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*"This year, perhaps
more than ever, people
are finding comfort
and solace in the
natural world."*

DAVID ATTENBOROUGH

Part of the job of a writer is to stay on top of the latest news, research, and culture in our society, identifying trends and coming up with story ideas to suit. With such an incentive to seek out newness, why, then, do I constantly crave my 100th re-read of *The Hunger Games* or watch *Sex and the City* again when I can practically recite all the episodes by heart?

If you've found yourself wanting lighter forms of entertainment during the pandemic, you're not alone. It turns out, at times when feelings of stress, anxiety and isolation creep in, we seek out comfort in the familiar like never before.

"It makes sense that people would have turned to more familiar territory during a time of unprecedented (at least, in our lifetime) uncertainty, loss, upheaval and anxiety about our health and our livelihood," says clinical psychologist Dr Lillian Nejad. "The familiar shows from our past give us a sense of comfort and remind us of a time when we felt more at ease, which can lead to feelings of optimism moving forward."

Since we've faced extended periods cooped up inside due to lockdowns, the pandemic has fuelled an increase in the consumption of TV shows, movies and books.

In Australia, a survey conducted from May to June 2020 revealed that watching TV and movies was the most popular activity that we spent more time doing since COVID-19 came into our lives, nominated by just over half the respondents. When it came to books, 30 per cent said they did more reading for pleasure.

So what kinds of stories bring us the most comfort? While the news has been vital to keep us up to date with the latest developments, sociologist Dr Lauren Rosewarne says it's not at all surprising if you've felt like switching over to gentler narratives in preference to stories reflecting the grittier aspects of reality. "For the first few months of the pandemic when the news was becoming ever more dire, I found myself rewatching old episodes of *Community*," she says.

"I simply couldn't bear my usual diet of CNN and crime drama. I was anxious and wanted content that didn't inflame that. I imagine many people felt similarly."

These days we're bombarded by almost endless options from the moment we wake up, becoming



PRESSING REPLAY

Does it feel like you're stuck in a rut of watching re-runs and re-reading old favourites ... while your list of new movies, TV shows, and books to catch up on grows ever longer? Here are some of the compelling reasons why.

WORDS BY REBECCA DOUGLAS

fatigued by all the decision-making in our lives. From 1986 to 2011, the amount of information Americans absorbed in a day increased fivefold, equivalent to 174 newspapers. In our leisure time, we now process 100,000 words, or 34 gigabytes, each day. No wonder we're exhausted.

STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

So what kinds of information are we consuming? Subscription streaming services such as Netflix and Stan are increasingly gathering viewers, with 17.3 million Australians watching a subscription TV service in a month-long period, an increase of 2.4 million from the year before. This increase encompassed all the biggest providers, including Netflix, Foxtel, Stan, Amazon Prime and Disney+. Over two-thirds of Aussies over 14 now watch Netflix in an average month.

In the face of these almost endless entertainment options, there's a distinct possibility of becoming overloaded, meaning we balk at making any decision at all. The term "decision fatigue" was created by social psychologist Roy Baumeister when examining whether our capacity to exert self-control and make good decisions is drained by making a spate of previous decisions.

Choice, it seems, is great until it becomes overwhelming. It therefore stands to reason that in times where we're particularly mentally exhausted, many of us simply return to our old favourites when sinking into a story to unwind.

"We're all, in varying degrees, predisposed to doing this," says Dr Rosewarne. "It might be heightened at times of stress or feelings of being overwhelmed, or even just times of choice fatigue. There are thousands of new things available to watch on Netflix, but we can't make a choice so we choose to watch something we've already seen."

RELAX & UNWIND

There are several psychological phenomena that may contribute to our yearning to rewatch what we've seen before.

The "mere exposure effect" explains a preference people have for things they've come into contact with before, even if they haven't consciously noticed them. There's less strain on the brain to figure them out, leaving more processing power for other activities. The principle is used in advertising to repeatedly expose consumers to a product to make it more familiar and therefore likeable.

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From an evolutionary point of view, the familiar is likely to be safer.

“Things that are familiar are easier to process so are more relaxing,” Dr Nejad says. “They are predictable, so don’t induce anxiety, and they require less effort overall. We like revisiting a bond we already have to a show or book and its characters, rather than having to create new relationships.”

Humans can also have a status-quo bias, meaning we generally have a preference for the world staying as it is, giving us a sense of control and comfort. This is particularly the case for people who are risk-averse and resistant to change.

Nostalgia, or our tendency to look back at the past with fondness, also plays a part and means we’ll be keen to re-experience shows and books that remind of us of better times.

“Autobiographical nostalgia (a memory associated with a specific time in your life) can lead us to revisit past shows, movies and books,” says Dr Nejad. “Remembering the experience you had when you watched it last or who you were with can have positive psychological effects – it can help with loneliness, foster optimism and improve self-esteem. It even gives us a sense of warm, physical comfort as well.” Going back to memories of happier days is also an opportunity to reflect on your life by comparing it to what you’re seeing on the screen or the page. This offers an avenue to understand ourselves and others better, and learn new ways of dealing with life’s ups and downs.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

“Revisiting old memories associated with a show, movie or book can help us process information related to these memories in a new way, giving us new perspectives and insights that enlighten us and potentially offer meaning to our lives currently,” says Dr Nejad. “We may identify strongly with a character or a story and watching it play out on screen can help us learn about ourselves and helps us work through our own challenges. It can also give us a sense that we’re not alone.”

Then there are the anxiety-soothing effects of knowing what to expect in a storyline, so we can switch our brains off and simply enjoy, or watch it in the background while doing other things and only partially paying attention. “Revisiting old shows, movies, and books is less of a mental load,” says Dr Nejad. “We don’t have to think too much, don’t

ENDLESSLY ENGAGING

Huge pop-culture hits such as the *Harry Potter* series and *The Hunger Games* top the list by book review website goodreads.com of the most popular books people have been re-reading in recent years. Some of the others titles nominated include:

- *The Girl on the Train*, Paula Hawkins: From the train she catches each morning, Rachel watches people, envying their perfect lives, until one day she witnesses a murder.
- *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: Beloved French children’s classic translated into English about a prince who visits various planets, including Earth.
- *The Fault in Our Stars*, John Green: Young adult novel about what happens when terminal teen cancer patient Hazel meets fellow patient Augustus and love blossoms.
- *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez: Bestselling book in the ‘magical realism’ genre about the tension between wanting to be alone and the need for love.
- *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Stieg Larsson: A tattooed prodigy and a journalist seek the truth behind the disappearance of a member of a wealthy Swedish family.
- *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini: The story of a friendship between a rich boy and the family servant’s son, set in Afghanistan and the US.
- *The Night Circus*, Erin Morgenstern: A fierce duel between two young magicians in a circus leaves the lives of patrons and performers hanging in the balance.

have to focus on learning new characters and plotlines, don’t have to pay attention as much because you’re already seen it, and have no obligation or need to watch the entire movie or watch the whole season. It’s easier so it’s more relaxing.”

Genres topping our watchlists during the pandemic have included family animation, sports, thrillers and disaster movies. While what soothes one person may distress another, it’s unsurprising that comedy is one of the genres we’re most likely to reach for when we want to feel better. “Sitcoms are the most revisited television shows – we want to feel better, we want to laugh, and we want to experience the lighter side of life,” says Dr Nejad.

“WE’RE KEEN TO RE-EXPERIENCE SHOWS AND BOOKS THAT REMIND US OF BETTER TIMES.”

The viewing experience can also be one that is engaged in with others in our household or from afar via the internet. It’s a way to enjoy a shared experience even when we’re physically alone, and it provides a ready-made conversation topic for further interaction down the track. There’s also the joy of seeing the reaction of friends and family when they’re experiencing a story for the first time that you’ve known and loved for years.

“Introducing someone else to a beloved story is another way to experience it,” says Dr Rosewarne. “During lockdowns we saw people participate in ‘watch parties’ via platforms like Zoom. Certain films with musical soundtracks – think *The Sound of Music* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* – have also attracted sing-a-long and dress-up events many decades after their first release.”

In particular, it can be a joy to introduce the stories we grew up with to the next generation through family movie nights. By sitting down to watch classics such as *Star Wars*, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, and *The Princess Bride*, children learn more about their parents and the way the world once was while also bonding over a fun family experience.

“It gives our kids a guide to our pop-culture preferences in our youth, and also a sense of the overall sociopolitical climate of the time in which we were raised,” says Dr Nejad. “And we get to see how our old favourites are viewed through the eyes of a new generation and learn more about ourselves as much as they are learning about us.”

Is there, in fact, anything wrong with going back to our old faithfuls? Should we seek out newness as much as possible or is it okay to wallow once in a while? Despite society’s tendency to look down on reality television and lighter genres, it’s okay to not only engage with these forms of entertainment, but keep going back to them as a form of escapism.

“There’s nothing wrong with seeking out the familiar,” Dr Rosewarne says. “Our leisure time is ours and we shouldn’t be made to feel guilty over how we elect to use it. Some people just need downtime, and this can be achieved through low-demand pop culture. The pop culture industry needs us [to be] fixated on newness, but there’s no need for individuals to be preoccupied by it.”

There’s room in our lives for a mixture of reliving old experiences and seeking out newness as well, provided we’re not leaning on the known too heavily as an unhealthy coping mechanism to avoid our problems. As with most things, balance is key, says Dr Nejad.

“If you’re only seeking familiar experiences, you may be overly focused on the past and using these experiences as avoidance behaviours to escape your present responsibilities or problems,” she says. “Revisit old movies and shows as a means of self-care, joy and relaxation, and at the same time seek opportunities for new learning, experiences and growth.”



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While enjoying a familiar favourite book or movie, why not whip up a batch of our delicious retro Monte Carlo biscuits? Just perfect for a spot of childhood reminiscing. mindfood.com/retro-monte-carlo