

**Remembering Our First Date Brings Back Those Fuzzy Feelings:  
The Role of Romantic Nostalgia in Relationship Functioning**

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**Abstract**

People often reflect nostalgically on the momentous occasions of their relationships. Experiencing romantic nostalgia—nostalgia for shared experiences with one's current romantic partner—likely confers relationship-specific benefits. Indeed, prior research indirectly hints at this assumed outcome by looking at relationship narratives. More recent work provides direct evidence that romantic nostalgia is both positively correlated with and causally enhances relationship-specific benefits. We describe such research and discuss avenues for future investigations that address mechanisms and potential downsides of romantic nostalgia while exploring translational possibilities.

*Keywords:* Romantic nostalgia, closeness, commitment, relationship satisfaction, romantic relationships

A first date, wedding, and first kiss, are examples of momentous occasions in a couple's relationship. Experiencing nostalgia for these significant events serve as reminders of the path of a romantic relationship—how the relationship started and how the couple has written the story of their relationship—and the ethereal feelings that bind people together. Such reminders may, in turn, serve to strengthen, repair, maintain, and enhance relationship functioning. This is the proposed function of romantic nostalgia – “nostalgia specifically for past experiences shared with one's current romantic partner” [1]. Here, we review the work on romantic nostalgia and offer avenues for exploration and expansion.

Nostalgia is defined as a “sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past” [2]. The last two decades have seen the proliferation of the science of nostalgia (see Sedikides et al. [3] and this special issue for a thorough reviews of this area). Nostalgia confers numerous psychological benefits, including meaning in life [4], optimism [5], self-continuity [6], self-esteem [7], and social connectedness [8]. Overall, while nostalgia's longing component can make the feeling bittersweet [9], it is predominantly a positive emotion [10].

Most research on nostalgia has focused on what we might call “general personal” nostalgia. That is, researchers induce nostalgia, but with no specific topical target for the nostalgia in mind. Even in the case of general personal nostalgia, though, findings consistently indicate that nostalgia increases connection to significant others [8], so much so that nostalgic recollections regularly involve close loved ones [11, 12]. Consequently, nostalgia fosters several positive connectedness-related emotions and behaviors. For example, experiencing nostalgia buffers against loneliness [13], even during the COVID-19 pandemic [14], and in turn, motivates people to pursue close relationships [11] and feel more confident doing so [15]. Therefore, if general personal nostalgia confers these social benefits, then nostalgia for targeted experiences

that involve one's romantic partner should be especially conducive of benefits for that romantic relationship. Prior work supports this premise indirectly, while more recent work has begun to address this premise directly.

Nostalgic memories are often self-defining [16]. That is, they represent a key event from one's life narrative [17]. This should also be true for romantic nostalgia. Indeed, prior work looking at relationship-defining memories—monumental memories that tie together the story of one's romantic relationship [18]—hint towards the beneficial role of romantic nostalgia. For example, research suggests that relationship-defining memories, compared to ordinary memories, confer relationship-specific benefits, such as intimacy, commitment, and satisfaction [18-20]. Much like nostalgia, these relationship-defining memories are not always positive. Instead, they provide meaning to the relationship by reminding the reminiscer of the developmental course of their relationship [21]. In sum, recalling relationship-defining memories is beneficial.

Additional work has focused on how stories of one's relationships impact their perceptions of relationship quality. Dunlop [22], for example, found that people who perceive and tell the story of their relationships as a coherent narrative have higher relationship satisfaction. Moreover, people who enjoy sharing stories of their relationships with their romantic partners score higher on satisfaction, intimacy, and commitment [23]. Again, albeit indirectly, these findings point a finger at nostalgic-like experiences influencing important relationship outcomes. Overall, however, this work stops short of addressing romantic nostalgia as a key emotional experience that drives these romantic benefits.

More directly, Mallory et al. [24] investigated romantic nostalgia, which they conceptualized as the longing or missingness of a romantic past. Here, they created a measure of romantic nostalgia and found that it was positively correlated with relationship satisfaction.

However, in a follow-up longitudinal study, they reported mixed results. Romantic nostalgia appeared to have a negative relationship with relationship satisfaction. Yet, the mixed results might be due to their operationalization of romantic nostalgia. Their measure focused on the “longing” or “missingness” parts of nostalgia, rather than the wistful affection. Rather than encompassing all components of the nostalgia experience, this instrument measured something akin to loss or deterioration in the trajectory of participants’ romantic relationships.

Evans et al. [1] directly investigated what we define as romantic nostalgia: “nostalgia specifically for past experiences shared with one’s current romantic partner” [1]. First, they created a new measure of trait-like romantic nostalgia. Unlike Mallory et al. [24], this measure focused on the full concept of nostalgia, including the wistful affection portion. They designed this measure based on the well-validated Southampton Nostalgia Scale [3]. Results of a cross-sectional study testing participants in committed relationships showed that those who scored higher on romantic nostalgia reported greater closeness, satisfaction, and commitment in their romantic relationships.

As state-level nostalgia is consistently shown to enhance social connectedness among its other benefits, Evans et al. [1] tested whether this finding extends to relationship-specific benefits when recalling a relationship-specific nostalgic memory. In other words, they examined whether experiencing romantic nostalgia enhances relationship functioning. Therefore, they induced nostalgia by having participants in committed relationships write about a nostalgic (vs. ordinary) event involving their current romantic partners. Nostalgia increased relationship closeness, satisfaction, and commitment in those who recalled nostalgic events. It appears that, much like the work of Dunlop [22], telling the momentous tales of their relationships reminds people of their romantic journey, imbuing it with meaning.

If you are currently in a romantic relationship and were instructed to think of a song that is intimately tied to your relationship with your partner, this song would likely conjure up nostalgia associated with your relationship. Evans et al. [1] leveraged the nostalgic power of music [25] in a relationship context. They had participants listen to a song that was representative of their current relationships or a song that they just liked at the time. Those who listened to a song that represented their relationships felt more romantic nostalgia and greater relationship closeness, satisfaction, and optimism, than those in the liked song condition. Furthermore, those in the nostalgia group felt more compassionate and passionate love for their partner than those in the liked song condition. Listening to “our song” appears to strengthen the bonds of romantic partners.

In a final study, Evans et al. [1] asked participants in committed relationships to report their romantic nostalgia and their relationship connectedness, optimism, and intentions to break up, every day for 14 days in a daily diary study. They found that on days in which participants reported feeling more romantic nostalgia, they also felt increased relationship connectedness, optimism, and weaker intentions to break up. The daily associations remained consistent when controlling for the amount of time participants spent with their partners. These results suggest that romantic nostalgia is operative in daily life and not just in a controlled laboratory environment.

Overall, romantic nostalgia confers relationship-specific benefits. Romantic nostalgia is associated with increases in relationship satisfaction, closeness, optimism, and even increased feelings of love. It does so in trait-like terms as well as after experiencing romantic nostalgia in the moment and in daily life. These results have implications for the close-relationship literature and in applied contexts. Furthermore, they are likely to inspire a literature on the antecedents,

correlates, and outcomes of romantic nostalgia. We next turn to the promising future of romantic nostalgia.

### **The Future of Romantic Nostalgia**

One primary goal for romantic nostalgia research should be to focus on mechanisms. Of course, an obvious mechanism that links romantic nostalgia to relationship outcomes is the pleasant feeling of the nostalgia experience [10]. The warm and fuzzy feeling of nostalgia is linked to the target of the nostalgia (i.e., the relationship) and the relationship is evaluated positively, as would be predicted by feelings-as-information theory [26]. Narrative researchers would suggest that the building of a coherent narrative allows relationship partners to understand the ups, downs, development, and redemptive arcs of their relationship [23].

Additionally, it is likely that romantic nostalgia serves as reminders of the less fluent or harder to grasp aspects of relationships. That is, people might not always be aware of the core reasons that they love their partner, and efforts to think of these reasons might lead people astray, as they focus on easily verbalized reasons rather than what makes them feel attached to their partner. For example, it is easier to think of a time when one's partner did not unload the dishwasher than it is to recall the butterflies and intimacy felt during one's first kiss. Romantic nostalgia might provide reminders of those important feelings. Consistent with this possibility, nostalgic, compared to ordinary autobiographic, memories increase mental transportation, which facilitates the fluent processing of such memories [27]. If so, romantic nostalgia might make salient the core reasons why the couple is together in the first place. The results of Evans et al.'s [1] Study 4 hints to this possibility. In that study, on days in which participants were higher in romantic nostalgia, they felt more connected and optimistic about their relationship. Romantic nostalgia might serve as an antidote for the insidious daily frustrations of romantic relationships

(e.g., minor squabbles) by reminding individuals of why they love their partner in spite of these issues. These hypotheses are worthy of empirical scrutiny.

In Studies 2 and 3 of Evans et al. [1], inductions of romantic nostalgia increased relationship quality and love, indicating that romantic nostalgia might be a resource for partners who experience problems in their relationship. However, further work is needed to test such hypotheses before therapeutic application. First, researchers could manipulate relationship dissatisfaction or recruit romantic partners experiencing relationship turmoil. The participants of Evans et al. [1] were typically satisfied in their relationships. Romantic nostalgia might bolster relationship quality but not repair relationships in turmoil. Second, Evans et al. [1] solicited brief nostalgic experiences, whereas relationship therapies often require long-term experiences in the process of relationship development. Therefore, future work could take into consideration long-term romantic nostalgia interventions.

An additional issue arises from adopting romantic nostalgia in therapeutic settings: dyads. It takes both partners to repair a relationship through therapy. As such, in the case of romantic nostalgia, the partners must co-nostalgize. Prior work provided evidence that co-remembering in dyads increased relationship satisfaction [28]. Additionally, work in the therapeutic domain tested how leveraging “we-stories” told by couples can foster positive relationship-specific outcomes [29]. Given that these “we-stories” involve retelling vivid relationship-defining memories, nostalgia might play a crucial role. Hence, future work should address the role that co-nostalgizing plays in how telling the stories of relationship-defining memories can improve relationship functioning.

However, when co-nostalgizing, there are chances for things to go awry. For example, what if partners did not see the same events as nostalgic? Or, what if the partners’ nostalgic

memories for the same events contain different details? Of course, a good therapist will work through these discrepancies, but it could be that, initially, such discrepancies can signal to the partners that the other does not care or understand them. Future work should examine the outcomes of matching and mismatched nostalgic experiences.

There are likely more potential downsides of romantic nostalgia, and indeed, romantic nostalgia may not always be healthy. Mallory et al. [24] reported negative associations between romantic nostalgia and perceived relationship quality. Again, these researchers focused on the “missing” or “longing” aspect of nostalgia. It is easy to imagine, though, that when romantic nostalgia focuses on these components, it can turn into rumination, especially regarding dissolved relationships. In a recent study, self-reported nostalgia was associated with an increased tendency to keep virtual possessions (e.g., social media photos) as reminders after a breakup, which was, in turn, associated with worse post-breakup adjustment (e.g., life disruptions due to the dissolution) compared to deleting such keepsakes [30]. Moreover, a propensity to draw on nostalgic memories for sexual encounters with previous partners was linked to sexual or relationship unfulfillment with current partners [31]. This might explain why romantic partners avoid discussing previous sexual encounters with their partners [32].

In contrast to the work suggesting negative outcomes for post-breakup romantic nostalgia, Ai et al. [33] recently found that it can also have positive impacts on one’s current relationship. In three studies, they found that reflecting on nostalgic (vs. ordinary) memories of a past partner led to increases in current perceived relationship quality. Further, they found that this effect was mediated by feelings of self-growth. Additional work running parallel to the post-breakup romantic nostalgia literature has shown that having a past time perspective of a positive relationship (similar to romantic nostalgic recollections) helped to buffer against breakup distress

[34]. Therefore, post-breakup nostalgia appears to provide meaning to the past relationship and a sense of growth, which partners can use to cope with a breakup and even bring to their current relationships.

At best, then, post-breakup romantic nostalgia may add meaning to one's former relationships [33] and reduce negative post-breakup feelings [34]. At worst, post-breakup romantic nostalgia may cause problems with post-breakup adjustment (e.g., rumination, longing) [35] and may even precipitate nefarious outcomes such as unwanted pursuit behaviors (e.g., harassment or stalking) [36]. Further work should address these possibilities and individual differences that may moderate whether romantic nostalgia has positive outcomes for some and negative outcomes for others. For example, it could be that those high in anxious (compared to secure) attachment experience poor adjustment outcomes in response to romantic nostalgia. In fact, work on general personal nostalgia has shown that those who are less (vs. more) avoidantly attached report greater relationship satisfaction when experiencing nostalgia [37]. This suggests that attachment avoidance may play a similar role regarding romantic nostalgia.

## **Conclusion**

While we have pointed to some of its potential downsides, on the whole, romantic nostalgia is associated with, and engenders, positive relationship outcomes. Romantic nostalgia reminds relationship partners of the important parts of their relationship and confers relationship-focused benefits.

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