

OPINION

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A plan for television addicts

Are you addicted to TV? Most people don't admit it, but their most frequent companion is a TV. The average family watches 25 hours of TV per week, and some watch as many as 55 hours per week. The average person has been watching 1000-2000 hours of TV per year since (s)he was 3 years old.

Watching a lot of TV does not necessarily make you an addict, of course. Sometimes heavy viewing is temporary, as when health problems make people more stationary than they otherwise would be, or when people move to a new town and haven't developed alternate social ties and activities.

Sometimes, however, TV watching looks like a real dependency. If you apply the general definition of addiction to television, ask if three or more of the following symptoms apply to you:

- You recognize that your use of TV is excessive but you feel unable to control it;
- Social or recreational activities are sacrificed because of TV use;
- With heavy use, a variety of social, psychological or physical problems may occur;
- Withdrawal symptoms can develop if you try to stop;
- And the substance (TV) is used more than you intended.

Interestingly, the main characteristic of TV dependency is not an obsession with a specific show or shows, but rather a dependency of the medium. After dinner, many families settle down to an evening of watching TV, regardless of what's on.

Interestingly, however, heavy television users get less pleasure from TV than people who watch it more rarely. Why? Perhaps those programs watched later on are of less interest than those watched earlier — a person may be "hooked" by on-air promotions for the next show, which then fail to meet the expectations raised.

Many viewers also feel worse the longer they watch because they know they aren't accomplishing anything. They feel somewhat



PSYCHOLOGY IN THE '90S

with DR. ARNOLD RINCOVER

guilty and contemptuous of themselves, though they keep watching.

Why do people develop a dependency on TV? One reason is boredom. They start watching when they're bored, and they don't develop other skills or activities to reduce their boredom. It then becomes a habit.

A second factor is that watching TV alters moods. It relaxes people very quickly. It's highly habit-forming because of its quick effect. We are most apt to turn on the TV when we are upset, angry, sad, because we relax and forget our problems as we get lost in the story on TV. It provides an escape.

Researchers recommend several strategies for breaking the dependency. First, measure your viewing for a week. Second, identify the times you are most likely to watch TV — after dinner, Saturday afternoon, etc. Third, make a list of activities that you might enjoy doing (or trying) at those times (e.g. reading, sports, taking a class, playing with the kids or going over their school work, visiting friends).

Put the list on your refrigerator and look at it before you turn on the TV. Try to make plans a few days ahead for at least one evening per week and make commitments that are difficult to break — join the YMCA, make a date to take the kids skating, set a time to visit relatives, take a class of some kind. Look for things that are fun, so that they can easily compete with TV.

Finally, limit yourself to a certain amount of TV per day, by identifying the shows you really want to watch and turning the TV off when that show is over.



Lowering credit card rates would stimulate the economy

Some economic pundits have grumbled lately about the fact Canadians aren't spending enough money. They argue the economic recovery is being held back by the consumer's general lack of confidence and a refusal to open their purses and spend, spend, spend. Have Canadians gone into consumer hibernation?

The question of floundering consumer confidence cannot be addressed without acknowledging the Canadians who are grappling with high levels of personal debt and experiencing anxiety about their financial future.

Particularly in light of mounting unemployment numbers, many people have decided retreat and caution is the wisest move.

Consider also the thousands of shoppers who drive daily to the United States. As is well known (but never admitted by politicians), these Canadians are staging a tax

MAINSTREAM CANADA



with MICHAEL WYCKS

revolt against the smothering taxes levied in Canada on basically anything they buy.

The above are just two elements which add up to a rather empty consumer spending pie and a citizenry unwilling or unable to stimulate the economic recovery with a flurry of purchasing power.

Yet, there is another factor, one too often ignored or quietly tolerated, which takes a big bite out of consumers' buying power: credit card interest rates. They have remained at shockingly high levels throughout these recessionary times.

Looking back at conditions a year ago, the prime rate was 9.75 per cent and the cost of credit cards ranged from 18.75 to 20.75 per cent. Thus, the differential then was between then was between 9 and 11 percent.

Today, the prime is 6.5 percent and financial institutions are charging anywhere between 16.75 percent and 19.75 percent, a differential of between 10.25 and 13.25 percent.

Unbelievably, the gap has increased during one of the toughest recessions Canada has experienced this century.

Furthermore, inflation is lower today than it was a year ago.

As Brian Gray, senior vice president, policy and research for the Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses points out, the banks must accept responsibility for their part in blocking the economic recovery.

"They've put up a wall in front of Canadians, a wall sustained by their greed," Gray says.

"There is little they can say or do to justify charging the exalted interest rates on credit cards they currently enjoy. To truly get the economy rolling again, retailers need people coming through their doors to shop. One of the big reasons this isn't happening is the banks' unwillingness to come back down to earth with their credit charges."

Earth to banks: Are you listening?

First encounter with a ferret has some merit

Had my first serious conversation with a ferret the other day.

It's not that I've avoided the little critters particularly; it's just that previous encounters had left me with the feeling that these animals are blessed with unpleasant temperaments and a tendency to bite.

The little guy I was introduced to had every reason to bite and behave abominably. He had been rescued just two days prior, by Sheena Rodda, the Humane Society Officer investigating cruelty charges for North Peel.

His cage, plastic bottom 6" deep with a wire top, was outside in a heavy rainstorm, and he'd been left there, unattended for at least two days. Only his nose was above water, he was shivering violently, and likely would not have lasted much longer.

"He sure was happy to see me," says Sheena, who had immediately tipped as much water out of the cage as she could before loading the whole thing into her rescue truck.

To say that he smelled bad would be an understatement, she says, and he did not really enjoy his subsequent bath very much but he endured it. The hair dryer he loved, rolling over onto his back in ecstasy to get his belly dried.

"Don't name him, he's not staying," Sheena told the kids. That remains to be seen, as he's a very affectionate and amusing creature. Fer-



PETS AND YOU

with ANNE NORMAN

rets belong to the weasel family and their long bodies with short legs make for a curious, hunched-up walk. Kind of like something out of a Monty Python skit.

These animals are burrowers, and they are always crawling into or underneath things: furniture, blankets, your clothing while you're still in it. The Un-named One was digging his way under a couch when I met him but he gladly came over to say "hello" and to have his head scratched. Finding all the attention somewhat tiring, he climbed up onto his cage and dropped down inside for a nap, burrowing blissfully under a pile of towels and curling up into a ball.

He's obviously a young ferret, less than 8 months old, as he still has very white teeth. Because he has not been neutered or desecated, he has a noticeable musky odour. Even for someone used to animals, it's fairly

nose-wrinkling. For a person not used to animals, gagging and retching may be the result.

This is something that can be remedied, and whoever ends up keeping the little guy should make a trip to the vet to find out what's involved.

As far as intelligence is concerned, this specific individual seems to be alert and aware of everything going on around him, and able to distinguish favourite people in the household, even after such a short time.

Personality-wise, he's an easy-going guy. He loves being curled up on someone's lap, and obviously feels left out when he can't be with people. It was quite touching to see the way he sat up, concern etched on his pointed face, to watch Sheena's daughter leave the room. He sat comfortably enough with us but he was looking for Shannon constantly till she returned.

Initial cost of ferret, cage, food and litter (they use cat litter and are said to be easy to housetrain) will likely run you under \$150. Harness and leash, for travelling or to keep your ferret safely with you outdoors, should be considered as well.

I guess I'll have to meet a few more ferrets before I can make a true assessment but I have to admit I'm leaning more and more to a thumbs-up decision.