



Reruns Are Good for You

Watching the 11 o'clock news is no way to lower your stress levels before bed. For that, it's better to head to a place where everybody knows your name, where they'll be there for you and where they thank you for being a friend.

ALTHOUGH CLASSIC TV IS OFTEN DERIDED AS A GUILTY PLEASURE — or, worse, an excuse for “bed rotting” — a 2025 study in the academic journal *Acta Psychologica* showed that binge-watching old favorites is chemically beneficial to the brain. As it turns out, reruns can reduce levels of cortisol (“the stress hormone”) while boosting levels of oxytocin (“the love hormone”), releasing the pleasure-generating neurotransmitter dopamine and lighting up established neuropathways for a healthy mental workout.

Psychologists have long understood the “mere-exposure effect” of a stimulus — sitcom or otherwise — wherein repeated exposure to something makes it easier for the brain to process it and thus like it. In other words, familiarity with your *Friends* breeds true feelings of friendship. As *Sex and the City* executive producer Michael Patrick King notes, those warm fuzzies can start to flow merely upon hearing his show’s cascading xylophone riff, or the lyrics to the *Cheers* theme.

“The gateway drug is that first sound,” King explains. “As with certain smells, something happens in your brain where it takes you back to some happy memory — familiar feelings telling you, ‘Here come your friends again!’”

For a show to produce this effect, there must be at least dozens, if not hundreds, of episodes — which means that in its original run, the show was likely in our living rooms for years.

“If you go to a movie, you might feel like you’ve had dinner with those characters once,” *Designing Women* creator Linda Bloodworth-Thomason says. “You got to know them somewhat, and you liked them, but you’ll probably never see them again. Even if there’s a sequel, it’ll just be another dinner. But with a TV series, those characters have moved into the house. You live with them every week, and they become part of your family.”

Visiting again with those same characters years later, it’s satisfying not only to revisit the love you have for them but to witness the love they will forever exhibit for each other. ➡➡

➡ The effect is a kind of emotional safe space, “taking you back to the time you first watched the episode,” says *The Big Bang Theory* cocreator Bill Prady. “It’s the same thing as visiting your old neighborhood.”

In some cases, sitcoms are like a cozy space within a cozy space, as in the case of *Friends*. Writers David Crane and Marta Kauffman created their six title characters in 1994 out of nostalgia for their own 20s, a life stage when your friends become your surrogate family.

Other binge-worthy shows bestow a comforting aura of a more literal, physical kind of safety, like when *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*’s Captain Olivia Benson (Mariska Hargitay) puts a perp behind bars, or when *Designing Women*’s Julia Sugarbaker (Dixie Carter) rips into an adversary with razor-sharp wit.

“If you watch some movies or TV dramas, women are treated like deer, killed all day long. They’re always in season,” Bloodworth-Thomason bemoans. And so, as a respite, female viewers in particular might opt for comforting reruns in which anxiety is reduced because they already know what’s going to happen. Bloodworth-Thomason says they can select a favorite



where “no woman ever ends up in a morgue drawer. They prevail, generally with their verbosity, and they wear it on their shoulder pads. Those shows can be really exhilarating.”

She theorizes that our favorite series all have a “hearth” — a central setting from which the good times flow. Whether it’s *Frasier*’s living room or *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*’s WJM-TV newsroom, just a glimpse of those iconic sets can relax one’s

system and perhaps even overwrite unpleasant images from the day’s cable news.

But that’s not to say that practicing such self-care in front of our flatscreens means we’re giving in to complacency. King explains, “What writers are trying to do is lift the human spirit into light, even in dark times. Whether resilient comic characters or incredibly heroic ones, they keep going on. So, as a viewer, if nothing else, you’re getting from the shows a little bit of coaching.”

Every repeat is like a refresher course, reminding us, as King says, “If Carrie Bradshaw can get up after falling on the fashion runway, you can get up, too.” —JIM COLUCCI

THE GREAT ESCAPE

Today’s tech has made “escapist TV” more bingeable than ever. Here’s what six industry impresarios watch for a much-needed unwind.

Lloyd J. Schwartz

Producer, *The Brady Bunch*
“*The Golden Girls*, because you know it’s going to turn out all right, and you can feel that the characters love each other. But if I have a half-hour to kill at home, I’m putting on *Seinfeld*. I’m tickled by how they weave three or four subplots together in an unpredictable way — and by how those characters barely tolerate each other.”

Michael Patrick King

Showrunner-EP, *Sex and the City*
“Because I write narrative, I don’t go to narrative shows for comfort. I get too involved in

how they are doing storylines. I love the creativity in *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. I find it original, fresh and empowering. Look at where these characters come from and how they’re winning and moving forward.”

Linda Bloodworth-Thomason

Creator-EP, *Designing Women*
“I’m addicted to *Everybody Loves Raymond*. I’m not trying to be pretentious, but I think it has all the qualities of a Shakespearean play. The characters are so flawed and maddening, and you love them anyway. I’ve seen every episode over and over, and I laugh

every time at the comedic hurricane those actors create.”

Bill Prady

Cocreator-EP, *The Big Bang Theory*
“*The Dick Van Dyke Show* is brilliant — a simple premise with terrific acting, great writing and solid jokes. I also find *M*A*S*H* comforting, even though it’s about war. The show’s central question is, ‘Can humanity survive war?’ And it does. There’s something very comforting about that.”

David Crane

Cocreator-EP, *Friends*

“We like watching *Shark Tank* during dinner.

They’re episodes we’ve seen before, but fortunately, there are so many seasons now that we don’t remember who makes deals with whom. For us, that’s mindless, soothing and non-triggering comfort.”

James Burrows

Cocreator-EP, *Cheers*
“*Curb Your Enthusiasm*, because I don’t know what’s coming. I didn’t watch it consistently in the past, so it’s almost like watching for the first time. And Larry David really makes me laugh.”
—J.C.