Secrets of Nostalgia: Simple Ways to Warm Up Your Holidays

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Enrich your holidays (now and in the future) by harnessing the benefits of nostalgia. Take a deep breath and learn how tuning into your five senses can make for a cozier, more connected holiday—one that looks, feels, smells, tastes, and sounds merry and bright.

The holidays offer up many reasons to celebrate. Delicious smells. Beloved movies. Colorful decorations. Lively parties. Cozy conversations. And if you're lucky, presents.

But if there's one thing that really lets you know the holidays have arrived, it's the music.

The feeling holiday music evokes can be unexpected and sudden. One minute you're grocery shopping while Bing Crosby croons about silver bells, the next minute you're remembering how you once ate a handful of sprinkles while decorating gingerbread cookies with your grandma.

This occurrence might be attributed to the experience of nostalgia, officially defined as "a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past." While this feeling can come from out of nowhere, intentionally engaging in nostalgic reflection by tapping into your five senses can positively impact your current holiday, as well as future holidays.

The Benefits of Nostalgia

In the short-term, nostalgia benefits us by reaffirming that our lives have meaning. That's because nostalgia usually features significant life events—occasions like birthdays, weddings, and the holidays. Further, these events usually include close loved ones. So reflecting on these events re-establishes our sense of connection and belonging, making us feel more loved, protected, and secure about our existing relationships.

And it's these short-term benefits that we tap into when our holidays don't go as planned—whether it's because of a cancelled flight or an unexpected snowstorm. In the case of the missed flight, nostalgia is what makes reminiscing in the airport lounge over a warm mug of cocoa a soothing comfort in the face of massive disappointment. With the snowstorm, it's ordering a spread of take-out Chinese food when you can't make it home because it reminds you of the year your parents burned the roast. These aren't perfect substitutes, of course, but by bringing forward elements of previous cherished holidays, we infuse our present with comfort from the past.

Nostalgia has benefits that extend into our future as well. Studies have shown that engaging in nostalgic reflection is a powerful social motivator, propelling us to pursue social goals like making new friends, reconnecting with loved ones, and finding a partner to share our lives with. This turns out to be great timing; experiencing nostalgia during the holidays is setting you up to achieve the resolutions you make regarding your social life on New Year's Eve.

Nostalgia and the Five Senses

With all its benefits, nostalgia might seem like it would be difficult to invoke. Lucky for us, it's simply a matter of tapping into smells, sounds, tastes, visuals, and sensations from our past. No matter what you're celebrating this season, consider the five senses as you prepare for the holidays. Here are some things to consider for each one.

Sound

Build a playlist that offers something for everyone at your holiday gathering. The songs that evoke wonderful holiday memories for you might not be the same ones that do so for your grandpa or your cousin. Create opportunities to get to know your loved ones better by asking them what songs remind them of the holidays in advance of your gathering. The result will be a playlist that spans generations and genres.

If you're not sure where to start, we've got you. Our Global Head of Music, Brian Beck, wrapped up Vintage Holiday just for you, an enduring playlist of lesser-known classics featuring Woodie Guthrie, Pearl Bailey, Loretta Lynn, Louis Armstrong, and more.

Smell

Of all the senses, smell is the sense that most directly evokes emotional memories. When we smell something, that information goes directly to the part of our brain that is associated with experiencing emotions. Consider the scents that remind you of your favorite holidays and recreate them with candles, essential oils, room sprays, or diffusers. If you have time, tackle two senses at once by cooking or baking (see "Taste" below). Lastly, experiment with different scents in different rooms—try welcoming pine for the entryway, warming cinnamon for the living room, and refreshing peppermint for the bathroom.

Sight

There's a lot of things that brighten up holidays…twinkling lights from menorahs, kinaras, and tiny villages that overtake every available flat surface in your home. But one of the most comforting things to gaze at during the holidays—a flickering fire on the hearth—can be impractical or more likely, impossible. That's why we teamed up with sound designer Andrew Tracy to create "The Best Sounding Yule Log Ever." With the proper log sizes, wood-to-flame ratio, and bark thickness, you can enjoy the mesmerizing flames on your TV with the soothing crackle through your home theater speakers.

Touch

Most often overlooked, incorporating the sensation of touch into your holiday can be an act of mindfulness. Take the time to bring your attention to the tactile sensations of the holidays—a rough firelog, a hand-knit scarf, a warm clay mug, the worn pages of a beloved book read once a year. And when in doubt, wrap yourself in a soft, fuzzy blanket.

Taste

This one gets the most attention around the holidays. And for good reason. But this is also where we have the biggest opportunity to expand our traditions. In addition to Christmas, people celebrate Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Winter Solstice, Diwali, Las Posadas, and Chinese New Year at this time of year. Get in the spirit of the season by learning about cultural traditions other than your own. Then, incorporate a traditional dish you learn about into your family's meal and use it as an opportunity to share what you've learned. Or, if you're a book lover, look to cookbooks with recipes inspired by literary giants like Charles Dickens, Toni Morrison, or Louisa May Alcott. Above all, share. Whether you invite friends to your family's meal or wrap up baked goods for neighbors, sharing food is a great way to connect with those you normally just share a wave with.

The holidays can be stressful. And don't always go as planned. By getting in touch with your senses during the season, you can tap into comforting memories of the past, get motivated to create a better future, and savor each moment of the present.

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