

## 13 Nostalgia

An intriguing variant of sadness is nostalgia. The word “nostalgia” was coined in 1688 by the Swiss scholar Johannes Hofer. Hofer created the word by combining the Greek words *nostos* (“return home”) and *algia* (“pain”). The direct English equivalent, “homesickness,” is a word of even more recent vintage. “Homesickness” didn’t become widely used in the English language until about 1750, about a hundred years after Hofer coined the word “nostalgia.”

In illustrating the affliction, Hofer described the case of a man from Bern who had traveled to Basel (about 100 kilometers away) in order to study. Shortly after arriving in Basel, the man became ill—what Hofer described as a long-term sadness. Hofer noted that the man’s symptoms got continually worse, until the people around him thought that he was in danger of dying. His doctors concluded that the only option remaining was to send him back to his native town of Bern. Hofer continues the story:

Although the patient was “half dead” by this point, he was placed on a small bed and began the journey back to Bern. No sooner did the journey start than the man began “to draw breath more freely . . . [and] to show a better tranquility of mind.” As the traveller approached his hometown, “all the symptoms abated to such a great extent they really relaxed altogether, and he was restored to his whole sane self before he entered Bern.”<sup>1</sup>

Although Hofer’s term “nostalgia” took some time to catch on among the general public, it was quickly adopted within the medical profession. It wasn’t long before “nostalgia” was a common diagnosis. Until the nineteenth century, few people traveled any distance. The most likely reason to spend long periods of time away from home came in the form of conscripted soldiers and press-ganged sailors. Many recruits hadn’t traveled more than one or two villages away from home before they were forcibly drafted. For most soldiers, being in the army meant truly being away from home for the first time.

For sailors, long periods of isolation took their toll. Captain James Cook's first great voyage took three years to circumnavigate the globe. The ship's naturalist, Joseph Banks, recorded in his diary how the sailors "were now pretty far gone with the longing for home which the physicians have gone so far as to esteem a disease under the name of Nostalgia." Given the primitive conditions of army and navy life, it's not surprising that the affliction was rampant.<sup>2</sup>

### An Affliction of Memory

The use of the word "nostalgia" has changed dramatically since Hofer's time.<sup>3</sup> Modern dictionary definitions emphasize the positive aspects of nostalgia: "a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations."<sup>4</sup> Although nostalgia entails a certain element of sadness, in modern usage, nostalgia also exhibits a distinctly positive element. The combination of positive and negative feelings results in a mixed emotion commonly characterized as "bittersweet." This seemingly paradoxical mixed emotional quality sets nostalgia apart from both melancholy and grief.

As in the case of melancholy and grief, nostalgia also has a pathological form, and from a modern perspective, it is this form that Hofer was describing in the case of the man from Bern. Although Hofer coined the word "nostalgia," in modern terminology, the condition he described is now deemed "homesickness." Homesickness is not merely an acute form of nostalgia. There are clinical symptoms associated with homesickness, including loss of appetite, not being able to sleep, anhedonia, apathy, sometimes fever, and obsessive thoughts of one's home.<sup>5</sup> The condition is highly stressful.

A key difference between homesickness and nostalgia is that homesickness is purely a negatively valenced state, whereas nostalgia involves a mixed (positive/negative–bittersweet) emotion. Another key difference between homesickness and nostalgia is duration. Episodes of nostalgia tend to be short-lived—typically minutes to hours. One might even encounter some object that triggers a momentary episode of nostalgia that lasts only a few seconds before quickly fading. By contrast, homesickness may last for weeks or as long as one is separated from home.

What is nostalgia? How does nostalgia differ from melancholy or grief? Does nostalgia have a purpose? What is the role of memory in nostalgia?

Is nostalgia a “universal” emotion? How does culture shape nostalgic experience? What accounts for the “bittersweet” feeling? In this chapter, I will argue that nostalgia is distinct from melancholy and grief—although all three share some physiological commonalities, and nostalgia can easily morph into melancholy or grief. I will suggest that nostalgia is evident in every culture and propose that it serves an important biological purpose. We will examine the relationship between nostalgia, autobiographical memory, and reverie. Finally, I will suggest why nostalgia is more enjoyable than either melancholy or grief.

As in our analyses of melancholy and grief, we might begin our discussion of nostalgia by considering its etiology, phenomenology, physiology, and development, as well as its behavioral, sociocultural, and possible evolutionary aspects.

An episode of nostalgia may be triggered by thoughts, external stimuli, or social situations. Internal precipitating causes include thoughts about one’s past. External precipitating causes include all kinds of stimuli: an old photograph, the smell of a childhood jacket, a piece of jewelry found in a drawer, or the sound of a particular musical work. In Marcel Proust’s famous novel *Remembrance of Things Past*, the taste of a madeleine cake dipped in tea is the starting point leading to an extended bout of nostalgia. Any personally relevant stimulus can serve to bring about a nostalgic episode.

The main phenomenological symptom of nostalgia is *reverie*—a wistful state of reflection about the past.<sup>6</sup> When experiencing nostalgia, we tend to be less attentive to the immediate events around us. Instead, we tend to be transported in time to reminisce about past people, places, objects, events, and situations. As already noted, it’s common to describe the phenomenal experience as “bittersweet.” Experimental research confirms that nostalgia involves a mixed emotional state in which feelings of sadness and pleasantness are intertwined.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to melancholy or grief, nostalgia is predominantly enjoyable; people frequently seek out the experience of nostalgia. The ratio of reported positive to negative emotions is almost four to one.<sup>8</sup>

As in the case of melancholy, the main physiological symptom of nostalgia is *anergia* or low arousal. Even when nostalgia brings a tear to one’s eye, arousal levels tend to remain low, with slow heart rate and shallow respiration. Low arousal is linked to reduced levels of epinephrine, acetylcholine, norepinephrine, and serotonin.

Behaviorally, nostalgia is associated with reduced physical activity. A relaxed or slumped posture is typical. Eyes may lose focus with the person looking at “nothing in particular.” Sighing may occur. Less commonly, one or more tears may appear.

Cognitively, nostalgia is associated with thoughts or reminiscences about the past. In fact, pleasant reflections drawn from autobiographical memory might be regarded as the principal defining feature of nostalgia. We will have much more to say about the cognitive aspects of nostalgia later in this chapter.

With regard to development, the principal change is the increasing frequency of nostalgic episodes with advancing age. An eight-year-old might experience a feeling of nostalgia when recalling experiences in a summer camp from the previous year. But generally, children don't often engage in nostalgic reverie. As a person matures into old age, the amount of time spent experiencing nostalgia increases considerably. Nostalgic reveries often focus on memories linked to a particular period of adolescent and early adult life—typically between the ages of roughly fifteen and twenty-five. This period is referred to as the *reminiscence bump*.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from changes due to age, personal circumstances also impact the propensity to engage in nostalgic reverie. Notably, well-off people are less prone to bouts of nostalgia than people whose fortunes are in decline.<sup>10</sup>

Although nostalgia is commonly experienced when alone, it is not uncommon for nostalgic experiences to be shared. In social settings, nostalgia may result in a willingness or eagerness to converse about bygone times. Shared reveries might include relaying personal histories or discussions of shared experiences of past people, places, or events.

In contrast to melancholy and grief, nostalgia can play a notable role in promoting social identity. A sense of social connection can occur for groups of any size. For example, two lovers may experience acute nostalgia from reminiscing about privately shared experiences. Or millions of people can experience nostalgia when viewing a nationally televised event.

Such feelings are commonly used as social motivators. For example, high schools and universities arrange reunion events with the explicit aim that feelings of nostalgia will foster feelings of institutional fealty or loyalty—with positive benefits for fundraising. Feelings of nostalgia have been commonly used to promote nationalist sentiments (for both good and ill).

Cultural expressions of nostalgia are common. Commercial enterprises exist specifically to cater to nostalgic reverie. Examples include “golden

oldies” radio formats and products that involve “retro” design elements intended to be evocative of some past. In many cultures, specific occasions are set aside for nostalgic reminiscing. At New Year’s Eve, the singing of “Auld Lang Syne” ostensibly encourages reflection about past friendships now lost. In some cultures, specific musical genres aim at evoking feelings of nostalgia, such as Portuguese Fado or Japanese Enka. Events like reunions and anniversaries may be planned in which feelings of nostalgia are expected to feature prominently. In general, there are more social and cultural phenomena aimed at inducing nostalgia than is the case for sadness and grief.

The concept of nostalgia does not appear to be limited to Western culture. A review of nostalgia studies by Frederick Barrett and his colleagues found that nostalgia is evident in every culture in which it has been investigated.<sup>11</sup> Working with an international team of collaborators, Erica Hepper directed a large-scale study of 1,700 participants from eighteen countries (Australia, Cameroon, Chile, China, Ethiopia, Germany, Greece, India, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Turkey, Uganda, the United Kingdom, and the United States). Hepper and her colleagues found that people across a range of cultures share strikingly similar conceptions of nostalgia. Whatever you call it, people around the world recognize the experience of reminiscing about their past, focusing on memories associated with positive emotions, yet mixed with an awareness of loss and often involving yearnings or explicit fantasies about recovering elements of that lost past.<sup>12</sup> Finally, apart from modern surveys, descriptions of recognizably nostalgic sentiments can be found in ancient classic Chinese, Indian, and Greek literatures. Nostalgia is a widely shared human experience.

### Pleasant Memories

Although people commonly claim that nostalgic reverie is enjoyable, self-reports are not always reliable, and so it’s helpful to seek independent corroborating evidence. The financial success of various nostalgia-related industries (such as golden-oldies radio) provides some evidence that people seek out and value nostalgic experiences. However, it would be reassuring to find more direct evidence of nostalgia-induced pleasure.

Such evidence can be found in a lovely series of experiments involving an international collaboration of researchers from China, England, and the Netherlands. In the crucial capstone experiment, Zhou, Wildschut, Sedikides,

Chen, and Vingerhoets made use of a well-known pain-threshold task—the cold pressor test.<sup>13</sup> Participants were instructed to recall either a nostalgic memory or a nonnostalgic memory with emotionally neutral content. Participants were then asked to keep their hands emersed in an icy water bath as long as they could stand it.

Placing your hand in cold water can be pretty unpleasant. When asked to keep your hand in the water as long as possible, the experience quickly morphs into a truly painful experience. Pain tolerance is known to be influenced by several factors, including the release of endorphins. Endorphins have a strong analgesic effect, reducing the sensation of pain. But endorphins are also pleasure molecules.<sup>14</sup> Their presence is symptomatic of the physiological machinery of pleasure.

In their experiment, Xinyue Zhou and her colleagues found that those participants who had engaged in nostalgic reflection kept their hands emersed significantly longer than those who engaged in nonnostalgic reflection.<sup>15</sup> This study offers more direct evidence of the pleasurable effects of nostalgic reverie. Apparently, simply recalling “pleasant” memories can indeed be experienced as pleasurable. For convenience, let’s coin a new term that explicitly refers to the pleasurable experience evoked through reminiscence. I propose the term *eumnesia* (yume-NEE-zee-ah). The word is formed from the Greek *eu* (meaning pleasant) and *mnesia* (meaning memory).

### Useful Reminiscing

It is possible that nostalgia is a cognitive/emotional by-product or spandrel that serves no useful function. However, as with all common behaviors, it’s appropriate to begin by entertaining the possibility that the behavior is indeed functional.<sup>16</sup> So what possible cultural or biological utility might be served by bouts of nostalgia?

Since nostalgia is intertwined with autobiographical memory, we might approach the question of function by first considering the role of memory.<sup>17</sup> A common tendency when thinking about memory is to assume that it is necessarily about the past. From a biological perspective, there is no reason for an organism simply to store information about past events. Memory systems exist, not for the purpose of preserving traces of our personal history but as a way of enhancing the effectiveness of our future behaviors. Information

about the past is retained only because it may prove useful later. From a biological perspective, memory is about the future, not the past.<sup>18</sup>

Recall yet again that emotions act as motivational amplifiers—encouraging us to behave in particular ways. If nostalgia serves some useful function, then at least some episodes of nostalgia must ultimately change future behavior. Moreover, if nostalgia has any biological purpose, then the future behaviors provoked by nostalgia must commonly lead to actions that increase the fitness of the person experiencing the nostalgic feelings.

From an evolutionary perspective, I know of no adaptive speculative accounts about nostalgia. Nevertheless, I think that a plausible evolutionary theory can be proposed. A key part of the puzzle is the observation reported in research by Krystine Batcho that nostalgia involves comparative judgments of past versus present states.<sup>19</sup> A second key is the observation by psychologists Mike Nawa and Jerome Platt that less well-off people are more prone to bouts of nostalgia.

In her book *Yesterday's Self*, Andreea Ritivoi chronicles the intense feelings of the one group of people most likely to experience extreme nostalgia—immigrants. In the heyday of U.S. immigration, 30 percent of Polish immigrants returned back to Poland, 46 percent of Greek immigrants returned to Greece, and fully 50 percent of Italian immigrants left the United States to go back to Italy.<sup>20</sup> When we give up a former life, we abandon many good things in the pursuit of something we hope will be better. The immigrant takes a considerable gamble—assuming that on balance, the good will outweigh the bad. However, things don't always work out as hoped.

One might suppose that the decision to stay or return to one's homeland is made following a rational assessment of the pluses and minuses associated with each option. However, research on decision-making suggests that emotions trump dispassionate rationality when it comes to human choice.<sup>21</sup> It is despair or wanderlust or adventure that motivates us to leave and seek our fortune elsewhere. It is nostalgia (or homesickness) that motivates us to return.

Incidentally, many feelings or emotions are linked in oppositional pairs. One feeling motivates us to behave in a particular way, and another feeling motivates us to behave in the opposite way. For example, feelings of hunger will motivate you to eat, whereas feelings of satiation will motivate you to stop eating. If we didn't experience satiation, we might continue eating well

beyond what is beneficial to our health. Similarly, feeling sleepy has the predictable consequence of encouraging us to sleep, but after eight or more hours in bed, we will find that the urge to get up and move around becomes irresistible.

My proposal is that *wanderlust* and *nostalgia* are examples of such paired or countervailing feeling states. Both feelings are functional affects that contribute to biological fitness. Feelings of wanderlust (also curiosity or despair) encourage people to traverse mountains, sail across seas, or head for the frontier. Wanderlust encourages us to try new possibilities. Humans are thought to have originated in a small region of Africa. Yet over just a few tens of thousands of years, we ended up spreading over the entire planet. We wouldn't have done that if people didn't regularly experience a strong wanderlust impulse.

Now having itchy feet can have a downside. The adventurous person who climbs over a mountain range, traverses a desert, or sails across an ocean may ultimately find nothing more than desolation. Lots of people discovered new lands that proved to be even more impoverished than the lands they left behind. The search for a better life can easily descend into a desperate struggle for basic survival. Feeling nostalgia, I propose, is the antidote to wanderlust. Feeling nostalgic (or the more pathological feeling of homesickness) encourages us to reconsider past environments, relationships, or circumstances that, if they can be recovered, are better than our current circumstances.

If my proposal is correct, we might ask how nostalgia works. It seems that positive feelings arise from recollections of past circumstances appraised as good. These past images may be juxtaposed against a present appraised as inferior with respect to the subject of the reminiscence. The effectiveness of nostalgia would seem to rely on this combination of *push* and *pull*: a negative feeling that pushes us away and a positive feeling that draws us toward. It is this push-pull partnership, I propose, that accounts for the characteristic "bittersweet" qualia commonly reported when people feel nostalgic. Pleasant memories are enjoyable in their own right. By contrast, melancholy and grief are solely "push" feelings. Melancholy and grief tell us how bad things are—without necessarily positing something good on the horizon that we might aim for. Nostalgia supplements the negative feelings with an image (drawn from memory) of how good things could be. There are undoubtedly elements of our past existence that were less than ideal, but we are nostalgic only for the good things, not the bad things.



Now it would be wrong to think that nostalgia is meant simply to bring us home. Although the word “nostalgia” was originally a literal synonym for homesickness, its modern usage is much broader and better captures the adaptive function I’ve proposed. Nostalgia can be quite selective. When in the throes of nostalgia, a person may form images of old friends, a former lover, beautiful vistas, past social occasions, a childhood home, or mom’s peach pie. As understood today, one can be nostalgic for a beloved pair of shoes. In short, nostalgia includes any sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period, place, object, or event with happy personal associations. This expanded meaning, I would propose, is more biologically appropriate.

Given the specific character of many nostalgic experiences, the nostalgic immigrant need not necessarily give up and return home. Favorite foods can be imported, the internet can deliver media in one’s native tongue, and elderly parents can be summoned to join the immigrant’s household in the new country. An enterprising individual or immigrant community can make up for many deficiencies in the new land. In each case, the feeling of nostalgia provides the critical impetus. It is the motivational amplifier that brings about changes that improve the quality of one’s life.

Of course not all of our desires can be fulfilled. Many aspects of our individual pasts can never be recovered. As a consequence, many nostalgic episodes might seem to be functionally futile; they represent ineffective efforts to help us recover something that is truly gone forever. However, even in these cases, nostalgia can lead us to recognize what is important to us and lead us toward possible surrogates that might, to some extent, replace what has been lost. People do often remarry after the death of a beloved spouse, purchase a house near their (long-gone) childhood home, or find shoes that closely resemble a no longer available treasured pair.

Notice, incidentally, that if the current circumstances are judged as superior to past circumstances, then the individual should be less likely to experience nostalgia. Indeed, as we’ve noted, well-off people are less prone to bouts of nostalgia. For most people, the relationship between past and present will be mixed: there will be elements of our past that are superior to our present and elements of our present that are superior to our past.

The feelings evoked by autobiographical memory helps us assess whether the current bargain might be improved on. A retired Danish couple enjoys winters in the Spanish Costa del Sol but miss their grandchildren in Copenhagen. In romantic relationships, the good and bad are inextricably bundled

together. A woman adores her romantic handyman husband but abhors the couch-potato slob who appears to occupy the same body. All situations involve compromises to various degrees.

Some readers might think that there is no need to posit a distinct emotion of nostalgia when cognitive reflection is all that is necessary for deciding whether to leave or stay. Emphasizing the role of cognition alone, however, fails to recognize that thoughts need to be translated into actions in order for an individual to benefit. There are many examples where someone concludes that doing *X* would be a good idea, but no action is taken because there is no compulsion to actually do *X*. Cognition is useless without recruiting some feeling state that ultimately motivates us to act. Antonio Damasio has chronicled cases where certain neurological patients have perfectly intact cognitive and analytic abilities but are unable to act to prevent onerous repercussions because flat affect makes those consequences seem irrelevant or unimportant.<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately, we are all immigrants to greater or lesser degrees. Any change in life produces a contrast between one's former life and one's current life. Changing jobs, moving to a different apartment, attending a different school—all of these sorts of changes give us a chance to appreciate improvements and lament losses. All of us have memories of a past that includes both recoverable and unrecoverable pleasures.

As so often happens with matters of the mind, our immediate subjective experiences are radically different from the long-term biological function: we live in a world of proximal feelings, not distal or ultimate motivations. Phenomenologically, nostalgia is the quintessential experience of backward time travel. We never feel so situated in the past as when we are in the throes of nostalgia. Yet from a biological perspective, nostalgia is one of the ways minds make adaptive use of memory in order to fashion a better future: nostalgia transforms memory into motivation. It leverages the past into desire, and where possible, that desire is ultimately converted into action.

If the purpose of nostalgia is to reshape future behavior, how do we explain why elderly people, approaching the end of life, spend so much time engaged in nostalgic reverie?<sup>23</sup> In the first instance, elderly people typically have more time on their hands than younger working people, so it shouldn't be surprising that idleness might enable more frequent episodes of nostalgia. Moreover, older people have had more life experiences, so they can draw on proportionally more memories, including many more pleasant experiences.

Certainly, the future opportunities for an older person may be dramatically constrained due to limited mobility, poor hearing or vision, or a host of other problems. But that doesn't mean that the nostalgic reveries of the elderly are necessarily nonfunctional. Anyone who has interacted with an elderly parent or grandparent knows that there are still decisions to be made that directly impact the quality of their lives. As the final horizon of life approaches, it remains essential to weigh decisions so that the quality of life is maximized. These decisions include where to live, what celebrations to attend, what possessions to retain, and many other issues. Do you choose to live in a familiar home, closer to the hospital, or closer to one of your children? Planning for the future is not merely about planning years ahead; it's also about planning what to do this afternoon. Emotions inform all of our decision-making right up to the point of death. Nostalgia helps elderly people to sort out what's truly important as the options become fewer.

This is not to suggest that all nostalgic episodes are functional in the biological sense of contributing to fitness. There are pleasures to be had from reminiscing about the past whether or not it leads to tangible improvements in our future lives. That is, eumnesia might be pursued simply for the pleasure it affords. Like the use of contraceptive technology to engage in (nonprocreative) sex, we can take advantage of the proximal positive feelings induced by nostalgia, even if the ultimate biological benefits are bypassed or circumvented.<sup>24</sup>

### Nostalgia versus Melancholy

Nostalgia and melancholy are similar in a number of ways. Both states are associated with low physiological arousal, feature a reflective mental state, and evince some degree of negative affect. Both can be reasonably described as types of sadness. This raises the question of whether nostalgia might be regarded as a bona fide emotion distinct from melancholy.

In the first instance, there are at least three important differences between nostalgia and melancholy—those of etiology, phenomenology, and socio-cultural expression. With regard to etiology, nostalgia is entirely dependent on autobiographical memory; nostalgia hinges on some sort of cognitive reflection about one's past. Melancholy and grief can also be induced by recalling sad events from one's past. However, nostalgia relies not on recalling past sad events but on recalling past pleasant events. Moreover, both

melancholy and grief are commonly evoked by immediate events with little or no involvement of autobiographical memory. The fact that nostalgia taps into past pleasant memories means that the phenomenological experience also differs significantly. Nostalgia evokes a unique subjective experience featuring a blend of positive and negative feelings—the “bittersweet” character that is a classic hallmark of nostalgia. By contrast, melancholy simply feels unpleasant.

An additional difference between nostalgia and melancholic sadness is that human cultures commonly fashion specific events, rituals, or products whose purpose is explicitly intended to evoke feelings of nostalgia. Of course, there are also cultural products intended to evoke melancholic sadness or even grief—as in documentaries whose aim is to induce righteous indignation or spur political action, and tragic arts (to be addressed in chapters 18 and 19) that paradoxically spectators find enjoyable. However, nostalgia-inducing cultural activities or products are typically quite focused on leveraging specific past (pleasant) memories. Altogether, these differences suggest that nostalgia warrants recognition as a unique affect in its own right.

Whereas melancholy exists to make the best of a bad situation, nostalgia exists to make the future more like a preferred past—or, more precisely, some preferred aspect of the past. Both melancholy and nostalgia link cognitive reflection with motivational affect. It is possible that nostalgia also taps into melancholic realism. However, I know of no pertinent research testing whether nostalgia induces more realistic thought.

Finally, we should consider the relationship between nostalgia and weeping. Nostalgic episodes sometimes lead to weeping, often simply some tearing of the eyes. As reviewed in chapter 7, weeping can arise from lots of emotions, including grief, pain, anger, joy, loyalty, piety, laughter, and so on. In the context of nostalgia, the feeling state motivating weeping may remain obscure. If the reminiscence focuses on a past tragic event (such as the death of a loved one), then the memory may offer little pleasure. The bittersweet mixture of sadness and eumnesia that characterizes nostalgia would be absent. In this circumstance, the weeping would be better understood as simple grief. However, if the weeping behavior is accompanied by positive feelings arising from eumnesia, then we might legitimately claim that the weeping is motivated by a feeling of nostalgia—yet another affective state that can be added to our long list of emotions capable of inducing weeping.

Notice, incidentally, that an observer of someone weeping in a nominally nostalgia-inducing situation would have difficulty knowing whether the weeping was due to nostalgia, grief, joy, or some other motivating affect.

## Reprise

In this chapter, I have proposed that nostalgia represents a third sadness-related emotion, distinct from melancholy and grief. Although nostalgia entails some feeling of sadness, the experience also involves positive qualities leading to a mixed “bittersweet” character. The sweet component arises from eumnesia—the pleasure to be had from recalling agreeable autobiographical memories.

Like melancholy, nostalgia features cognitive reflection or reverie. I have proposed that nostalgia commonly serves a useful adaptive purpose. By implicitly contrasting a current (inferior) circumstance with a past (superior) circumstance, nostalgia motivates us to return, recover, rekindle, or reconstruct earlier favorable circumstances. Of course there are aspects of one’s past that are entirely unrecoverable (such as the death of a loved one). The adaptive function of nostalgia is served only when it leads to objective improvements—including new friendships, replaced objects, or a substitute event—that might at least partially redress truly unrecoverable losses. Nevertheless, nostalgic reverie can sometimes morph into genuine melancholy or grief, whose adaptive benefits we have already discussed. In general, memories are enlisted as motivators that encourage future actions likely to improve a person’s lot in life.

By itself, preserving a historical record of past personal events serves no biological purpose. It is only if those memories are enlisted to change future behavior that memory can have any biological value. The biological machinery that enables the existence of long-term autobiographical memory could not have evolved if those memories didn’t influence future behaviors in positive ways. In this chapter, I have suggested that nostalgia is one of the ways by which autobiographical memory serves an adaptive role.<sup>25</sup>

In our discussion of nostalgia, we have briefly mentioned various cultural phenomena intended to induce or enhance nostalgic experiences. In the next two chapters, we expand our discussion and consider the role of culture more broadly in emotion-related displays.



This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/15262.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/15262.001.0001)

# The Science of Sadness

## A New Understanding of Emotion

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### Citation:

*The Science of Sadness: A New Understanding of Emotion*

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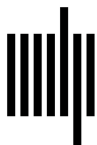
DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/15262.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262378314

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2024

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from MIT Press Direct to Open



The MIT Press

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The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Stone Serif and Stone Sans by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Huron, David Brian, author.

Title: The science of sadness : a new understanding of emotion / David Huron.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2024] |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023027997 (print) | LCCN 2023027998 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780262547772 (paperback) | ISBN 9780262378307 (epub) |

ISBN 9780262378314 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Sadness. | Emotions.

Classification: LCC BF575.S23 H87 2024 (print) | LCC BF575.S23 (ebook) |

DDC 152.4—dc23/eng/20231128

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023027997>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023027998>