

*INTODUCTORY NOTE:* Marie Winn wrote children's books and published articles in *The New York Times* and *The Village Voice*. She is best known for her interest in the effects of television on its viewers. The following passage is adapted from her 1977 book *The Plug-In Drug: Television, Children, and Family*.

## **ADDICTED TO TELEVISION**

The word "addiction" is often used loosely and wryly in conversation. People will refer to themselves as "mystery book addicts" or "cookie addicts." E.B. White writes of his annual surge of interest in gardening: "We are hooked and are making an attempt to kick the habit." Yet nobody really believes that reading mysteries or ordering seeds by catalogue is serious enough to be compared with addictions to heroin or alcohol. The word "addiction" is here used jokingly to denote a tendency to overindulge in some pleasurable activity. Similarly, people often refer to being "hooked on TV." Does this, too, fall into the lighthearted category of cookie eating and other pleasures that people pursue with unusual intensity, or is there a kind of television viewing that falls into the more serious category of destructive addiction?

When we think about addiction to drugs or alcohol, we frequently focus on negative aspects, ignoring the pleasures that accompany drinking or drug-taking. And yet the essence of any serious addiction is a pursuit of pleasure, a search for a "high" that normal life does not supply. It is only the inability to function without the addictive substance that is dismaying, the dependence of the organism upon a certain experience and an increasing inability to function normally without it. Thus people will take two or three drinks at the end of the day not merely for the pleasure drinking provides, but also because they "don't feel normal" without them.

Addicts do not merely pursue a pleasurable experience and need to experience it in order to function normally. They need to *repeat* it again and again. Something about that particular experience makes life without it less than complete. Other potentially pleasurable experiences are no longer possible, for under the spell of the addictive experience, addicts' lives are particularly distorted. Addicts crave an experience and yet are never really satisfied by it. The organism may be temporarily sated, but soon it begins to crave again. Finally, a serious addiction is distinguished from a harmless pursuit of pleasure by its distinctly destructive elements. Heroin addicts, for instance, lead damaged lives: their increasing need for heroin in increasing doses prevents them from working, from maintaining relationships, from developing in human ways. An alcoholic's life is similarly narrowed and dehumanized by dependence on alcohol.

Let us consider television viewing in the light of the conditions that define serious addictions.

Not unlike drugs or alcohol, the television experience allows the participant to blot out the real world and enter into a pleasurable and passive mental state. The worries and anxieties of reality are as effectively deferred by becoming absorbed in a television

program as by going on a “trip” induced by drugs or alcohol. And just as alcoholics are only inchoately aware of their addiction, feeling that they control their drinking more than they really do (“I can cut it out any time I want – I just like to have three or four drinks before dinner”), people similarly overestimate their control over television watching. Even as they put off other activities to spend hour after hour watching television, they feel they could easily resume living in a different, less passive style. But somehow or other while the television set is present in their homes, the click doesn’t sound. With television pleasures available, those other experiences seem less attractive, more difficult somehow. One heavy viewer, a college instructor, observes: “I find television almost irresistible. When the set is on, I cannot ignore it. I can’t turn it off. I feel sapped, will-less, enervated. As I reach out to turn off the set, the strength goes out of my arms. So I sit there for hours and hours.”

Self-confessed television addicts often feel they “ought” to do other things – but the fact that they don’t read and don’t plant their gardens or sew or crochet or play games or have conversations means that those activities are no longer as desirable as television viewing. In a way, the heavy viewer’s life is as imbalanced by the television “habit” as a drug addict’s or an alcoholic’s. Each is living in a holding pattern, as it were, passing up the activities that lead to growth or development or a sense of accomplishment. This is one reason people talk about their television viewing so ruefully, so apologetically. They are aware that it is an unproductive experience, that almost any other endeavor is more worthwhile by any human measure.

Finally it is the adverse effect of television viewing on the lives of so many people that defines it as a serious addiction. The television habit distorts the sense of time. It renders other experiences vague and curiously unreal while taking on a greater reality for itself. It weakens relationships by reducing and sometimes eliminating normal opportunities for talking, for communicating. And yet television does not satisfy, else why would the viewer continue to watch hour after hour, day after day? “The measure of health,” writes Lawrence Kubie, “is flexibility...and especially the freedom to cease when sated.” But television viewers can never be sated with their television experiences -- because those experiences do not provide the true nourishment that satiation requires -- and thus they find that they cannot stop watching.

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## **ESSAY TOPIC**

According to Winn, in what ways does television viewing resemble the use of such addictive substances as alcohol and drugs? To what degree do you find her observations and arguments persuasive? Write an essay that responds to these two questions; to develop your own position, be sure to use specific examples. Your examples can be drawn from anything you have read, as well as from your observation and experience.