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**HUMAN**  
FLOURISHING LAB

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# NOSTALGIA IN AMERICA:

## THE POWER OF LOOKING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD

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## ■ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The term nostalgia was coined in 1688, but it has only been in the last quarter century that scholars have begun to systematically study this phenomenon and how the human tendency to longingly reflect on past experiences influences psychological functioning. Recent research has revealed that nostalgia is not merely a sentimental indulgence, but a powerful psychological resource. Nostalgic reflection gives people comfort when they are emotionally distressed and inspires them to make choices and pursue goals that improve their well-being. Nostalgic memories also serve as a guide when people are looking to make life changes that will help them achieve a greater sense of meaning.

Though psychologists and other researchers are discovering that nostalgia has many benefits, a critical question remains: Do ordinary Americans view nostalgia as a psychological resource that can help them improve their lives? To explore this question, our team at the Human Flourishing Lab surveyed a nationally representative sample of just over 2,000 American adults about how they experience and use nostalgia. We also asked participants to share a nostalgic memory, some of which are included in this report.

## ■ KEY INSIGHTS

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- Most Americans (73%) agree that their nostalgic memories are best characterized as social memories involving family, romantic partners, or close friends.
- Young adults are the most likely to characterize their nostalgic memories as non-social; nearly one-quarter of adults under 30 report that their nostalgic memories generally involve experiences in which they were alone or doing something by themselves.
- Most Americans (84%) agree that nostalgic memories serve as reminders of what is most important in their lives.
- Most Americans agree that when life is uncertain or difficult, nostalgic memories are a source of comfort (77%) and inspiration (72%).
- Nearly 60% of Americans believe that nostalgic memories offer guidance when they are not sure what direction to take in life.
- Older adults are more likely than younger adults to view nostalgic memories as reminders of what is most important in life and as sources of comfort, inspiration, and guidance. However, the majority of adults in every age group hold these beliefs about nostalgia.
- Americans whose nostalgic memories generally involve social experiences with family, romantic partners, and close friends are the most likely to view nostalgic memories as reminders of what is most important in life and as sources of comfort, inspiration, and guidance.

## ■ INTRODUCTION

In popular culture, nostalgia is often treated as a sentiment primarily linked to consumer behavior and aesthetic preferences. Indeed, many people enjoy listening to music, watching movies and television programs, playing video games, eating food, and purchasing products reminiscent of their childhood and youth. However, nostalgia is much more than an attraction to retro-themed products, styles, and experiences. In fact, nostalgic entertainment often connects to a deeper quest for belonging and meaning.

In my forthcoming book, *Past Forward: How Nostalgia Can Help You Live a More Meaningful Life*, I explore the profound role that nostalgia plays in helping people navigate life's uncertainties and challenges, leading to a more fulfilling existence. I also offer specific suggestions for harnessing the power of nostalgia to reduce mental distress, cultivate and strengthen relationships, identify and pursue meaning-providing goals, and live more intentionally.

I have spent more than two decades conducting research on nostalgia and collaborating with businesses and non-profit organizations looking to tap into its power to improve their products and services and to better connect with their employees, clients, and customers. During this time, I have come to view nostalgia as a future-oriented experience. Most people understandably think of nostalgia as a past-oriented experience because it involves thinking about the past. However, a growing body of research from the field of psychology and related social and behavioral sciences is revealing that nostalgic reflection energizes future-oriented goals and actions by focusing people's minds on cherished experiences, typically shared with loved ones, that instill a sense of meaning in life.

Nostalgic reflection is especially useful when people are facing distressing mental states such as sadness, loneliness, anxiety, low self-esteem, and meaninglessness.

These mental states are not only unpleasant to experience, but they can also be demotivating, leading individuals to withdraw from other people and the aspirations and activities that help them, their families, and their communities thrive. Nostalgic reflection reminds them that even though they are currently going through a challenging time, life is much bigger than their present difficulties, and it is full of meaning-providing experiences. This has the effect of restoring well-being and inspiring a hopeful mindset. For example, studies find that loneliness triggers nostalgia; nostalgic reflection serves as a reminder of previous socially fulfilling experiences, which makes individuals feel more socially connected, competent, and motivated to restore or strengthen existing social bonds or cultivate new relationships.

Moreover, when individuals are struggling to make important life decisions or are looking to make changes to improve their lives, their nostalgic memories offer critical clues for forging a path forward. To determine what choices to make and goals to prioritize, it is very helpful to look to one's most meaningful memories for guidance.

Psychologists and other researchers are using the tools of cognitive, behavioral, and social science to discover the many ways in which nostalgia serves as a powerful psychological resource. However, the extent to which the general public views nostalgia as a resource they can use to better their lives remains unknown. Do Americans know that their nostalgic memories can illuminate what is most important in their lives, offer solace and inspiration in challenging times, and provide direction when they feel lost? To find out, our team at the Human Flourishing Lab surveyed a nationally representative sample of just over 2,000 American adults about how they experience and utilize nostalgia.

### My Nostalgic Memory

#### JUST TODAY WATCHING FAMILY GUY

THE EPISODE REFERENCED THE '90S, AND I THOUGHT ABOUT GROWING UP IN THE '90S THE CLOTHING WE WORE, THE HAIRSTYLES, AND THE FUN DAYS SPENT AS A KID OUTDOORS WITH NO ELECTRONICS. WATCHING THE SHOW TOOK ME BACK TO THOSE DAYS." — MALE | AGE 33

## ■ THE CONTENT OF NOSTALGIC MEMORIES

Research finds that nostalgic memories are deeply social memories. They typically involve close relationships such as family, romantic partners, or friends. In the current survey, we asked participants to select one of three themes that best captures the general nature of their nostalgic memories. This allowed us to further explore the social nature of nostalgia and to examine if the general content of people’s nostalgic memories relates to their views of nostalgia as a psychological resource.

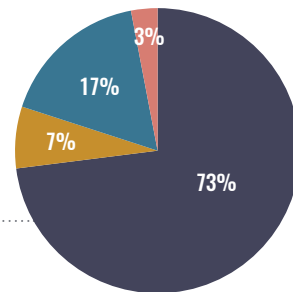
For nearly three-fourths of Americans, nostalgic memories are about relationships with family, romantic partners, and close friends. And when nostalgia isn’t about close relationships, it is more likely to involve solitary experiences than social experiences involving strangers or casual acquaintances. We also explored how age and

gender potentially influence nostalgia themes among American adults. Age is especially important to consider because of its natural association with the accumulation of life experiences. Not only do people have more total life experiences to draw from as they get older, but they also have more diverse life experiences.

There are some differences across age and gender. Older adults and women are the most likely to characterize their nostalgic memories as being about family, romantic partners, and close friends. Most notably, nearly one-quarter of adults under 30 characterize their nostalgic memories as generally involving experiences in which they are alone, compared to 12 percent of adults 60 and older. However, for most men and women, regardless of age, nostalgic memories feature loved ones.

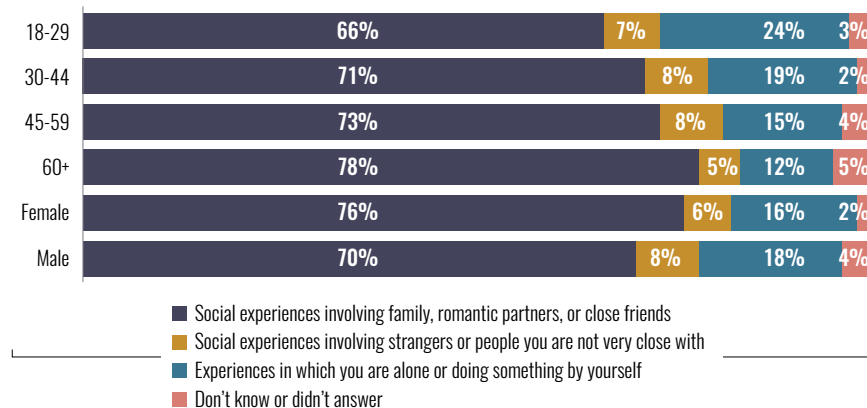
### GENERAL NATURE

**Which of the following themes best captures the general nature of your nostalgic memories?**



**Which of the following themes best captures the general nature of your nostalgic memories?**

(ACROSS AGE GROUPS & FOR BOTH MEN AND WOMEN)



#### RUNNING ON A TRACK

I USED TO RUN TRACK FOR AS LONG AS I REMEMBER, AND IT JUST MAKES ME FEEL SO ALIVE AND SO GOOD AT ONE OF THE FEW THINGS I CAN DO. — FEMALE | AGE 32



**MAKING COOKIES WITH MY DAUGHTER**

IT BROUGHT ME BACK TO THE TIMES WHEN I WOULD MAKE COOKIES WITH MY MOM WHEN I WAS LITTLE. THERE WAS SO MUCH EXCITEMENT AROUND MIXING INGREDIENTS, TASTING, AND PUTTING THE COOKIE DOUGH ON THE BAKING SHEETS. I TRIED TO MIMIC THE EXPERIENCE I HAD WHEN I WAS LITTLE; IT BROUGHT BACK FEELINGS OF “MAGIC”—THESE INGREDIENTS CREATED SOMETHING COMPLETELY NEW.

— FEMALE | AGE 25

■ **NOSTALGIA AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL RESOURCE**

A growing body of research indicates that nostalgia is a vital psychological resource for human flourishing. Distressing mental states such as sadness, loneliness, and low self-esteem increase nostalgia, while nostalgic reflection increases positive mood, feelings of social connectedness, self-esteem, and other indicators of psychological well-being. Moreover, studies find that nostalgia has motivational power. It makes people feel more energized, confident, and inspired to pursue life goals.

Though researchers have discovered that nostalgia has many psychological benefits, it is unclear if the public understands the many ways that nostalgia helps them

flourish. In popular culture, nostalgia is often treated as a form of escapist entertainment. Consumer trends clearly indicate that Americans have a strong appetite for nostalgia-themed products, services, experiences, and media content. But do Americans have a deeper appreciation of nostalgia as a well-being and motivational resource?

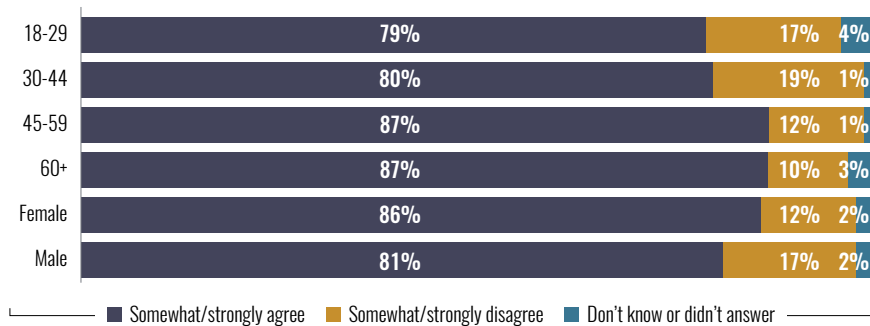
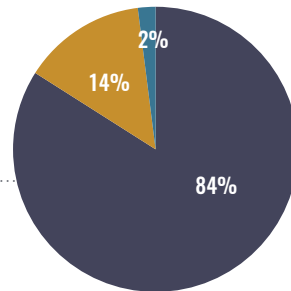
To examine this, survey participants were asked to report their agreement with a series of statements regarding how they use nostalgia in their own lives. First, do Americans believe that nostalgia reminds them of what is most important in their lives?

**WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT**

**“My nostalgic memories remind me of what is most important in my life.”**

**Most Americans view nostalgia as a reminder of what matters most in their lives—**

IS THIS TRUE ACROSS AGE GROUPS & FOR BOTH MEN AND WOMEN?





**WHEN I FIRST MET MY PARTNER**

IT WAS VERY EXCITING. I'D NEVER MET SOMEONE I FELT SO UNDERSTOOD BY OR MADE SUCH FAST FRIENDS WITH. ONE DAY I WAS JUST ME, AND NOW WE'RE PART OF EACH OTHER. SOMETIMES I MISS THOSE EARLY DAYS. — FEMALE | AGE 30

Though there are differences between age groups, the fact that nearly 80 percent or more of American adults across age and gender categories agree that nostalgic memories are a reminder of what is most important in life indicates that people generally view nostalgia as an existential resource. Nostalgic memories focus men and women of all ages on what gives their lives meaning.

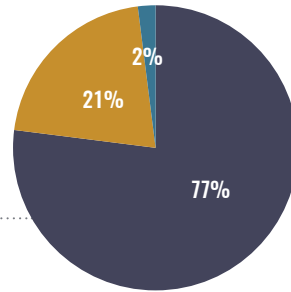
Research finds that people become more nostalgic when they are experiencing unpleasant psychological states and that nostalgia serves to restore well-being during

these challenging times. Do Americans have a good understanding of nostalgia as a source of psychological comfort?

Americans, regardless of age or gender, largely agree that nostalgia has a comforting effect when life is uncertain or difficult. Though the percentage of people who view nostalgia as a source of comfort increases with age, most young adults also appreciate that nostalgia provides solace during challenging times.

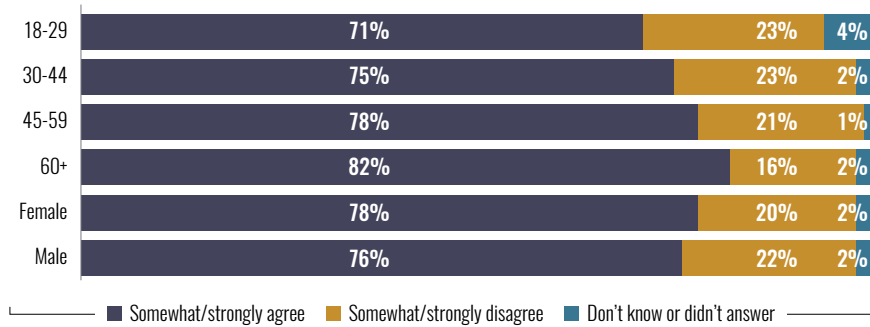
**COMFORT**

**“When life is uncertain or difficult, my nostalgic memories are a source of comfort.”**



**Most Americans view nostalgia as a source of comfort in their lives—**

IS THIS TRUE ACROSS AGE GROUPS & FOR BOTH MEN AND WOMEN?



**EVERYTIME I SEE A HUMMINGBIRD**

THE DAY OF MY GRANDMA'S FUNERAL, I FELT TOTALLY ALONE. I WAS STANDING ON OUR DECK WONDERING HOW I COULD GO ON. I HEARD A HUMMING SOUND, AND WHEN I TURNED, I WAS FACING A HUMMINGBIRD. I HAD NEVER BEFORE SEEN ONE. SHE STAYED, AND WE LOCKED EYES. IT WAS MY GRANDMA TELLING ME SHE WOULD ALWAYS BE WITH ME. TO THIS DAY, I BECOME VERY NOSTALGIC WHEN A HUMMER STOPS TO CHECK ME OUT. I JUST SAY “LOVE YOU TOO, GRAMMA.” — FEMALE | AGE 74

Research further finds that nostalgia does more than offer psychological comfort. It inspires action. Do Americans think of nostalgia as a source of inspiration?

Americans, regardless of age or gender, largely agree that nostalgia provides inspiration when life is uncer-

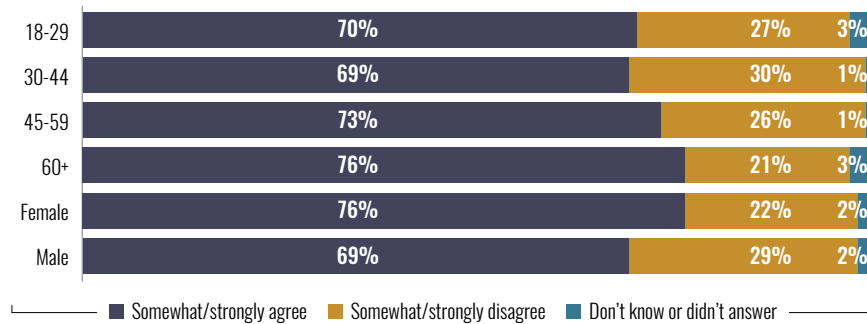
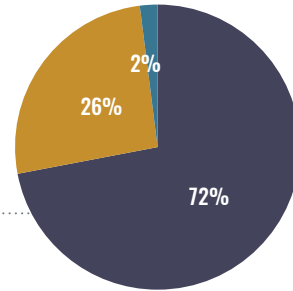
tain or difficult. Older adults are more likely than young adults to hold this view, but most young adults also consider nostalgic memories to have inspirational power.

## INSPIRATION

**“When life is uncertain or difficult, my nostalgic memories are a source of inspiration.”**

**Most Americans view nostalgia as a source of inspiration in their lives—**

IS THIS TRUE ACROSS AGE GROUPS & FOR BOTH MEN AND WOMEN?



### My Nostalgic Memory

#### RIDING MY BIKE TO PURCHASE A NEWSPAPER

WHEN I WAS 10, MY PARENTS GAVE ME THE TASK OF RIDING MY BIKE TO THE CORNER STORE TO PURCHASE THE TOWN NEWSPAPER. IT CAME OUT ON WEDNESDAYS AND COST 50 CENTS. MY PARENTS WOULD GIVE ME A DOLLAR OR TWO AND OFF I'D RIDE ON MY 10-SPEED, FEELING LIKE THE MOST POWERFUL WOMAN ON EARTH. — FEMALE | AGE 40

Since nostalgia reminds people of what is most important in their lives, it can help them make major life decisions. In other words, in addition to inspiring people to take action to improve their lives, it can help them determine what direction to take. Do Americans view nostalgia as offering guidance in their lives?

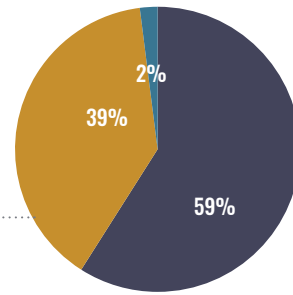
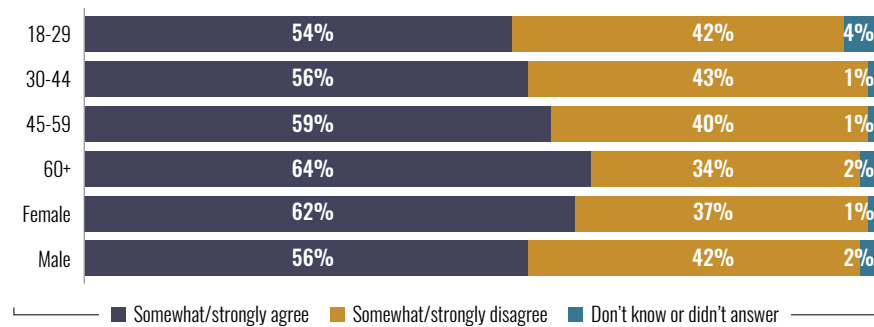
Similar to other findings in this survey, the percentage of people who hold this future-oriented view of nostalgia increases with age. However, despite having fewer past experiences to draw from than older adults, over half of young adults believe their nostalgic memories can help guide them when they aren't sure what path to take in life.

## GUIDANCE

**“When I don’t know what direction to take in life, my nostalgic memories offer guidance.”**

**Nearly 60 percent of Americans believe that nostalgia offers guidance when they are not sure what direction to take in life—**

IS THIS TRUE ACROSS AGE GROUPS & FOR BOTH MEN AND WOMEN?



### My Nostalgic Memory

#### A FLOAT DOWN THE COLORADO RIVER

DOING A 19-DAY FLOAT DOWN THE COLORADO RIVER IN GRAND CANYON: I FELT STRONG, COURAGEOUS, ADVENTUROUS, HAPPY, AND FUN-LOVING, SURROUNDED BY A GROUP OF LOVELY PEOPLE. MAKES ME FEEL NOSTALGIC FOR A TIME WHEN I COULD HANDLE THE CHALLENGES OF THAT TYPE OF TRIP AND MY WILLINGNESS TO DO SO. — FEMALE | AGE 67





### **Does the general theme of people’s nostalgic memories relate to their view of nostalgia as a psychological and motivational resource?**

Research indicates that nostalgia is most effective at improving well-being and increasing goal motivation when it is focused on close social relationships. This suggests that people whose nostalgic memories generally involve social experiences with family, romantic partners, and close friends should be the most likely to find nostalgia to be psychologically beneficial.

To explore this possibility, I divided survey participants into groups based on the theme they selected as generally reflecting the nature of their nostalgic memories and compared each group on their agreement with the statements concerning nostalgia as a reminder of what

is important in life and as a source of comfort, inspiration, and guidance.

Individuals whose nostalgic memories generally focus on social experiences involving family, romantic partners, or close friends are more likely than those in each of the other nostalgia theme categories to think that nostalgia serves as a reminder of what is important in life, offers comfort when life is difficult or uncertain, offers inspiration when life is difficult or uncertain, and offers guidance when the direction in life to take is unknown.

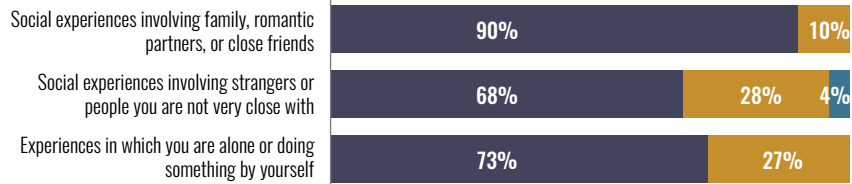


#### **PHOTO ALBUMS FROM MY LIFE**

LOOKING AT PHOTO ALBUMS FROM THE LAST 20 YEARS OF MY LIFE: THEY MADE ME FEEL HAPPY, PROUD, AND CONFIDENT IN WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS FOR MYSELF—KNOWING THE THINGS THAT I’VE DONE FOR A BETTER LIFE, THE LESSONS I’VE LEARNED, AND THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS THAT I’VE COME THROUGH. — MALE | AGE 41

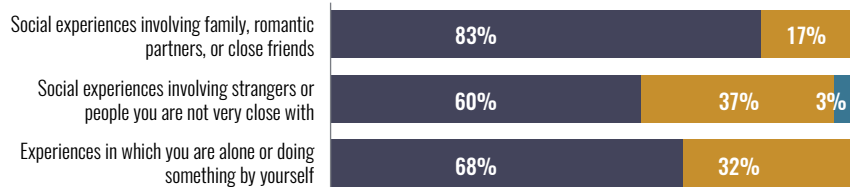
## WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT

**“My nostalgic memories remind me of what is most important in my life.”**



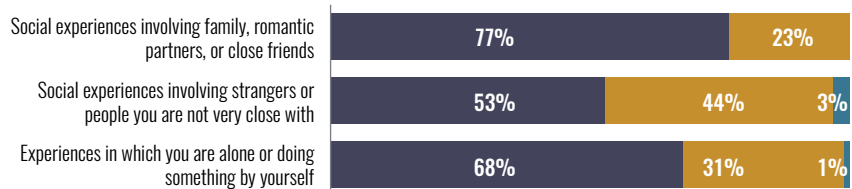
## COMFORT

**“My nostalgic memories are a source of comfort when life is uncertain or difficult.”**



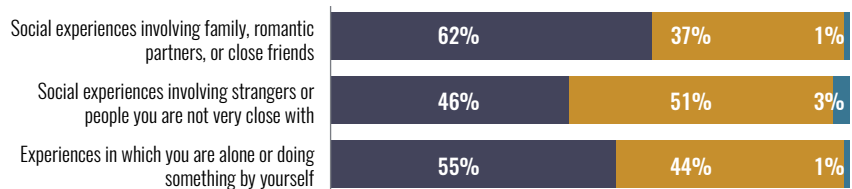
## INSPIRATION

**“My nostalgic memories are a source of inspiration when life is uncertain or difficult.”**



## GUIDANCE

**“My nostalgic memories offer guidance when I don't know what direction to take in life.”**



■ Somewhat/strongly agree ■ Somewhat/strongly disagree ■ Don't know or didn't answer

## ■ CONCLUSION

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Consistent with previous research, for most American adults, nostalgic memories are deeply social memories. Importantly, Americans value nostalgia as a psychological resource. With age comes a greater appreciation for nostalgia, but most young adults understand that their nostalgic reflection has numerous benefits.

The general theme of people's nostalgic memories is strongly related to their views of nostalgia as a psychological and motivational resource. Individuals whose nostalgic memories are about close relationships (family, romantic partners, and friends) are the most inclined to view nostalgia as a reminder of what is important in life and as a source of comfort, inspiration, and guidance. These findings are consistent with research indicating that a major reason nostalgia

boosts well-being and motivation is because it focuses people's minds on the deep social bonds that give their lives meaning.

There are Americans who do not view nostalgia as a useful resource for improving their lives. It is possible that nostalgia isn't helpful for everyone. However, many of the people who doubt its value may not realize just how much they use nostalgia in their own lives. And some have a negative attitude about nostalgia that isn't based on evidence but instead on the myths that nostalgia is just a form of escapist entertainment, a mental weakness, or a barrier to personal growth. The more people learn about the psychological benefits researchers are discovering, the more they may be able to utilize nostalgia to improve their lives and the world around them.

## ■ METHODOLOGY

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For this survey, we partnered with NORC at the University of Chicago and its AmeriSpeak® panel. AmeriSpeak® is a probability-based panel designed to represent the US household population. Randomly selected US households are sampled using area probability and address-based sampling, with a known, nonzero prob-

ability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame. The nationally representative sample consisted of 2,049 respondents. The survey was conducted October 5-9, 2023.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**DR. CLAY ROUTLEDGE** is the Vice President of Research and Director of the Human Flourishing Lab at the Archbridge Institute. He is also co-editor-in-chief of *Profectus*, an online magazine dedicated to human progress and flourishing. As a leading expert in existential psychology, Clay's work focuses on helping people reach their full potential and build meaningful lives.

Clay is a highly cited researcher who has published more than 100 scholarly papers, co-edited three academic books, authored three books, and received numerous awards for his research and mentorship. As a public intellectual, Clay has authored dozens of articles for popular outlets including *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Newsweek*, *Fortune*, *The Hill*, and *Harvard Business Review*.

His work has been covered by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Guardian*, *CBS News*, *ABC News*, *BBC News*, *CNN*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *Vox*, *National Geographic*, *HGTV*, *Men's Health*, *Wired*, *Forbes*, *Oprah Daily*, *Shondaland*, *Discover Magazine*, *Reason Magazine*, and many others. He has appeared on numerous television and radio programs and podcasts such as *NBC Today*, *Hidden Brain*, *Science Friday*, *Cheddar News*, and *NPR Morning Edition*. He has also appeared in a number of documentary programs including *The Overview* from *NBC Peacock*, *The Benefits of Being Nostalgic* from *BBC Reel*, *Cursed Films* from *Shudder*, and *The Well* from *Big Think*.

He wrote the TED-Ed documentary short film, *Why Do We Feel Nostalgia?*, and his forthcoming book, *Past Forward: How Nostalgia Can Help You Live a More Meaningful Life*, will be published December 5, 2023.

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The Human Flourishing Lab—a project of the Archbridge Institute, a non-partisan, independent, 501(c)(3) public policy think tank—is dedicated to the study and promotion of human flourishing, as well as exploring the connection between human flourishing, civilizational progress, and freedom. We conduct original research, identify and highlight existing knowledge, and provide resources for researchers, the media, and the general public.