

IDEAS

Why does parenthood make us nostalgic?

Disruption can spark yearning for a better time — and there is no disruption quite like having a kid.

By Joe Keohane Updated February 18, 2022, 3:00 a.m.

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It occurred to me while lying on the floor of my bathroom somewhere in the spring of 2020 that I had all of a sudden become incurably nostalgic. Next to me, in the tub, was my 3-year-old daughter, enacting various shrieking conflicts and abashed reconciliations between her bath animals. Outside were ambulance sirens, howling 24 hours a day because we live in New York City, and there was a plague on. And on my mind was my own childhood — specifically, one sequence from it, playing on a loop, as it had for days: walking home from a baseball game in twilight, feeling pleasantly spent, looking forward to watching the Sox on the couch with a warm breeze coming in through the screen door of my childhood home in Quincy.

I've never been a nostalgic person. I find the sentimentalization of the past irritating, and I am positively without mercy when it comes to disposing of old things. Yet here I was, being sucked back into my childhood in a really vivid way. *What was this?* I wondered.

It came to a climax during the pandemic, but in truth my bouts of nostalgia had been going on in some form or another since we had our daughter in 2016. It was different from simple

reminiscence. All parents reminisce about their childhoods, partly because the presence of a child offers a lot of prompts and also because parents want to try to replicate what their own parents did right or steer away from the wreckage of what they did wrong.

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No, this was nostalgia, a bittersweet yearning for the past. Again, and again, and again, when times got hard, I found myself listening to music I listened to as a kid, revisiting old books, thinking about past holidays, family parties, and vacations, thinking about old friends and cousins I'd largely fallen out of touch with. It was new to me, and being so powerless against it felt vaguely shameful — evidence of softness, or childishness, or a craven need to flee the present. But it wasn't any of those things, I've since learned. It was something else. It was adaptive, therapeutic, and common. Parenting may make us nostalgic, but nostalgia can make us better parents.

An antidote to loneliness

Nostalgia is a modern phenomenon, mainly associated with loss and the passage of time. The term “nostalgia” was coined in 1688 by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer to describe symptoms afflicting Swiss mercenaries. These traveling soldiers, fighting on behalf of foreign monarchs, were experiencing crying jags, anxiety, disordered eating, sleeplessness, and above all intrusive and obsessive thoughts of home. Seeing this, Hofer combined the Greek words “nostos” (return) and “algos” (pain) to form “nostalgia.” He believed it was a physical malady caused by vibrations running through the part of the brain that memories of home cling to, like so much psychic lint.

The idea that nostalgia was in essence crippling homesickness prevailed for the next 300 years. In 1898, the psychologist Linus Ward Kline placed it in the center of a perpetual human conflict: “the migratory impulse versus love of home.” It wasn't until the 20th century that nostalgia was given a more nuanced treatment. In 1979, the American sociologist Fred Davis published a study of nostalgia that deepened our understanding of what was at play, arguing that nostalgia “always occurs in the context of present fears, discontents, anxieties, or uncertainties.”

For Davis and the social scientists who followed him, nostalgia wasn't merely a reaction to being away from your physical home. It was a reaction to stress more generally. When things are hard or don't make sense, or we're lonely, we reach back to a time when we felt less lonely, less stressed, and when the world felt simpler, and this comforts us. It's a yearning for a different, more abstract kind of home. The psychologist John Wengle [put it nicely in 1986](#): “The feeling of nostalgia is all about . . . [the desire] to return to that time when one had a place, to return to that place where one belonged, to return to that place where one belonged in time. Home is where one psychologically begins and where one needs to return, even only rarely and then in memory, for psychological refueling.”

Over the last decade and a half or so, the research into nostalgia has advanced in a decidedly [optimistic direction](#). Today, [a growing number of psychologists](#) see nostalgia not as an affliction but as a critical psychological resource, a source of strength and resilience, a psychological mechanism that allows people to reach back into the rosier past and draw out some comfort or companionship, or restore a sense of order.

“Regarded throughout centuries as a psychological ailment, nostalgia is now emerging as a fundamental human strength,” writes Tim Wildschut, a psychologist at the University of Southampton, in the United Kingdom. He runs [an influential research group](#) on the subject with his colleague Constantine Sedikides. Although the group hasn’t studied nostalgia in parents explicitly, Wildschut says the evidence supports the idea that parenting can make us nostalgic, because parenting is hard. “Becoming a parent is associated with discontinuities, disruptions, uncertainties, relationship stressors, and so on,” he says. “And what we find is that under these challenging circumstances, people do become nostalgic.”

That certainly captures my situation. Even garden-variety baby and toddler behavior has a way of making me wonder about the evolutionary design of a species whose offspring so compulsively torture the people they rely on to stay alive. And that was before the veritable carousel of delights that was raising a 3-year-old as a two-working-parent family in a city apartment during a pandemic. In those circumstances, it makes sense that I started having fits of nostalgia, because nostalgia, Wildschut and his colleagues have found, can help us cope.

Wildschut and Sedikides’s group did an [experiment](#) in which they had some study participants listen to a cheerful song and another group listen to a nostalgic one. The nostalgic group reported feeling sadder than the other group, but they also reported feeling a deeper sense of meaning in life, higher self-esteem, and more connectedness.

That connectedness part is important. If you’re lonely — and parenting can be lonely, especially in the early months, and especially during a pandemic — thinking about absent loved ones can give you a heightened sense of belonging and social support. Though nostalgia is usually experienced in solitude, it is in a curious way a social activity. “When you bring to mind nostalgic memories, it features the self, but it features the self in a social context,” Wildschut says. “So you’re surrounded by parents, or you’re surrounded by siblings, or grandparents, or friends from school. For a moment, it’s as if you’re in the presence of these people. You simulate their presence, and you feel closer and more connected, and you’re reminded of what matters in life and what makes life meaningful.”

Wildschut and Sedikides’s group conducted [a study during the pandemic](#) linking nostalgia and loneliness. They found that feelings of loneliness did indeed lead to feelings of nostalgia, which in turn led to a boost in happiness. It was like a system rebalancing itself, and it worked so well that the researchers went so far as to pronounce nostalgia an “antidote to loneliness.”

Parenting also involves a great deal of cluelessness — of stumbling around in the figurative or actual dark trying to figure out what the hell to do with this thing that won’t stop screaming, or nursing, or accidentally wounding itself with its weird little claws. In this instance, reminiscing about happy or formative moments can function as a “teaching form,” Wildschut says. “The

future is amorphous and unpredictable, but we can structure it by reaching into the past and using that as a template for what the future could look like, or what we want it to look like.”

Most interesting to me, though, is what nostalgia does for our sense of who we are. There’s a term in psychology: “self-continuity.” It’s the belief that our life stories are linear and coherent and our selves are stable. That this is frequently a delusion doesn’t matter. We seem to have a psychological need for it, perhaps as a bulwark against the chaos of the world.

Psychologist Susan Bluck at the University of Florida is a leading scholar on autobiographical memory. She tells me that having a stable sense of self has been found to be related to indicators of long-term well-being such as lower levels of neuroticism and higher levels of self-esteem, lower levels of depression, and enhanced sense of authenticity. And “one central way that we maintain self-continuity is by looking back at our past and thinking about ways in which we’ve remained the same, even across a variety of different life situations.”

As many first-time parents have discovered, becoming a parent can be hugely disruptive to your sense of who you are, what you do, and what your place is in the world. I felt that way, and many parents I’ve spoken to over the years have felt that way: that your past self and present self have been severed from each other. For a normal transition like parenthood — as opposed to, say, severe trauma — “there can be a loosened sense of self, or a sense that the life story is not as coherent as you felt it was before,” Bluck says. And that can prompt us to look back to try to mend the rupture. “When we experience nostalgia in that sort of situation, it might be a signal that we are really trying hard to create continuity again.” In other words, Bluck says, “we are searching around in the past for things that will make us feel whole again.”

Wildschut and Sedikides’s group has also conducted [experiments](#) that demonstrated the link between nostalgia and self-continuity. For these, some participants were prompted to reflect on an episode from their past that made them feel nostalgic and others were asked to think about a more ordinary episode. They were then given a survey to establish how connected they felt to their past and to who they were in their past, and the degree to which they felt a sense of continuity in their personalities. The participants in the nostalgia group felt a significantly greater sense of self-continuity than the others.

Beware rose-colored glasses

Most people, in time, are able to incorporate those disruptions — a birth, a layoff, a breakup — into their own personal narratives, categorizing them as opportunities for growth, or as challenges bested. But some disruptions are so extreme that the break between past and present cannot be reconciled. Nostalgia among refugees, for example, can take on a darker character than nostalgia among, say, new parents.

Alexander Zinchenko, a psychologist in San Francisco, spent years studying nostalgia in Russian émigrés (he’s one himself). He found that the revisitation of the past among some of his patients became so extreme and obsessive that it led to psychosis and made it virtually impossible for them to function in the present. “They, and I after them,” Zinchenko [recalled in a 2011 paper](#), “were quite surprised to find out that nostalgia can be experienced not only as that benevolent,

bittersweet Proustian longing for the time past but also as malignant and disruptive of one's well-being. . . . Nostalgia in these conditions serves to: re-establish connection with the lost; reject the novelty of the world; [and] prevent new knowledge about oneself." Another Russian émigré, Vladimir Nabokov, took a similar view, likening this sort of nostalgia to "a fatal tumor on the soul."

Nostalgia can also present some difficulties short of full-on psychosis, says Michael Addis, a psychologist at Clark University and a parent himself. "One thing I would caution about is that putting on rose-colored glasses about the past can make you less tolerant of the current," he says. "If you're sitting there with your kid crying, and you're feeling like *When is this ever going to change?*, and you start looking back and thinking *Things were so perfect then, and why can't it be like that now?* then you can end up just adding stress to your situation."

Still, a growing body of evidence tells us, nostalgia helps keep us sane and balanced and helps us cope with the shifting demands of an ever-changing world. "It has a regulatory function," says Wildschut. "It serves to counteract those uncertainties, those disruptions, that instability, by boosting a sense of stability and connectedness and offering some reassurance that things have been OK in the past and things are rough now, but they'll be OK again in the future."

That's just what parents need when things are hard. A guide to the future, based on the past; a quick hit of resiliency when you feel outmatched or overwhelmed; a reminder that you are not alone, even at 4 a.m. when you're at wit's end, even during a pandemic, when the walls seem to be closing in; and most important, a resource for the hard times.

"We've compared it to a store, or a battery," says Wildschut. "You lay up these meaningful experiences, and then in times of need — later on, maybe decades later — you smell something, or you look at a photograph, and it gives you what you need in that moment."

"It is," he says, "a beautiful emotion."

Joe Keohane, a New York City-based writer, is the author of "[The Power of Strangers: The Benefits of Connecting in a Suspicious World](#)," and co-author of a forthcoming novel, "The Lemon."