



This 1832 lithograph, "Le mal du pays," or "the disease of one's country," depicts a nurse attending to a resting patient who is being treated for nostalgia.

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Death by Nostalgia, 1688

Before its association with a pining for the toys or TV shows of yesteryear, nostalgia was deemed a dangerous psychiatric disorder.

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Late in the 17th century, a medical student in Switzerland named Johannes Hofer noticed that people living far from home, such as soldiers or those sent abroad in domestic service, sometimes experienced a psychological burden so great that they actually died as a result. In his 1688 [dissertation](#), Hofer named the phenomenon "nostalgia," using the Greek roots *nostos*, which means returning to a native area, and *algos*, a term for pain or grief.

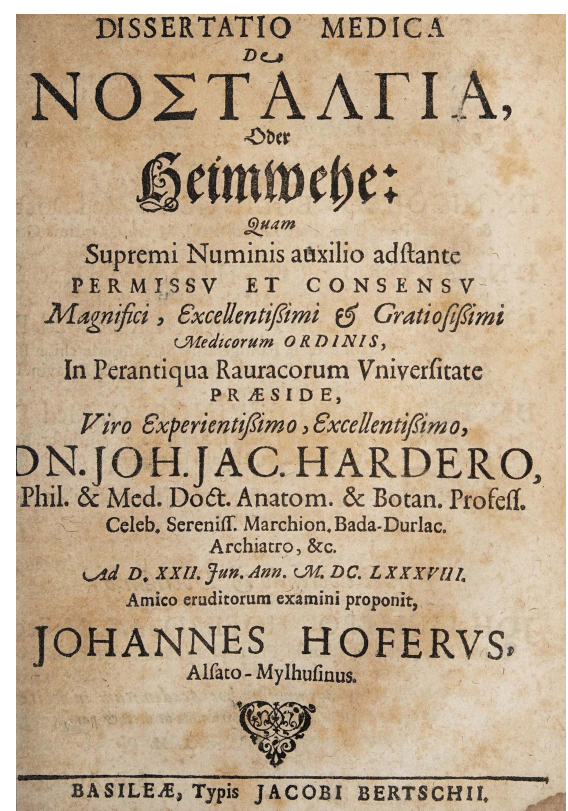
Doctors initially approached nostalgia by "thinking about it as a disease," says Clay Routledge, a psychology professor at North Dakota State University and the author of [Nostalgia: A Psychological Resource](#). Deaths related to the condition were often caused by suicide or by self-neglect. A dampened immune system brought on by

depression, for example, sometimes left people more susceptible to fatal illnesses.

Hofer proposed that nostalgia was “sympathetic of an afflicted imagination,” caused by “continuous vibration of animal spirits” through certain parts of the brain, and that it “admits no remedy other than a return to the homeland.” He wrote about a girl who fell from a great height while living far away from her home. Initially on the mend, she began refusing to eat or take medicine and would say nothing beyond her desire to go home. She returned to her parents emaciated, weak, and near death. Mere days later, however, she was “wholly well.”

In addition to sending patients home, doctors thrust myriad other purported therapies upon these heartsick people. When a Russian commander noticed his troops suffering from nostalgia in 1733, for example, he buried a soldier alive as a warning to others, while during the French Revolution, physician Jourdan Le Cointe prescribed “pain and terror” as a cure for nostalgia, which the French called *le maladie du pays*, or a disease of one’s country. Throughout the American Civil War, soldiers who felt homesick were taunted relentlessly for being weak-minded. Around this same time, diagnoses of nostalgia were dropping, rolled into cases of melancholia, one of the most [common](#) justifications for institutionalization during the Victorian Era’s mental asylum boom.

The concept of nostalgia underwent a renaissance in the early 1900s, however, as the symptoms were found to align with better-studied psychological illnesses such as shell shock (what doctors now call



AFFLICTED IMAGINATION: Johannes Hofer published his 1688 dissertation on the phenomenon of nostalgia, which he classified as a medical condition caused by the “continuous vibration of animal spirits” in the brains of patients. People suffering from nostalgia were subjected to various, sometimes cruel treatments before the 20th century, when psychologists realigned the condition with better-studied mental illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorder.

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post-traumatic stress disorder), anxiety, or schizophrenia. Over time, the word evolved into its current meaning: a fondness for objects or experiences of the past, with or without debilitating pangs of sadness.

In fact, Routledge's recent [research](#) into the function of nostalgia has revealed that, contrary to Hofer's observations, it's a largely positive phenomenon. Nostalgic feelings often increase in periods of instability or loneliness after a big life change, he says, but rather than dragging a person's mood down, looking backward can help them regroup. "For most people, nostalgia helps them live in the present and motivates future-oriented action," Routledge explains. "After people engage in nostalgia, they report feeling more inspired, and they actually want to spend more time with other people. It actually kind of energizes them."