

TELEVISION Television, the drug of a nation – are you just a user, or have you become an addict? Answer the questions on the TV screen to find out

TV nation

The average person in the UK watches 3.5 hours of TV a day. Watching TV consumes 40 per cent of our leisure time. That means that children born today will spend more of their lives in front of the box than at work.

Never before have people watched so much TV, but has habit turned to harmful addiction? *The Ecologist* has developed a questionnaire based on the standard criteria that psychiatrists use in this country to diagnose substance abuse. Check if you have a TV addiction problem. Or do you think you can handle it?

1 Do you watch more TV than you really want?

When asked, people say that TV is about as enjoyable as housework and cooking. TV isn't a great pleasure in our lives, it just seems to have a very low cost. According to David Burke of anti-TV campaign WhiteDot (www.whitedot.org), the TV model works like this:

- You think you are there to watch the programme, but in fact you are watching the ads.
- You think it is free, but in fact it is costing you time and effort.
- You get an illusion of togetherness, but really you are alone.
- You don't necessarily enjoy it, but keep watching it hoping something worthwhile will happen.

2 Have you thought about cutting down the amount of TV you watch? Have you tried to cut down but found that you just tend to end up watching the same amount?

'Friends, Seinfeld, Cheers. The place where everybody knows your name. The best-selling programmes are always about friends or families. Big, fun groups of people who hang around together and tell jokes. TV is just selling back to us the kind of friends it took away from us in the first place. The people on TV are not your friends. They're not in the room with you. You are alone in the dark, staring at a plastic box. Jerry and Elaine, Kramer and that whole loveable bunch on Friends, none of them know you. They don't care whether you live or die.' WhiteDot

3 Do you spend 'a great deal of time' watching TV and/or preparing to watch TV (eg, browsing TV guides, magazines, etc)?

Watching an average of 3.5 hours of TV a day, means that over a 75-year life you will watch a total of 671,147 hours. That's 671,147 hours inside, sedentary and probably alone. We're better than this. We don't need TV. It's TV that needs us.

4 Do you skip social and/or work commitments or hobby time to watch TV?

'Nothing – not low education, not full-time work, not long commutes in urban agglomerations, not poverty or financial distress – is more broadly associated with civic disengagement and social disconnection than is dependence on television for entertainment' Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*

Putnam's seminal study on social involvement found that, irrespective of effects of education, income, age, race, health, place of residence, work status and gender, heavy TV viewers had less friends, attended less social engagements, belonged to fewer community and religious organisations and were more distrustful of other people than non-TV-dependent individuals.

TV ADDICTION QUIZ

Are you a user or an addict?

- 1 Do you watch more TV than you really want?
- 2 Have you thought about cutting down the amount of TV you watch? Have you tried to cut down but found that you just tend to end up watching the same amount?
- 3 Do you spend 'a great deal' of time watching TV and/or preparing to watch TV (e.g. browsing TV guides, magazines, etc)?
- 4 Do you skip social and/or work commitments or hobby time to watch TV?
- 5 Do you have any long-term psychological or physical problems that have been made worse by TV watching? Have you ever had any mental health problems?
- 6 Do you find that TV needs to be more exciting than real life? Do you find that you can watch TV for long periods of time without getting bored?
- 7 Do you miss TV if you have a day off? Do you watch videos or play computer games?

Answer yes to three or more of the sections above.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Are you an addict?

Do you watch more TV than you really want?

Do you try to cut down the amount of TV you watch?

Do you find you just tend to end up watching the same amount?

Do you watch TV and/or preparing to watch TV (TV guides, magazines, etc)?

Do you have other commitments or hobby-time to watch TV?

Do you have social or physical problems which are caused by you continued watching TV despite this?

Do you find TV is boring or fast-paced to hold your interest these days?

Do you watch TV for longer and longer stretches at a time?

Have you not watched any for a while?

Do you play computer games if you can't watch TV?

Do you answer these questions and you are an addict

5 Do you have any long-term psychological or physical problems that are caused or made worse by TV watching? Have you continued watching TV despite this?

People who watch a lot of TV suffer comparatively more from insomnia, headaches and indigestion. In children, heavy TV watching causes obesity and can impair language development.

Like the connection between smoking and cancer, there is a hard-to-prove but intimate connection between TV and materialism, fear and discontent. The images bombarding us from TV can't help but make us unhappy with ourselves physically, and materially. At Arizona State University professor Doug Kenrick conducted experiments that found that women shown a succession of pictures of female models become less happy; and men shown such pictures become less content with their wives. TV means that we compare ourselves to the rich and famous, rather than our neighbours.

6 Do you find that TV needs to be more exciting or fast-paced to hold your interest these days? Do you find that you can watch TV for longer and longer stretches at a time?

Psychological research shows that heavy viewers watch more TV but find it less rewarding. As we watch more and more TV our attention span drops; to keep viewers interested there is a need for a faster and faster rush of images and sounds exploding off the screen.

TV reduces individuals' ability to concentrate, and may tap into deep-seated natural instincts to respond to rapidly changing lights. For every minute we watch our metabolic rate sinks lower and lower, thus reducing our willpower to turn our sets off.

7 Do you miss TV if you haven't watched any for a while? Do you watch videos or play computer games if you can't watch TV?

In 1995 19 per cent of US adults said they 'could not survive' without a TV. Despite its negative effects, TV has come to be considered a necessity. In 1995 the ratio of Chinese who owned a TV to the number who had hot running water was 84:1.

TV doesn't satisfy, but it does keep you hanging on craving for another fix. Like all addicts, TV viewers make excuses to other people and themselves – 'I just use it to relax', 'I want to switch off'. TV is a drug – a sedative that stops people causing trouble in the hours between work and sleep. It allows an increasingly consolidated global media to place thoughts inside your mind; the machinery of capitalism is plugged directly into your brain to feed you propaganda, advertising and discontentment.

'It is a medium of entertainment that allows millions of people to listen to the same joke at the same time and yet remain lonesome' TS Eliot

Even when turned off, TV sets create 'attentional holes' in rooms. Chairs and sofas are focused towards the TV, pointing people sitting in them away from each other.

The diagnosis is shockingly clear – we need to kick the TV habit to become healthier, happier and better connected people. Fortunately, all these things can be done at the press of a single button: the 'off' switch.

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