

So, here's the science behind why we're so obsessed with watching reality shows

Arielle Tschinkel

If you're like us, there's a good chance that, after a long day, you look forward to **winding down** with a bowl of snacks and your favorite reality shows on deck. No shame – it's our favorite hobby, too! But there's *also* a good chance you've likely never given too much thought to the psychology behind why we're so obsessed with reality TV, and yes, there is actual *science* behind it.

Turns out, experts have been diving into our cultural obsession with reality shows for decades, ever since we first became captivated by the contestants on *Survivor* or the housemates on *The Real World*. According to a recent article in *Psychology Today*, there's a pretty direct connection between watching reality TV and voyeurism, which sounds creepy and certainly conjures up images of looking through people's windows and obsessing over someone's private life.

But we wanted to get to the core of the discussion here: Is it so bad that we love reality TV? Isn't it a relatively harmless form of escapism?

We talked to five experts who gave us the insight on why we're glued to the TV week after week, and it turns out, there's little to be worried about, even if you spend endless hours on the couch, waiting to see who will get that final rose. Though it seems most reality shows are staged or scripted to a point (or, at the very least, edited in clever ways), why are we so obsessed with them?

Dr. Jana Scrivani, a licensed clinical psychologist, explains that it's the perfect storm of feeling less connected with the people around us than ever before due to our busy schedules and finding that connection in characters or contestants. "Every genre of television, but reality television in particular, gives us a false sense that we really know the people we see on the screen each week. This sense of having a personal relationship is amplified with the 'reality' label, even though we are well-aware that the reality piece is often greatly exaggerated. Modern life has us pulled in many different directions, and close ties between family and friends are at all-time lows. Over time, we come to see the folks portrayed on the screen as friends. We identify with their **struggles** and triumphs. It's much less time consuming to take in a half an hour television show than to connect with a friend – we can squeeze reality TV in between work, the dishes, and putting the kids to bed." And it seems that the less connected you feel to people in your life, the more you may seek the drama of reality shows.

According to Alex Hedger, cognitive behavioral therapist and clinical director at Dynamic You Therapy Clinics in London, social media is also to blame here. "Many people use TV and social media, in particular, to increase either passive or active relationships with others. [These tools] can be really helpful, however like all things, balance is the key. There is also increasing evidence psychologically which shows that increased use of...social media and reality TV can have negative impacts on young people's social abilities and emotional fluency."

But not *all* the experts were convinced that we're replacing our real-life social networks with those of the Teen Moms. Dr. Racine R. Henry, licensed marriage and family therapist, was quick to keep things in perspective. "I think if someone is truly lonely, they may find comfort in watching reality TV but it could also have an adverse [effect]. Imagine being lonely...and then watching people with unlimited amounts of money argue over something trivial. That would make you feel worse [about your situation]. Reality shows play various roles for every one that watches. It's most important to keep things in perspective and keep in mind that nobody's life is perfect, **regardless** of how it appears on TV."

In fact, part of why it's so fun is because we're aware of how artificial these shows are. Dr. Carole Lieberman, M.D., media psychiatrist and reality TV consultant, **broke it down** for us, explaining why we get such deep enjoyment from watching the triumphs and tragedies of our favorite reality stars. "We live **vicariously** through the experiences of the reality TV stars – from the safety of our own homes. We don't actually have to risk our heart or our reputation when we vicariously live through the experiences of the reality show participants," she explains.

Clinical psychologist Dr. Farrell **doubles down on** this, adding that it's largely so enjoyable *because* we're aware that the reality in reality TV isn't *actually* real. "Most of us know that this isn't real at all, and that [reality stars] really are all just playing roles. Remember when you were a child and you enjoyed playing house? This is the equivalent of playing house in a way with people on TV who aren't there physically with you."

Ultimately, though, each expert agrees that reality TV provides a glossy, fun escape from our everyday lives. Dr. Henry adds, "Reality TV is the ultimate escape. We get to see **lavish** lifestyles, outrageous arguments, and never-ending drama. We don't have to think about the problems we have in our real lives and we get to **weigh in on** the choices and mistakes of a population that was foreign to us before the reality TV era."

And should we be concerned about the voyeuristic undercurrent involved in spending hours **vested** in the lives of strangers? Absolutely not, according to Dr. Henry. She says, "The biggest boundary between clinical voyeurism and enjoying reality TV is what a viewer does when the show is over."

The questions she says to ask if you're concerned are as follows: "Are you obsessing about the people you watch to the point of knowing everything about them and trying to find them in real life? Are you neglecting work, your friends, your family, your real life to tweet these celebrities or send them messages on Instagram? Do you get personally offended by criticism of these shows/people? Are your real relationships impacted by your level of fandom?" The bottom line, according to Dr. Henry, is, "As long as you are able to separate what you're watching from actual everyday life, I think you are simply using reality TV for entertainment." And with that, we'll happily continue *keeping up* with the Kardashians week after week. Grab the remote!

- | | |
|-------------------------|--|
| 1. to wind down | () make a forceful contribution to a competition or argument. |
| 2. struggles | () a determined effort under difficulties. |
| 3. regardless | () relax after stress or excitement |
| 4. break something down | () large in quantity and expensive or impressive |
| 5. to double down on | () to give someone or something the power to do something |
| 6. lavish | () without paying attention to the present situation |
| 7. to weigh in | () analyze information. |
| 8. to vest | () take a further risk in a situation or passionately re-commit one's efforts to a cause or course of action. |

Adapted from : <https://hellogiggles.com/reviews-coverage/tv-shows/science-behind-watching-reality-shows/>