

# My resolution: A year without TV. Here's how it worked out.

BY TEAL BURRELL

There's a scene in "Friends" where Ross's colleague admits she doesn't have a television. Incredulous, Joey asks, "You don't own a TV? What's all your furniture pointed at?"

Americans are obsessed with television, spending an average of five hours a day pointing ourselves at it even as we complain we're busier than ever. It rules our lives, whether we admit it or not. A friend of mine claims to not watch much TV, but whenever I visit her — morning,

noon or night — it's on. After my husband admitted we hadn't watched any while on vacation, a family member was floored: "A whole week without TV?" And when I showed off my new house, visitors were most excited about the cable outlet on the back porch; now I can even point my outdoor furniture at a TV.

But for all the time we spend with it, TV doesn't repay us very nicely. People who watch more television are generally unhappier, heavier and worse sleepers, and have a higher risk of death over a

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defined length of time.

Studies have found links between children and teenagers who watch a lot of TV and worse attention spans, lower grades and structural differences in brain regions associated with intelligence. One study found that people in their 20s and 30s who watched at least three hours of TV a day did worse on tests of cognitive focus and speed when they reached their 40s and 50s than those who had watched less TV as young adults.

A few years ago, I realized — despite feeling constantly frazzled and busy — that I wasted hours clicking through shows I barely liked or bingeing on series I'd already seen. I had big aspirations for the near future — I wanted to defend my PhD thesis, launch a freelance writing career and qualify for the Olympic trials in the marathon — but they seemed overwhelming, things I had been working at for years.

I needed more time to read, research, write, run and rest. What if I gave up TV ... for an entire year?

Despite a lifetime of failed New Year's resolutions, I started on Jan. 1, 2014. On the second day, I found myself in a bar discussing the latest shows. Already, talking TV felt wrong, as though I were a recovering addict walking by an old supplier's place. But not wanting to seem like a pretentious ascetic, I didn't mention my resolution.

In fact, for the rest of the year, I told few people what I was doing. It became an experiment: Would anyone notice? Do we need to watch television to be social?

But banning TV didn't seem to affect my social life. Water-cooler discussions don't revolve around the previous night's must-see TV as they once did; streaming means not everyone is watching the same episode or even the same season. I could just say I hadn't gotten to that episode and no one thought twice about it. The only times I felt I was missing out were retellings of late-night talk-show jokes. I figured I'd watch some programs I missed when the year ended, but reruns of "The Daily Show" would just be dated.

Almost immediately I noticed I was enjoying my weeknights more. I didn't automatically collapse on the couch only to look up hours later, surprised so much time had passed. My husband, while supportive of my mission, wasn't particularly eager to adopt the same resolution. He agreed to wear headphones while he watched TV (mostly sports, which I didn't find particularly tempting anyway), so some nights would find us both on the couch — me reading and turned away from the TV, him silently cheering on the Nationals/Redskins/Wizards. Sans TV, evenings seemed



COURTESY OF TEAL BURRELL

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longer: I got more chores or work done, spent time piddling on the Internet or read. And I actually got to bed on time.

But in March, not quite three months into my effort and exhausted from running a half marathon and battling a cold, I nearly caved. All I wanted to do was spend an entire Sunday lying on the couch and resting, but I couldn't plop down in front of some mindless TV.

Surely there's some good to television, as stress relief or to give our brains a break, isn't there?

"That's one of the most debated questions in television studies in the last 40 years," says Michael Grabowski, a media studies researcher at Manhattan College and editor of "Neuroscience and Media: New Understandings and Representations." "Does television help us be more relaxed and is it kind of a cathartic experience, or does television feed into addiction and make us more anxious?"

Studies seem mixed depending on the genre, but TV can color how we see the world.

"The more television we watch, the more it influences our understanding of the real world and how it operates," says Grabowski, citing a theory originally developed by communications researcher George Gerbner. One aspect of this well-established cultivation theory states that if we watch programs with lots of

violence, we think of the world as a more violent place — not exactly an anxiety-reducing perspective. Watching "Law and Order: SVU" is hardly a way to make you sleep better. But comedies comfortably reinforce social rules, Grabowski says: The guy with the hare-brained scheme usually gets his comeuppance. A small study found that comedies may also decrease levels of stress hormones in the blood, while another found that laughing may increase endorphins.

But more research needs to be done, as better understanding of the neurochemistry of TV watching might shed light on whether it's habit-forming. Although "there's no consensus on [TV watching] being an addictive behavior," says psychologist Steve Sussman, who has written a textbook on addictions. Based on the available research, he says, "I think TV addiction is probably the first addiction that people experience in life."

People can become preoccupied with television, spending more time watching it than they intended to despite negative consequences on their relationships, schoolwork, happiness and health.

And, as with taking an addictive drug, consuming more TV may leave us worse off. One study found that people who binge-watched TV (defined as watching two or more episodes in one sitting) reported more depression

and loneliness than those who didn't binge.

Despite my unhappiness on that TV-less sick day, I stuck with my resolution and, in early spring, I completed my PhD. One major accomplishment down.

I was feeling proud until I realized I had started to transfer my TV time to Twitter and Facebook. How was that better?

As an aspiring writer, I had hoped to spend my extra hours reading. I doubled my efforts, but the desire to shut off my brain again nagged at me. Reading fiction and watching a fictional show seem similar, but television fills in more of the blanks. "With a novel, we get to participate in imagination of what these characters look like or what the settings feel like," Grabowski says. Sometimes that felt too exhausting, and I missed having the TV do the work.

In August, my sister invited my cousin and me to a friend's beach house. Soon after we arrived, my cousin discovered the TV was broken, and she wasn't happy about it. But my sister was relieved, glad to be free from TV for a few days. We spent the days at the beach and the evenings talking, TV-free.

Not long after, as the new fall shows debuted, I remained blissfully unaware; without commercials, the previews weren't drilled into my head. Neither were endless plugs for fast food and mouth-watering snacks. I wondered if I'd achieved a better diet by not being tempted by manipulative commercials or fast-paced shows, which some research suggests can increase distracted eating. I wasn't sure: I had lost weight, but I also was training to run a marathon. Either way, I certainly didn't miss commercials.

Did I miss any of it? As the year neared its end, my husband said he doubted I'd tune back in. I agreed.

In December of 2014, I ran my fastest marathon ever, qualifying for the 2016 U.S. Olympic Trials and accomplishing all of my TV-free-year goals: I defended my thesis, started a writing career and made it to the trials. In my newly discovered spare time, I also read 35 books, a personal record. Could I have done all that without giving up TV?

Maybe, but I'm doubtful. Regardless, I decidedly kicked my addiction. (And my husband also admitted he watched less over the year.)

Two years later, I haven't stayed entirely away from TV. But now I watch only a few shows, with intention. I discovered TV is better in small doses, not turned on instinctively to channel-surf or to fill the silence.

A few days into 2015, proud of the only resolution I'd ever kept, I told a friend what I'd done. She laughed it off and said it was easy: She'd just watch Hulu.

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