



A Spell on You

TV is a lot easier to turn on than off,
says new research. *By Bill Glovin*

Few things are more relaxing than curling up on a comfortable sofa, grabbing the remote, and watching your favorite TV show. And while no one begrudges you this often satisfying and seductive pleasure, you may not realize that TV—like a habit-forming sedative—sucks you in by making you feel relaxed as long as you keep watching.

That's the message of a February *Scientific American* cover story co-written by Robert Kubey, director of the Center for Media Studies and a professor of journalism and media studies at Rutgers, School of Communication, Information, and Library

Studies. The average individual in the industrialized world, the article states, devotes three hours a day to the pursuit—fully half their leisure time. "At this rate," Kubey and his co-author, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, calculate, "someone who lives to 75 would spend nine years of his or her life in front of the tube."

Using scientific studies, polls and surveys, and plain old common sense, the authors hammer home the following essential points:

- ◆ The use of cuts, zooms, pans, and sudden noises activates the human "orienting response"—our sensitivity to movement and potential predatory threats. As a result, our heart rate slows as the "brain focuses its attention on gathering more information while the body rests," write the authors. This leads to a kind of hypnotic trance.

- ◆ The sense of relaxation ends when the set is turned off, but the feelings of passivity and lowered alertness continue. In contrast, reading, sports, and other hobbies actually improve one's mood.

- ◆ Viewing is less mentally stimulating, as measured by alpha brain wave production, than reading.

- ◆ Excessive viewing leads to boredom and loneliness and lessens creativity in problem solving and the ability to persevere at tasks.

The authors also recommend a few strategies to kick a persistent TV habit. To cut down on viewing, they suggest turning off a particular program or movie within the first few minutes if it doesn't live up to expectations. "It's natural to keep watching to find out what happens next," they write, "but once the set is off

and people have turned their attention to other things, they rarely care anymore." Also, track and enforce limits with a kitchen timer and post a list of alternative activities on the fridge so that family members won't reflexively plop down in front of the TV after dinner.

While Kubey isn't comfortable with the term "TV addiction" since it suggests biological dependency and is laden with value judgments, he and his colleague report that researchers have found that people do, in fact, experience classic withdrawal symptoms when they cut back on viewing. They