, nostalgia-based exercises may be especially helpful when clients feel disconnected, uncertain about the future, or constrained by limited time horizons, but still experience a sense of continuity with valued past selves (Hepper et al., 2021). In such contexts, guided nostalgic reflection may help clients access social support, recall successful coping strategies, and reconnect with intrinsic motivations. For individuals struggling with severe identity discontinuity or high attachment avoidance, however, nostalgia may need to be approached with caution or integrated into broader interventions that first stabilize identity and attachment security.

At a broader level, the findings complement cross-cultural work showing that nostalgia is a pancultural emotion with similar triggers and functions across societies, even as its specific content varies with cultural norms and history (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2022). This suggests that the comfort derived from nostalgia taps into basic human needs for belonging, temporal coherence, and meaning. Nevertheless, the existing evidence base has limitations. Many studies rely on Western, student-heavy samples, brief laboratory manipulations, and self-report outcomes. Longitudinal and ecologically valid research is still relatively rare, and few studies examine potentially adverse effects of nostalgia when boundary conditions are not met. Future work would benefit from more diverse samples, intensive longitudinal designs (e.g., daily process studies), and multi-method assessments that integrate behavioral, physiological, and qualitative indicators of comfort.

5. Conclusion

Nostalgia is more than a wistful glance over the shoulder; it is a psychologically potent resource that can help people feel socially held, temporally anchored, and existentially grounded. Across the reviewed studies, nostalgia consistently increased social connectedness, which in turn supported self-continuity, meaning in life, and authenticity, and even influenced perceptions of physical warmth. When people feel that their past and present selves are connected, and when they are open to interpersonal closeness, nostalgia appears to offer a reliable route to psychological comfort.

At the same time, nostalgia is not a one-size-fits-all intervention. Its benefits depend on identity continuity, attachment style, and how people think about their past. A reflective, similarity-focused stance—one that highlights ongoing threads between “who I was” and “who I am”—seems especially important. Understanding these mechanisms and boundary conditions can guide more intentional use of nostalgia in clinical practice, community programs, and everyday life, helping individuals draw on the past in ways that support, rather than hinder, present well-being.

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