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Feeling Blue? Try a Shot of Nostalgia

(Excerpted from Psychology Today, by Marina Krakovsky)

For some, it's the smell of a holiday turkey dinner. For others, it's a few bars from an old Everly Brothers tune that suddenly triggers a flood of sunny memories from long ago. Such reminiscences can be healthier than you think in spite of the often heard advice to "live in the moment." In fact, recent clinical studies indicate that an occasional detour down memory lane can elevate your spirits significantly.

Researchers at Loyola University in Chicago, led by psychologist Fred Bryant, have concluded that recollecting good memories for just a few minutes each day can make people more cheerful and optimistic than they were the week before and happier than if they focus exclusively on their current life situations. According to Dr. Bryant, most people spontaneously reminisce when they are alone or feeling down, which suggests that we have an internal mechanism to reach for pleasant memories as an antidote to feeling blue.

Similar, corroborative research conducted at the University of Southampton (U.K.) by psychologist Tim Wildschut and colleagues discovered that people who write about a nostalgic event from their past are more cheerful after the exercise compared with people who write about a current everyday experience. The British researchers conclude that since memories often star important people in our lives, they may render a comforting sense of belonging while providing a potent mood booster. Wildschut adds that people who are disposed to experience nostalgia also tend to see their past as positive, tend to report overall higher self-esteem and are less prone to depression. Previous research has shown that nostalgia-prone personalities cope with problems more effectively and are more likely than not to receive social support after experiencing stress.

But for best results, try reminiscing "in your head" rather than on paper, suggests Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky, of the University of California at Riverside. When she asked participants to either write or just think about happy moments in the distant past, the thinking group experienced greater well-being than the writing group. Interestingly, a large body of research, including Lyubomirsky's, shows that just the opposite happens when people reflect on unpleasant life events. Ruminating about them "retraumatizes" you, whereas analyzing them through writing helps you get past the trauma. This dichotomy makes sense, she claims, because there's a "magic and mystery" in recalling positive events that can disappear when we overanalyze them in writing.

For a minority of people, however, reminiscing about good memories can trigger painful emotions. For example, recalling a career triumph can make one feel like a "has been" while thinking of the joy of acquiring a pet can be a poignant reminder of that pet's eventual demise. But it needn't be that way, according to Lyubomirsky: "Do you focus on how positive it was then, or that it's over now?" People who see each good experience as permanently enriching are more likely to experience an uplifting mood boost. But a person who mainly focuses on the contrast between past and present damns every good experience with the attitude that nothing in the future can ever match it.

The current holiday season may provide many of us with fantastic opportunities to reminisce with friends, family and co-workers. But even if you find yourself alone, you still have a rich repository of good memories to enjoy – again and again! And remember, you are definitely not wasting time; rather, you're engaging in a positive, self-affirming exercise.