

A Little Nostalgia Could Make Your Relationship More Loving



Recent research suggests that engaging in nostalgia about their romantic relationship helps partners feel more connected and passionate.

BY **JILL SUTTIE** | OCTOBER 19, 2022

My husband and I just celebrated a milestone wedding anniversary. Recounting the fun we had on our wedding day—as well as some of the funny mishaps—felt like a great way to connect and amp up the romance of the evening.



Still, I can imagine friends rolling their eyes at that idea. Engaging in nostalgia may seem overly “cutesy” to some, while others might worry about it backfiring. After all, when you look back on the early days of your romance, you might feel bittersweet realizing how much has changed since those early, heady days.

But recent research suggests that feeling nostalgic about significant, past events from your relationship can actually benefit it—whether you reminisce alone or with your partner.

How nostalgia and romance interact

In one study, some participants in a romantic relationship were prompted to write about a nostalgic experience they’d had with their partner or to listen to a song that made them feel nostalgic about their relationship, while others wrote about an ordinary experience they’d had or a song they liked (as a basis of comparison).

Afterward, people reported on their overall feelings, as well as how close and committed they felt to their partner, how satisfied they were with their relationship, and (in the music group only) how much compassionate and passionate love they felt for their partner.

After comparing the groups, the researchers found that those primed to experience nostalgia felt closer, more committed, and more loving toward their partner, and were more satisfied with their overall relationship. This was true even when accounting for other emotions, like happiness, that might affect our views of others.

“Our conclusion is that experiencing nostalgia temporarily enhances perceptions of relationship quality,” says lead researcher Nicholas Evans of the University of Manitoba in Canada. “People report more closeness, commitment, and relationship satisfaction after listening to a nostalgic song or writing about nostalgia.”

To look at how this might work in everyday life, Evans and his team asked another group of participants to fill out diaries for a couple of weeks, noting every evening how much time they’d spent with their partner and whether or not they’d experienced any romantic nostalgia during the day. They also reported on how connected they felt, how optimistic they were about their relationship, and if they’d had any thoughts of leaving their partner that day.

Again, those who experienced nostalgia in everyday life felt better about their relationship, regardless of how much time they’d spent with their partner that day.

“In our daily lives, when we experience romantic nostalgia, we can experience positive perceptions of our relationship that go above and beyond just spending time with someone,” says Evans.

The limits of nostalgia

While past studies have found that feeling nostalgic brings meaning to one’s life and helps people feel more socially connected, the use of nostalgia in romantic relationships, specifically, had not been tested before. Evans believes this is an untapped resource for couples.

“Nostalgia definitely could be one of many tools to help enhance relationships,” he says.

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—Nicholas Evans, Ph.D.

I certainly agree with that finding myself. But does it matter that I’m the kind of person who already tends toward nostalgia?

Evans doesn’t know for sure. Past research suggests that a person’s age, gender, and “attachment style” (whether someone feels secure or insecure in a relationship or tends to avoid intimacy) may affect how much they reminisce and how beneficial it is.

For example, one study found that avoidant people are less likely to benefit from reminiscing, while another found that women tend to recall past relationship events better than men (though, when recalled, those memories benefit both genders).

The content of nostalgic memories could also be important, though it wasn’t explored in Evan’s study. However, he points to prior research showing that nostalgia for the past can have benefits for psychological health, even if you feel wistful or sad. As long as a relationship memory carries a redemptive narrative, showing how it led to further growth, it will probably be helpful, he says.

“Nostalgia helps us to see where our relationship has been and where it’s going,” he says. “What drives its effects is that it helps us make meaning in our relationships.”

The benefits of reminiscing together

Although Evan’s study looked at individual nostalgia (and focused mostly on young adults), others have considered how reminiscing together about relationship-defining events affects partners’ relationship quality.

For example, a recent meta-analysis (where findings from several studies were pooled together) found that married couples who reminisced tended to be more satisfied with their relationship and feel warmer and closer to their partner than those who didn't.

It's hard to say whether nostalgia leads to better relationship quality or vice versa. It's possible that people with happy relationships are more apt to spontaneously engage in nostalgic reminiscing, and people in troubled relationships aren't as likely to do so. Still, at least some studies included in the above meta-analysis were experimental, supporting a cause-and-effect relationship between nostalgia and marital satisfaction.

For those of us who are fairly happy with our partners, tapping into nostalgic feelings could lead us to feeling closer, warmer, and more satisfied with our relationship partner. That's why I like to reminisce about the past often—whether for a special anniversary or not. I feel it helps my relationship—and the research seems to bear this out.

“Nostalgia is one of many ways to enhance our relationships—on top of engaging in gratitude, being more empathic, and taking the perspective of the other in your relationship,” says Evans. “It's another tool to help relationships thrive.”

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