

Happiness & TV

Television has a real impact on mood, but whether it helps or hurts depends on how you use it.

Images effect the brain differently than books, and the mood center (amygdala) is highly developed to respond to visual cues and body language. Programs with positive images can improve mood. Of course, what is positive for one person may be annoying to another. We try to present relaxing images and music in the waiting room here and encourage your feedback on how it impacts you.

Below is a summary of the research on television and mental health.

News programs can increase depression

This may be because the media overly-emphasizes the problems in the world and plays to our fears.

Advertising can increase depression

Studies have found that unhappiness increases with the amount of advertising people are exposed to. This may have to do with the way ads can make us feel inadequate or unsafe (unless we buy the product!). Experiences that make us feel less valuable than others – like being bullied or shamed – are a strong risk factor for depression. To a lesser extent, ads that showcase attractive people driving luxury cars may generate the same feelings.

Channel Surfing may worsen depression

Actively setting and reaching goals can help ward off depression. When we surf channels, there is often no goal in site and no specific is program found. On the other hand, depression may improve when you schedule a favorite program at 7pm as a way to relax and reward yourself just for getting through the day.

Moderation

Depression makes people avoid change, variety and novelty. It's common to watch too much TV during depression, because everything else is too difficult or unrewarding. If yourself in this trap, spice up your schedule with new ideas; try:

www.moodtreatmentcenter.com/active.htm

Some programs can worsen PTSD

Graphic images which remind you of past trauma

may worsen post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). People can also develop new PTSD from too much exposure to tragedies in the news (this has happened in people who watch too much footage of national tragedies like 9/11).

Violence on TV is a problem

Although this used to be controversial, research has established that exposure to graphic violence on TV does increase the risk of violent behavior in children.

A word about Blue Light

TVs emit blue-light, which has been linked to insomnia, depression, several types of cancer (breast, prostate), diabetes, heart disease, and obesity. There are products which can filter the blue light from television, including screen filters and night-time glasses (at www.lowbluelights.com or www.cet.ort). Computers, tablets and smart-phones are just as bad and sometimes worse. A free download will lower the blue light in your monitor at night (search term = "f.lux").

Move around, laugh a little

Another risk with TV is physical inactivity. The brain needs at least 30 minutes/day of aerobic activity (anything which gets your heart rate up by 10 beats/minute) to stay healthy and beat off depression. It might help to move and stretch while you watch. Or try a comedy – 10-15 minutes of laughter actually burns 50 calories. Laughter also improves mood, sleep, stress-hormones and the immune system.

—Updated 11/11/2013 by Chris Aiken, MD

