

## A STUDY OF NOSTALGIA IN OLD AGE PEOPLE: EXPLORING MEMORIES OF ADULthood

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### KEYWORDS

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims at identifying the nature of nostalgic memories experienced by the old age people in their past times, specifically young adulthood, as well as the emotions related to it. It also focuses on the impact of their past experiences on their present life as well as future life. To study the individual nostalgic experiences, an interview method was used in which a total of 10 participants (5 married couples) were interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire. The verbatims were then analysed using thematic analysis which shows their past life experiences, the best phase of their life, things that make them nostalgic, as well as people they remember from their past. The analysis of the data shows the significant past memories recalled by the participants and how things have changed with time. In addition to this, the present research also shows the differences in the experiences of males and females as well as the differences or similarities between spouses about the memories recalled from the past.

### Introduction

WHO (2024) found the global population of people aged 60 years and above to be over one billion which represented 13.5 percent of the world's total population. This number is expected to reach approximately 2.1 billion by the year 2050. The increasing number of old age people brings us to the concerns related to them including low physical activity, poor health, memory impairment, decline in cognitive functioning, inflexibility and rigidity, difficulty in time orientation as well as decline of positive affect and extraversion and increase in loneliness and external locus of control. Psychosocial theory by Erik Erikson (1963) explains the stage of old age "integrity versus despair" where previous stages of the person's life are either integrated followed by a wise attitude to life or the person falls into despair. Older people, of age 60 and above, are more likely to evaluate their abilities and emotions based on temporal comparisons than social comparisons. The past events and their importance become more realistic when people, in their old age, consider the importance of those events in their present life. These old memories of their school colleges, marriage, childbirth or professional success connect them to their past (Georgiey, 2003 as cited in Stoyanova et al, 2017).

Recollection of the past, consideration of the present, and projection on to the future are interdependent cognitive processes with a shared neurological substrate (Klein et al., 2010; as cited in Cheung et al, 2013). Old age people are often heard telling their stories to their children and grandchildren. They often become excited and enthusiastic when they reflect back into their past and relive the moment of happiness and joy. Not all memories that are remembered are good memories. Some also include the pain that people have gone through, the trauma they have faced and loss they suffered. Nostalgia is defined as "a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past" (Pearsall, 1998, p. 1266). It is a predominantly positive emotional experience that involves revisiting highly valued memories of personal and past events. It is considered to be a universal emotion which is frequently experienced by people of all ages including children, teenagers, adults and older adults, as well as people of all cultures.

The term 'Nostalgia' was first coined by Johannes Hofer in 1688 who considered it as a disease in which a person is so much occupied with the past images that he/she cannot function well in his/her life. Contrary to this theory, modern theories describe nostalgia as the memory of past places, experiences and activities that is more positive and self-centred in nature. It is the merry, rose-coloured inclination, optimistic outlook, or positive conduct toward

items, persons, or locations that were popular in the past (Holbrook & Schindler, 1991 as quoted in Stoyanova et al, 2017). In nostalgia, self plays the role of a protagonist and therefore it is found to be beneficial for self. Nostalgia is found to foster social bonds, particularly in social gatherings such as family functions, or friends get-together.

Nostalgia is found to be elicited by a variety of triggers such as music, objects, photographs, odours and tastes (cited in Yang et al., 2022). It is prevalent (i.e., experienced several times a week), universal (i.e., found in many cultures in various forms), and is observed among all ages. Nostalgia is categorized as either restorative or reflective. Restorative nostalgia involves happy memories that inspire us to go back and recreate our past, whereas reflective nostalgia makes us feel disappointed and allows us to accept our past memories. Both of them have positive outcomes. People experience restorative nostalgia when they are happy and excited. For example, recalling and reliving one's own college days when watching one's son or daughter entering college life. On the other hand, reflective nostalgia is experienced when one is facing some challenges, e.g., loss of a spouse, and thus remembers the good old days spent together, which makes them happy. Some studies have also categorised nostalgia as state-level nostalgia (also known as momentary and transient nostalgia) and trait-level nostalgia (also known as nostalgia-proneness). Momentary nostalgia is the one that is induced at a particular moment using an experiment or task. It is transient in nature and is induced in the individual for a particular period of time. On the other hand, nostalgia-proneness is the characteristic of the person to be enamoured with the past and to relate the present events to past positive memories.

Anticipatory Nostalgia is another category of nostalgia which is defined as missing the present prematurely before it has become a past. It is different from personal nostalgia as it is aligned with thinking of the future, emotional distancing, difficulty enjoying the present, and greater tendency to sadness and worry (Batcho & Shikh, 2016). On the other hand, personal nostalgia is associated with remembering the past, positive affect, and favorable reactions. Wildschut et al. (2014) stated the term 'collective nostalgia' which is defined as nostalgic reverie that is contingent upon thinking of oneself in terms of a particular social identity or as a member of a particular group and concerns events and objects related to it. This nostalgia experienced at group level is found to be associated with controversial intergroup relations like racial prejudice as found by Behler et al. (2021).

Though the past studies have stated that nostalgia is experienced by people of all age groups and across all cultures, it might have a different impact on old age, or the way it is experienced may differ in them. Therefore, this study focuses specifically on old age people, and not any other age group, to know and understand their nostalgic experiences, its nature and relationship with their emotions.

People above 60 years of age are largely considered to have lived through the majority of their lives and for that very reason, nostalgic experiences may have the most lasting effects on their mood and momentary state of affect. As individuals grow old, their relationship with memories become increasingly important, serving as the source of comfort, identity, and emotional stability. During old age when people go through many transitions in the form of retirement, physical changes, or bereavement; nostalgia is found play significant role in their lives, especially when they are psychologically threatened (Brandstadter & Greve, 1994; as cited in Hepper et al., 2021). It has also been found to foster motivation for physical activity in older adults by linking the past to present. Older adults are found to rate the songs from their youth as more emotional and remember their childhood times more positively. In addition, with enhancing psychological well-being, nostalgia also provides insights into effective care and support strategies for the elderly people.

Nostalgia has also been studied as a source of a safe environment for the old age people which provides them comfort in response to existential threat, social threat, and self-threat.

Fleury et al. (2022) stated that nostalgia contributes to behavioural, physiological, and emotional capabilities in context of threat and safety among older adults. This helps the old age people in finding a safer place, mostly for the people who live away from their families or in old age homes. Nostalgia counteracts the effects of loneliness and provides a greater sense of continuity and meaning in life. It also serves self-oriented (i.e., perceptions of a positive future), existential (i.e., perception of life as meaningful), and social (i.e., sense of social connectedness) functions (Sedikides et al., 2015). Nostalgia could also be used as an intervention for older adults for a variety of issues such as maintaining and improving memory functions and emotions (Yamagami et al., 2007); enriching social well-being (Bohlmeijer et al., 2007); and dealing with depression (Chiang et al., 2010) (as cited in Yang et al., 2022).

Therefore, it is important to understand what causes old age people to be nostalgic, what kind of memories do they remember while being nostalgic, which emotions do they experience during nostalgia, and what are the behavioral and emotional outcomes of these memories. This will not only help in understanding nostalgia in older adults, but will also show a path to know its effect on them and how nostalgia could further be analysed with other variables for healthy ageing.

## Method

### Participants

For the present study, 5 old age couples (10 participants) were interviewed using semi-structured questionnaires. All the participants were above 60 years of age and were married for more than 30 years. The responses of all the participants were audio recorded which were further transcribed and converted from Hindi to English. The order of the questions was kept flexible as per the responses of the participants. Prior consent was taken from all participants and they were assured that their responses will be kept confidential and will only be used for research purposes. They were also informed that their participation is voluntary and they can refuse to answer any question or quit the participation any time they want to.

### Data Analysis

In order to facilitate comprehension, each of the interviews was rendered into English after being translated. The data were transcribed, and verbatim reports were written for each individual participant. For the purpose of analyzing the data, thematic analysis was used which included reading and re-reading the material, developing themes, searching for connections across themes, and interpreting the content at deeper level. Narrative analysis was used when participants narrated the stories related to their past experiences. It included coding the entire process and then taking out superordinate and subordinate themes.

## Results

The demographic details of the participants are presented in Table 1. A total of 10 participants between the age 60-70 years were interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire.

**Table 1**

*Demographic details of the participants*

S.No	Pseudonyms	Spouse of	Age (in years)	Sex	Education Status
1.	Hari	Aiysha	63	Male	B.Com
2.	Aiysha	Hari	60	Female	B.A
3.	Jagdish	Neelam	68	Male	12 <sup>th</sup> pass
4.	Neelam	Jagdish	63	Female	Untutored
5.	Poonam	Aman	64	Female	12 <sup>th</sup> Pass
6.	Aman	Poonam	71	Male	10 <sup>th</sup> Pass
7.	Kuldeep	Naina	69	Male	BA
8.	Naina	Kuldeep	64	Female	12 <sup>th</sup> Pass

9.	Shivani	Narender	66	Female	10 <sup>th</sup> Pass
10.	Narender	Shivani	70	Male	Untutored

Following the transcription of the data, coding was performed, and interpretative thematic analysis and narrative analysis were used to extract the themes that emerged from the data. The coding process allowed a systematic analysis of the information, highlighting patterns and connections with the narratives. The superordinate and subordinate themes, as well as the replies of the participants to each of those themes, are presented in the tables that follow.

**Table 2**

*Themes*

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
Early adulthood memories	Significant people Happy memories Sad memories Responsibilities
Memories after marriage	Happy memories Sad memories Challenges and opportunities Responsibilities
Best phase of life	Best life Reasons Problems faced Emotions
Importance of past	Major learnings Emotions Instances when past is recalled more Significant people
Emotions related to past	Emotions Reason Instances of remembering past Things that activate past memories
Things that make nostalgic	Food Movie Music Photographs Changes over time
Significant people in past	Parents In-laws Spouse Children

Based on the above-mentioned superordinate and subordinate themes, coding of verbatim was done for analyzing the actual information provided by the participants using narrative analysis. The coding are presented in the following tables along with their interpretations.

**Table 3**  
*Early Adulthood Memories*

Theme	Coding	Percentage
Important people	Siblings	20
	Friends	40
	Parents	60
Happy	Learned to drive	20
	Fun and guidance from friends	40
	Support from elder brother	20
	Studies	40
	Being independent	20
Sad memories	Death of father or mother	60
	Getting scolded	20
Responsibilities	Taking care of siblings	40
	Working in fields	40
	Household chores	40

The table above represents the memories of the participants during their early adulthood, when they started developing their own way of thinking and being more responsible. Hari stated that:

*...I did all the work, including household chores like milking buffalo, ploughing the field, etc.*

Participants also shared their school experiences where they talked about their studies, friends, and many other related things. Aiysha stated:

*When I was in school, all my friends used to say that we'll come back after 20 years here in school and see who's where, and doing what. We'll see how the school is now.*

**Table 4**  
*Memories after marriage*

Theme	Coding	Percentage
Happy memories	Raising kids	20
	Marriage	40
	Spending time with life partner	20
	Travelling	20
	Other adventures	20
Sad memories	Leaving job due to family pressure	10
	Not being able to connect with in-laws after marriage	40
	Regret missing. Career opportunities	20
Challenges and opportunities	Bringing changes at workplace	20
	Adjusting after marriage	40
	Leaving job for family	20
	Meeting family expectations	20
Responsibilities	Raising kids	20
	Household responsibilities after marriage	20
	Buying gifts for family members	20

Adulthood was the time reported to me a mixture of sad and happy memories along with a lot of life changing challenges and opportunities. Marriage, for example, was shared as a happy

memory by some, whereas some other participants reported it to be life changing where it was difficult to adjust. Neelam stated marriage to be an adventure:

*Before marriage, I wasn't aware of where Shimla is, we just had heard about the place, but never seen it. After the wedding, I went to Shimla with my husband as his job was there, then I thought what a wonderful place I have come to as I could never think I could go to such place. I felt very happy. It was the first from the entire family to go out of station, and I was very proud of myself for that...*

Aiysha talked about her sad memory about leaving her job as she was very fond of working and being independent. She stated:

*The office days were really good. I was very independent; I had my own car. I used to earn really well and from that I used to contribute at home as well as bring lots of presents for my nieces and nephews. I made everyone in the house open their bank account from my salary. I used to fulfil everyone's wishes.*

**Table 5**

*Best phase of life*

Theme	Coding	Percentage
Best life	Mid-adulthood	40
	Old age (present time)	20
	All the phases	20
	None of the phase	20
Reason	<i>Adulthood</i>	20
	Being able to make one's own career decision	
	Financial independence	20
	<i>Old age</i>	20
	Raising grandchildren	
Problems faced	Economic hardships	20
	Career doubts	20
	Lack of opportunities	20
Emotions	Proud	20
	Happy	40
	Satisfied	40
	Blessed	20
	Loving and loved	40

While taking about the best phase of their lives, some participants reported all the phases as best with all having some or the other adventures. Kuldeep stated:

*I have enjoyed all three phases of my life. I don't think there was ever a bad time in life. All the time was good. Yes, some ups and downs kept on happening in all the three phases, but that's the part of life...*

At the same time, there were also the participants who gave entirely different aspect by stating that none of the three periods was good. All were full of some or the other problem. In this context, Jagdish stated:

*...All three phases were problematic. I don't remember if there was any good phase of my life...*



**Table 6**  
*Importance of Past*

Theme	Coding	Percentage
Major learnings	Every woman should be financially independent	20
	Past improves present	20
	Learning from past mistakes	20
	Education is the key to success	20
Emotions	Feeling of being dependent	20
	Past makes happy	60
	Proud	20
Instances when past is recalled	When I am angry or sad	20
	When I feel dependent	20
	When I see my children happy	20
Important people	In-laws	20
	Children	40
	Spouse	20

When asked whether past memories influence their present memory in any manner, many participants shared their learnings from the past experiences. Mixed emotions were reported wherein there has been progress in some participants' life and deterioration in the life of others. Females, specifically, reported starting of their career after marriage in some cases, and ending in some other. For example, Shivani stated:

*I have learned from the past memories that every woman should be independent, should be working, and should not be sitting at home. There's no concept like a housewife. Women can take care of their home and family, but along with that they should definitely work and be independent.*

Whereas the words by Narender goes like:

*The past memories make me better each day. Work done in the past always improves the present work. Whatever I do in the present, I am always able to do it better because of the past mistakes I have made.*

**Table 7**  
*Emotions related to past*

Theme	Coding	Percentage
Emotions	Happy	40
	Enjoyable	80
	Mixed emotions	20
Reason	Spouse	20
	Children	20
	People around	20
	Present and past are incomparable	20
	Emotions depends on the situation I am in	20
Outcomes	Provides positive environment	20
	Laughing at past memories	20
Instances of remembering past	While sitting with friends and relatives	40
	When I see my children doing the stuff I used to do	20
	At night, when I don't feel like sleeping	20

	Being alone at home	20
	During festivals	20
	During summer vacations	20
Things recalled most	Sacrifices made in past	20
	Other's behavior towards us	20
	Change in lifestyle	40
	Celebrations during festivals	60
Things that activate past memories	While sitting with friends and family members	40
	When being sad	40
	At night when I couldn't sleep	20
	While observing children doing their work	60

Most of the participants found past memories to be happy and enjoyable, whereas others felt mixed emotions while remembering about the past. They recall these memories in different contexts and with different people which makes them realize the importance of past.

**Table 8**

*Things that make nostalgic*

Theme	Coding	Percentage
Food	Vermicellies	40
	Dal-rice	20
	Butter and milk	40
	Ladoo made during festivals	20
	Limited food options in past	40
	Change in the quality of food over time	60
	Secretly serving food to an aunt	20
Movie or music	Reel and real life are different	20
	Family	20
Photos	Young photos were smart	20
	Ageing made us look ugly	20
	Daughter's wedding photograph	40
Changes over time	Impure food	20
	No physical work	20
	Number of food options available	20
	Change in physical appearance after being aged	20
		20

When the participants were asked this question, they all became very energetic and could recall some or the other memory of a movie, song or a photograph. Many of them recalled the food they used to eat. Aman stated:

*The food at our time was very different and good and pure. We didn't use to cook vegetables every day, whenever there was no vegetable at home, we used to have chapattis with milk. We used have buffalos and thus we had milk, butter, ghee at home itself.*

Poonam could recall a song which made her remember her brother.

*The song is "ae mere pyare vatan". It reminds me of my eldest brother. He used to sing this song after making me sit on his shoulders. So, whenever I hear or sing this song, I always miss him.*



**Table 9**

*Significant people in past*

Theme	Coding	Percentage
Parents	Have always been supportive	100
Mother	Goddess of love	20
	Never scolded	20
Father	Unconditional love and Pampering	20
Mother-in-law and father-in-law	Good nature	20
	Supportive	20
	Kind	20
Children	Give a lot of respect	20
	Show me the right path	20
	Save me from bad people	20
Spouse	Guides me	20
	Teaches me the true meaning of life	20
Friends	Intelligent and helping	20
	Reason for my success	20

People including the close family members and close friends have been important in participants' life. Naina stated:

*My parents, specifically my mother is just like goddess of love. She never scolded us. She explained everything with love.*

Similarly, Poonam stated:

*My father, my eldest brother, and most important my children and my husband..... My children show me the right path always, they make me happy and they make me aware of the surroundings, about the nature of people..... and my husband always saves me from the evil people around me. He guides me about how to deal with such people, sometimes with love, sometimes with anger.*

### **Discussion and Interpretation**

People are often found to remember their old days while living in present. This is majorly seen in old age people when they see their children and grandchildren and relate their daily life activities with their own life. Remembering past events that makes people happy, also known as nostalgia, is found to play an important role in the well-being of elderly. It brings comfortable joy by reconnecting them with their past memories of young adulthood, the time when they had maximum energy, were independent, and yet had lots of responsibilities. Reminiscing about the past evoked mixed emotions in the participants as could be seen in above examples.

Remembering past experiences helps people relieve pain, increases psychological well-being, reduces isolation, and boosts communication. Recalling past experiences gives meaning to life and works as a positive shield for the present and future (Madoglou et al., 2017). When participants recalled the sad part of their life, they also stated a happy memory related to it. For example, Aiysha stated that she regrets leaving her job and she misses being independent as she was at that time. At the same time, she also recalls the birth of her elder daughter and how life became happy again. In the above-mentioned results, some of the participants have also stated that their past plays an important part in their present as well as future, as the mistakes made in past helps us to be vigilant in the present and prepares us well for the future. Studies have also proven that nostalgia offers a sense of continuity from past to present and to future.

The positive perception about the past fosters positivity and creativity about the future (Sedikides et al., 2008).

Wildschut et al. (2006) stated four functions of nostalgia which could also be seen in the verbatim given by the participants. The first function is that nostalgia provides a source of positive energy. As one of the participants stated, nostalgia makes him feel proud and happy. When he remembers his past achievements, he gets a lot of positive energy that pushes him to work even after retirement. The second function of nostalgia is that it empowers social bonds. That means remembering past experiences with people including family, friends or any other significant people in life gives a ray of security, as well as a sense of connectedness in people. The results shown in above tables also state the importance of social bonds in the elderly adults and the important role they play in making them happy and successful. Wildschut also stated that nostalgia increases self esteem. As found in the present study, participants could recall many instances where they reposted high self- esteem such as getting a job, being able to drive, earning for family members, etc. The fourth function of nostalgia is that it makes people less vulnerable to existential threats. The present study could not find any evidence supporting this fact.

Many studies have brought up the gender differences in nostalgia. Some stated that women feel nostalgic more than men, some stated the opposite, while some others stated no gender difference in nostalgia. However, Baker and Kennedy (1994) presented that there is a difference in the content of nostalgic memories between males and females. The present study was conducted on 5 married couples to know the similarities and differences in their nostalgic experiences. This study found a difference in the content of memories recalled by the couples, i.e., the ones recalled by males and the ones recalled by females. Females rooted most of their memories that relate to family, marriage and children. They also talked about their responsibilities at home, raising kids, and doing household chores. On the other hand, the memories of males were more related to their work life, financial responsibilities, etc. This is in support of the fact that people who are now in their 60s and above faced many challenges related to their genders, like males should be the bread-earners, females should orient their life towards taking care of children and family. Regarding the content of memories recalled, studies have also shown that women are found to be more sentimental about certain objects like photographs, while males display more preference towards materialistic things like cars. In the present study females were more specific to the objects that make them nostalgic. For example, one female participant reported that she feels nostalgic whenever she listens to the song “*ae mere pyare vatan*”, it makes her recall her elder brother's memories. Also, 4 out of 5 females reported how food makes them feel nostalgic, whereas only 1 man out of 5 talked about the food that makes him nostalgic. Males, on the other hand, could not tell any specific object including picture, song, etc. which makes them nostalgic.

## Conclusion

People go through many changes in their life during their old age. As stated by Erikson, the stage of old age brings on integrity in some whereas despair in the others. People often remember good old days which make them happy, they also recall their sad memories at times which makes them feel bad about their past. The present study was conducted on 5 married couples in the age range 60-70 years to understand their nostalgic experiences during young adulthood and also to analyse gender differences in context with the memories recalled by the males and females. The study revealed that all the participants become nostalgic while remembering their past. Many of them remember the days when they had the job, the others recall their life before and after marriage, whereas some compare their childhood life with the

life of their grandchildren. Gender differences were seen as the memory of males was more structured and related to their career, whereas the memories of females were more sentimental, related to their marriage, family, and children.

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