



How to Find Two Hours in Your Day

Using Television to Your Advantage and Not As Your Crutch

After a long hard day at work, it's practically the American way to come home, flip on the TV and leave it on for hours... and hours... and hours. Some people say they need TV to "decompress" after a hard day at work... others say they like to be entertained or, even, to have a sense of admittedly fake companionship from on-screen TV personalities. This is all well and good until you add up the time spent in front of the TV. With obesity and its related illnesses growing and what many believe to be a decline in social connectedness, surely those mindless hours intrude on a more gratifying life. The TV issue seemed to be a good topic for one of my monthly conversations with life coach Lauren Zander, founding partner of The Handel Group. We explored how TV is a trap and how people can squirm out of its clutches.

MANAGING TELEVISION TIME

Interestingly, Lauren says the issue has nothing to do with TV itself. Rather, and not surprisingly, it is the amount of time people spend in front of it. She has observed that both her busiest clients, people who are at the top of the success ladder and who work many hours each day, and those who live more balanced lives claim to watch "only a little" TV. However, when they figure out how many hours they actually spend, they are astonished to discover it's more than 15 to 20 hours each week! Sure some of that time is theoretically spent watching "good" programs like news, business or education programs. The problem, however, is that for most people TV watching consumes a large part of life. Sitting there gazing at the screen is a problem not because of what you are doing but because of what it means you are not doing — for instance, having creative conversations with your spouse or children, calling up old friends, getting at-home projects underway, meeting new people. Instead you have turned yourself into a passive onlooker, watching a multitude of programs that have only the slightest interest and maybe even reruns of shows that didn't much interest you the first time around.

DARE TO CHANGE

Lauren likes to present the TV challenge as a dare — turn off your TV for two weeks to find out how it affects your life. This is important as a step toward greater excellence in living, she says, but it requires real motivation and effort. In short, it's hard and here is why — all of us, including the busiest people among us, suffer to some degree from laziness. This goes back to a simple principle

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of physics — a body at rest stays at rest without a greater force to put it in motion. Lauren adds that this principle applies to many aspects of life, not just TV, and it is, she says, “always going to be part of the human dilemma.” In short, it will always be easier to be lazy rather than motivate ourselves into doing something else. Having the TV on is the ultimate deception of feeling like you are doing something, when all it does is let you pretend that you’re not really being lethargic.

GETTING STARTED

To ease into the dare, Lauren advises making a list of the TV shows you really love, the ones that make you laugh or that move you or whatever else you find compelling about them. Probably this will involve about four shows. Then keep track for a week or so of how many hours you actually watch TV in addition to your favorite shows — if you’re like most people, the total will come to more than 15 to 20 hours. The extra hours are what you will eliminate, turning on the TV only to watch a favored show — and turning it off right afterward. You may try to kid yourself that it’s okay to leave it on as “background noise,” but this doesn’t fly with Lauren. Background TV remains a distraction from life and artificial filler, she says. Instead, turn on music you love that transports you to a happier place in your mind. Do this via your CD player or MP3, not the radio, which also has distracting voices. She adds that you can enhance the TV challenge by doing it with your spouse or a friend. “It can be a good time, and the fun is contagious,” she says.

By the second week of the TV dare, you will no doubt be “bumping into your own boredom,” as Lauren phrases it. At this point she advises devising a plan of things you can do instead — and for most people it should start with activities you have been avoiding. Start to make a list of what else you can do with the extra time you have regained — there should be enough time to accomplish some truly meaningful activities. Who are the important people in your life you could be in touch with? Call them or send a letter. Find ways to improve your social life, like making plans with friends, finding pursuits where you are apt to meet like-minded people, activities like wine tasting lectures, foreign language classes, museum talks and so much more. Start some of those household projects you’ve been thinking about. Every community today, even small ones, offers a plethora of activities from local college courses to volunteer work... or you can organize a group of friends for regular get-togethers such as themed revolving potluck dinners.

Sometimes you may decide to do simpler things... meet a friend for a movie, play an instrument you haven’t played in a while or go for a walk. Whatever the activity of choice might be, giving up TV addiction allows you to reclaim the equivalent of an extra whole day in your life each week. Use it to make your time on this planet more productive, richer and just plain more fun. You absolutely can change your life, says Lauren, and the place to start is turning off the TV.