



Nostalgia Serves as a Psychological Resource for Mothers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

The current study examined whether nostalgia, a sentimental longing for the past, serves as a psychological resource for mothers of children with ASD (autism spectrum disorder). Twenty-six mothers of children with ASD were asked to complete measures of well-being during an initial visit. Over 8 weeks, mothers were asked to write about their experiences with raising a child with ASD, which were coded for the use of nostalgic language. The results revealed that mothers who reported being lower in positive affect and parental well-being had increased nostalgic narratives over time. There were no significant findings for negative affect and life satisfaction. This work provides a first step in understanding the relationship between nostalgia and maternal health. Specifically, nostalgia may serve as a potential intervention to improve the well-being of parents of children with ASD.

Method

Participants were 26 married mothers ($M_{age} = 39$, $SD_{age} = 6.21$) of children ($M_{age} = 8.02$, $SD_{age} = 3.30$) who were diagnosed with ASD.

After completing an initial survey to assess their well-being, participants were sent a writing prompt each week where they were asked to spend approximately 15 min writing about their experiences with raising a child with ASD.

The total possible number of writing prompts collected was 208 (8 weeks x 26 participants); however, three mothers did not complete all 8 weeks of the study, resulting in a total of 195 writing prompts.

Mothers completed:

- An abbreviated version of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Thompson, 2007; Cronbach's α positive affect = .86, Cronbach's α negative affect = .88).
- The 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) was also used as another indicator of maternal well-being ($\alpha = .81$).
- The Parenting Sense of Competence scale (PSOC; Johnston & Mash, 1989). Example items include, "Being a parent is manageable" and "Any problems are easily solved." The average of all items indicated parents' sense of competence and a higher score was indicative of feeling more competent as a parent ($\alpha = .79$).

Method (Cont.)

- Nostalgia proneness was measured using LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count; Pennebaker, Booth, & Francis, 2007), a language analysis software. Mothers' narratives for each week of the 8-week study were coded for their use of nostalgic language. Specifically, using a custom dictionary (e.g., *nostalgic*, *memories*, *sentimental*; Carnelley & Rowe, 2010), mothers' responses were coded for the proportion of their narratives that had nostalgic tones.

Results

- Hierarchical Linear Modeling was used to calculate the predicted intercept (nostalgic tones at Week 1) and slope (change in nostalgic tones from Week 1 to Week 8) for each participant.
- No significant results emerged between demographic variables (i.e., household income, maternal education, & maternal ethnicity) and study variables.
- Mothers' nostalgia scores at Week 1 (intercept) were significantly associated with the change in nostalgia scores across the study (slope; $r = -.58$, $p = .002$). Therefore, the intercept term was included as a covariate in all subsequent analyses.
- Results revealed a significant relationship between mothers' well-being and use of nostalgic language in their narratives. Mothers who reported lower initial positive affect had an increase in nostalgic tones in their writing over time, controlling for their initial levels of nostalgia.
- Similarly, mothers with a lower sense of competence related to parenting also increased in their use of nostalgia over the course of the study.
- There were no significant findings for negative affect and life satisfaction.
- Overall, mothers who have lower initial well-being were more likely to draw upon nostalgia when writing about their child with ASD over the course of 8 weeks.

Results of Separate Hierarchical Linear Regressions Predicting Change in Nostalgia

	Positive Affect		Negative Affect		Life Satisfaction		Parenting Sense of Competence	
	b(SE)	R ²	b(SE)	R ²	b(SE)	R ²	b(SE)	R ²
Model 1		.33		.33		.33		.33
Nostalgia Intercept	-.28(.08)**		-.28(.08)**		-.28(.08)**		-.28(.08)**	
Model 2		.53		.33		.33		.46
Nostalgia Intercept	-.29(.07)***		-.29(.09)**		-.28(.08)**		-.26(.08)**	
Predictor	-.05(.02)**		.01(.02)		.00(.02)		-.03(.01)*	

Discussion

Given the psychological benefits of nostalgic reflection (e.g., Routledge, 2015), the purpose of the current study was to examine whether mothers of children with ASD, who experience reduced levels of well-being, engage in greater nostalgic reflection over time. The results of this pilot research found that mothers who score low on positive affect and have a reduced sense of parental competence utilized more nostalgic terms when writing about their ASD child over 8 weeks. These findings were shown regardless of demographic factors and pre-existing levels of nostalgic reflection.

Future research should examine whether activating thoughts of nostalgia increases the health of families of children with developmental disabilities, and the role that optimism (and other factors) may play as either mediating or moderating variable(s). Additionally, although the current work did not manipulate feelings of nostalgia as either an individual difference or environmental prime, evidence has found that nostalgic reflection can be easily activated with respect to writing prompts, listening to music, visiting websites, and through certain smells (e.g., Routledge, 2015). Future research should adapt and implement some of these well-established interventions with families of children with ASD.

References

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