

When Nostalgia Was a Disease

Cures ranged from sending sufferers home to threatening them with pain and terror—but some treatments contained sound advice.

By Julie Beck, *The Atlantic*

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(State Library of South Australia)

People who like to bring up old Nickelodeon cartoons at parties (you know who you are) should be grateful it's not a few hundred years ago. We'd have license to leech them, bully them, and maybe even bury them alive.

These were some of the treatments proposed for nostalgia during the 17th to 19th centuries, when it was considered a psychopathological disorder--rather than a blanket term for fondness for anything that existed more than thirty minutes ago.

Swiss physician Johannes Hofer coined the term in his 1688 medical dissertation, from the Greek *nostos*, or homecoming, and *algos*, or pain. The disease was similar to paranoia, except the sufferer was manic with longing, not perceived persecution, and similar to melancholy, except specific to an object or place.

Though Hofer is credited with naming nostalgia, it existed prior to that. During the Thirty Years War, at least six soldiers were discharged from the Spanish Army of Flanders with *el mal de corazón*. The disease came to be associated with soldiers, particularly Swiss soldiers, who were reportedly so susceptible to nostalgia when they heard a particular Swiss milking song, Khue-Reyen, that its playing was punishable by death.

Also disposed to nostalgia were children sent to the countryside to nurse (who naturally missed their mothers), young men between 20 and 30, and women who left home to be domestic servants. Autumn was a particularly dangerous season, the falling leaves perhaps

reminding marching soldiers of their impermanence and making them wonder why they were spending their limited time on this Earth bloodying their swords in distant lands instead of enjoying the comforts of home and hearth.

Aside from the nostalgia epidemic itself, there was also an outbreak of fake nostalgia among soldiers, who would pretend to miss their friends and family to get out of fighting. But the joke was on them, as "true" nostalgics would just retreat into themselves, without revealing why they were suffering, according to Michael S. Roth's *Dying of the Past: Medical Studies of Nostalgia in Nineteenth-Century France*.

Apparently, almost anything under the sun could cause nostalgia. A too lenient education, coming from the mountains, unfulfilled ambition, masturbation, eating unusual food, and love ("especially happy love," Roth's paper notes) could all bring on the disease. In the 18th and 19th centuries, some doctors were convinced nostalgia came from a "pathological bone" and searched for it to no avail.

French doctor Jourdan Le Cointe thought nostalgia should be treated by "inciting pain and terror."

Some of the symptoms victims presented with are fairly logical--melancholy, sure; loss of appetite, okay; suicide, upsetting but understandable. But many other symptoms that were gathered under the umbrella of nostalgia almost certainly had causes other than homesickness--malnutrition, brain inflammation, fever, and cardiac arrests among them. Some of the early symptoms, according to Dr. Albert Van Holler, were hearing voices and seeing ghosts of the people and places you missed, though whether these were hallucinations or just regular old dreams is unclear.

How to treat this primordial sludge of symptoms depends on the situation and, I guess, your perspective. For a little boy who missed his wet nurse, doctors brought her back and then slowly conditioned him to spend time away from her. The soldiers sometimes were treated with less patience. French doctor Jourdan Le Cointe thought nostalgia should be treated by "inciting pain and terror," as Svetlana Boym describes in her book *The Future of Nostalgia*.

Le Cointe cited the example of the Russian army's outbreak of nostalgia in 1733, on its way to Germany. The general told the troops that the first one to come down the nostalgic virus would be buried alive, and actually made good on his threat a couple times, which nipped that right in the bud.

When nostalgia finally made its way to the United States, after the Civil War, the "scare it out of them" tactic was replaced with "shame it out of them." American military doctor Theodore Calhoun thought nostalgia was something to be ashamed of, that those who suffered from it were unmanly, idle and weak-willed. He proposed curing it with a healthy dose of public ridicule and bullying. Maybe this is why most people don't feel nostalgic about middle school.

Other dubious cures tried over the years include leeches, purging the stomach, and "warm hypnotic emulsions," whatever that unspeakable horror might be. Doctors did sometimes go with the obvious solution of just letting the patients go home, which more often than not cleared their symptoms right up. But even that wasn't guaranteed to work, if the home they longed for had changed significantly or just no longer existed.

Obviously the prevailing view on nostalgia has changed over the years, to the point where we now actively cultivate it with GIF-laden lists and VH1 specials, and rarely, if ever, die from it. But advice on treatment from French doctor Hippolyte Petit is as relevant to someone clinging to the past today as it was to a soldier driven mad by a milking song hundreds of years ago: "Create new loves for the person suffering from love sickness; find new joys to erase the domination of the old." Or, just let it go.

Some questions this article evokes:

- Is nostalgia, in essence, what Jay Gatsby suffered from?
- Should he have instead, as Beck suggests, just moved on?
- Is there a lesson about nostalgia for readers that Fitzgerald is trying to relate? When does longing for the past become counter-productive or even destructive?

Sidenote and warning: At one point in this article Beck writes, “Some of the symptoms (nostalgia) victims presented with are fairly logical—melancholy, sure; loss of appetite, okay; suicide, upsetting but understandable.” I have a problem with her description of suicide as “understandable.” This seems to be a flippant and dangerous adjective to describe ending one’s life, especially when so many students struggle with depression and suicidal thoughts. Please use this passage with caution.