

A LINE ON LIFE

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"Boob Tube" Addiction *

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The average American watches the "boob tube" about 25 hours per week, with some watching television as much as 55 hours a week. Are they addicted to television?

Although the general public has accepted the concept of TV addiction, research on this subject has been relatively sparse. Psychologist Robert McIlwraith surveyed 136 people to see if they agreed with the statement, "I'm addicted to TV." Excluding 15 people who couldn't decide, McIlwraith wound up with 17 self-labeled addicts and 104 who denied addiction.

He tested several theoretical models of TV addiction. One model emphasized **fantasy**, viewing TV addiction as caused by either excessive fantasy or a deficit in personal fantasy. The second model relates to **stimulus seeking**, viewing TV addicts as either stimulus-seeking extroverts or stimulus-avoiding introverts. Still another regards TV as an **oral-level** addiction — people at the oral level want their needs met effortlessly, as most of us were treated when we were babies.

McIlwraith found no differences in the amount of fantasy. However, TV addicts were found to be more introverted than non-addicts. As related to oral needs, TV addicts ate more junk food, but were not more likely to be addicted to cigarettes or alcohol. The TV addicts indicated that they watched more TV "when they're lonely, sad or angry. And they're also more likely to say they watch when they're bored and have nothing to do."

Unexpectedly, TV addicts do not believe that the quality of the programs is better. Thus the difference is not in how they evaluate TV, but how they use it.

Psychologist Robert Kubey had subjects paged with beepers at random intervals and then asked about their feelings and if they were watching TV. The primary attraction of TV seemed to be in its ability to alter moods. "It relaxes people very quickly. It's so habit-forming because of its quick effect." The longer people watch TV, the harder it is to turn the TV set off. Essentially, "viewing begets viewing." Beside relaxation, long-term TV viewing leads to an attitude of passivity.

"Human beings are not well designed to enjoy many hours of passivity.... Many viewers feel worse as time with television stretches on, because they know they aren't accomplishing anything. They feel slightly guilty and contemptuous of themselves, but they still view on."

Ironically, even though long-term TV viewers watch more television, they do not enjoy it as much as those who watch it less.

"In part, prolonged viewing is enjoyed less because the programs watched later (in the viewing period) are often of less interest to the viewer's taste than those watched earlier."

Kubey does not like the term "addiction" — which suggests a physical drive — but prefers to view it as a "dependence" — which is a learned, psychological need. Spending 1,000-2,000 hours a year as children with the "electronic baby-sitter" leads people, as adults, to rely more on mass-produced stimuli rather than developing their own interpersonal skills.

A third psychologist, Robin Smith Jacobvitz, believes that relatively few of us are dependent on TV. One factor she found related to increased TV watching was reduced environmental stimulation. For example,

those who are bedridden from illness or accident watch more TV. Likewise, so do people who have recently moved to a new town, but neither group is really considered "*dependent*."

With a TV dependency scale filled out by 491 students, Jacobvitz found only 11 — about equally men and women — who indicated that they thought they were "hooked" on TV. However, these men were mostly married with children, while the women tended to be divorced or widowed. It is possible that the women used the TV as a companion, while the men use it as a way to escape the hassles of family life.

In families, TV viewing may be an **entertainment habit**. As Kubey said:

"Viewers turn to television almost automatically. Once dinner is finished and the dishes are washed, many of the families gather around the television regardless of what programs are on. Viewing is an entrenched habit for the majority of U.S. families."

If you want to control your viewing habit, the first step is to keep a record of how much and when you watch TV for at least a week. Next, you need to list all the other fun activities you can do at home on your refrigerator, so you can check this list before you turn on the TV. However, this may not be easy. In fact, you may have to lock the TV in the closet for a while. However — if you are successful — you might even find yourself talking to each other again.

* Adapted from Kathleen McCarthy's article, "TV addicts not lured to shows, but medium," [*APA Monitor*](#), November 1990, page 42.