Favorite TV reruns may have restorative powers: researcher

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Derrick's findings may dispel some notions that watching TV is bad for us. Credit: Douglas Levere, University at Buffalo

(Medical Xpress)—We hear all the time that we need to get off the couch, stop watching TV and get moving. But what if watching TV under specific conditions could actually provide the mental boost you need to tackle a difficult task?

A new paper that describes two studies by Jaye Derrick, PhD, research scientist at the University at Buffalo's Research Institute on Addictions, found that watching a rerun of a favorite TV show may help restore the drive to get things done in people who have used up their reserves of willpower or self-control.

"People have a limited pool of these valuable mental resources," explains

Derrick. "When they use them on a task, they use up some of this limited resource. Therefore, they have less willpower and self-control for the next task.

"With enough time, these mental resources will return. However, there may be ways to more quickly restore them."

One of these ways is to re-watch your favorite TV show, Derrick's research found. Doing so, she says, taps into the surrogate relationship people form with the characters in their favorite shows. We find it comforting, mainly because we already know what the characters are going to say and do. All we have to do is sit back and enjoy it.

"When you watch a favorite re-run, you typically don't have to use any effort to control what you are thinking, saying or doing. You are not exerting the mental energy required for self-control or willpower," Derrick explains. "At the same time, you are enjoying your 'interaction,' with the TV show's characters, and this activity restores your energy."

In the first of her two studies published in the journal *Social Psychological and* Personality *Science*, Derrick asked half of the participants to complete a structured task which required concentrated effort. The other half were asked to complete a similar but less structured task that allowed them more freedom and required much less effort.

Then half of the participants were asked to write about their favorite television show while the other half listed items in their room (a "neutral" task).

Following this, the participants were tested to measure any reduction or renewal of willpower.

Those who wrote about their favorite television show (rather than listing items in their room) wrote for longer if they had done the structured task than if they had done the less-structured task. This, Derrick says, indicates these participants were seeking out their favorite TV shows and they wanted to spend more time thinking about them.

And writing about their favorite television show restored their energy levels and allowed them to perform better on a difficult puzzle.

In the second study, participants kept a daily diary. They reported on their effortful tasks, media consumption and energy levels each day. If they had to do effortful tasks, they were more likely to seek out a re-run of their favorite television show, to re-watch a favorite movie or to re-read a favorite book. Doing so, then restored their energy levels.

"In other words, there was a measurable restorative effect from a familiar fictional world," Derrick finds.

But that doesn't mean people should veg-out in front of any TV show.

"The restorative effect I found is specific to re-watching favorite television shows (or re-watching favorite movies or re-reading favorite books)," Derrick says. "Just watching whatever is on television does not provide the same benefit. And perhaps surprisingly, watching a new episode of a favorite television show for the first time does not provide the same benefit."

Derrick explains that there is something special and comfortable about a "relationship" in which you already know what the other person is going to say and do, and all you have to do is sit there and enjoy it.

In fact, the effects of this fictional "social surrogacy" may work better than actual social interaction with real people under some circumstances.

"Although there are positive outcomes to social interaction such as a sense of feeling of being energized," says Derrick, "human exchanges can also produce a sense of rejection, exclusion and ostracism, which may diminish willpower."

Derrick's findings may dispel some notions that watching TV is bad for us.

"Based on my research, I would argue that watching television is not all bad. While there is a great deal of research demonstrating that violent television can increase aggression, and watching television may be contributing to the growing obesity epidemic, watching a favorite television show can provide a variety of benefits, which may enhance overall wellbeing," she says.

Derrick's new research will expand on these findings and examine other social consequences of television.

"I have found, for example, that favorite television shows can actually increase people's pro-social behavior. Specifically, after thinking about a favorite television show, people are more willing to forgive others, are more willing to help a stranger and are more willing to sacrifice for their romantic partner," she says.

Provided by University at Buffalo