



# A Season of Happiness



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## What Are You Really Afraid Of?

### how media pressure influences the way we feel

According to the adage, there's nothing to fear but fear itself. In the days when many forms of unreasonable discipline were acceptable, it was the secret weapon of parents who used it to keep their children in line. Even though they had never actually seen the boogie-man or been confronted by a vengeful policeman, the mere threat of the possibility made kids think twice before doing whatever they had been told not to. Having little experience of life and its consequences, imagination filled in the blanks and, depending on the child, the effect on their future disposition could be brief or long-lasting. Being brought up in this way, it isn't surprising that adults continue to worry about things that haven't happened to them yet, but still fear that they might. One of the main distillers of this concern is the media in general, television in particular. Whether reality or fiction, broadcast messages influence the lives and health of those who receive them.

I know I harp on about it, but news reports and current affairs programmes are the worst offenders. Crimes do occur, also terrible road accidents; and there always seems to be a war going on somewhere in the world; but violence and tragedy are nowhere near as prevalent as the media would have us believe. Good things happen too, as a percentage far more than the bad stuff. Unfortunately for us, these aren't considered as newsworthy and we are subjected instead to truck-loads of negative content because it is dramatic and it stirs the emotions of those who watch, and watch, and watch again. It's almost as if we are addicted to it. In truth, we are, and we suffer because of that addiction.

No different to anyone else, I find myself drawn towards stories of pain and misfortune. The public-spirited presenter warns: "The images we are about to show may be confronting to some viewers." They've got me! I have to see what has the potential to wound my sensitivity, even though I've checked out similar pictures every night of the week. Needless to say, I am upset yet again. The evening meal could be fairly bland, but I suffer indigestion. Sounds outside that are ignored during the day suddenly become cause for concern and I'm on edge, wondering if someone's up to no good and I'm their target. We have never been the victims of a home-invasion and I hope we never will be, but the possibility goes through our minds each time we see a news report of one. It seems ridiculous - we live in a quiet country town where this sort of thing rarely occurs, yet by constant media repetition verging on brain-washing, we are made aware of the latent danger and find ourselves preparing for an impending attack!

Of course, the news isn't the only show on the box. Sitcoms are popular and, silly though some might be, they are generally uplifting, portraying incidents and characters in cartoon-fashion not to be taken seriously. These can have a positive effect on health, lightening moods, engendering happiness rather than doom and gloom. As long as the stupidity can be tolerated, these programmes are purely entertainment and viewers are unlikely to draw comparisons with their own lives. They simply watch to enjoy. If, by chance, they do become irritated by the antics, they will probably switch to another channel. Funny - they can do that with a sitcom that's only making them frown, while remaining glued to a show that has their stomach tied in knots!

Although the mere thought of it makes me cringe, I suppose I should mention "Reality TV". I guess it's because the genre is extremely popular and I'm simply trying to give everyone a fair shake. I have to admit that some of the "cop" shows catch my attention. For a few minutes at least, I tag along with law-enforcement officers as they stop and question possible offenders in a

variety of situations from airports to the beach. Then I become aware that an uncomfortable feeling of resentment towards petty criminals is making me increasingly angry, so I switch to something else. Certain presentations I never watch cause a similar reaction simply by being advertised. I am amazed how gullible viewers can be so convinced the events related in the shows in question are actually spontaneous and unscripted. Talent contests, survival challenges, cooking competitions - they are all about spectacular television and ratings. They are no more a true reflection of real life than the so-called "live" game shows that are recorded in bulk, then reviewed before a selection is screened that is deemed good entertainment value. The poor devils whose attempts didn't get aired aren't entitled to whatever they won - that's in the contract. I wonder how many nightly viewers know that? Even if they did, they would still tune in because it's what they do at that particular time. Deceptive or not, these programmes seem quite harmless, provided you discount the metabolic production of adrenalin, dopamine and stomach acids; not to mention the chewing of fingernails, rising blood-pressure and a surge of vengeful hatred for the quizmaster when a favourite competitor gets shafted. These very real emotions are experienced simply by watching a choreographed half-hour of Un-Reality TV, and they definitely impact on the way we lead our normal lives.

To understand how the media can really influence us, let's take a squint at series programmes. Actually, we give these far more than a squint. They have the power to pull audiences in to such an extent that some families organise their days and weeks around them. For this very reason they are allocated prime-time slots catering for specific audiences, not only in consideration of who they are and what appeals to them, but also what they are likely to be doing when the shows go to air. Episodes intended for adults may not be screened until eight-thirty in the evening to be watched after the meal is over and the children are in bed. Soapies produced for a mixed audience including youngsters seem to appear around seven. By then, the kids will probably have had tea and finished their homework - well, so they maintain! Everyone sits down to watch what has become an essential part of family life. There's nothing wrong with enjoyable entertainment; and it would seem to have little to do with promoting the fears of viewers; but it does exactly that in a way far more subtle than any disturbing news report. Many regulars not only warm to the characters and their stories, but mentally adopt them into their own lives, thinking of them as intimate acquaintances, *real* people. They may discuss their problems, have expectations for them, be happy or sad for them, worry over them. Then, the trials, tribulations and concerns of these make-believe friends and relations become their own.

Movies use a different ploy. They don't pretend to portray entire lives as they happen, just a condensed segment focussing on a few well-chosen characters the audience can immediately identify with. We see their stories unfold as dramatic scenes shot from dynamic angles, brief clips that hold attention and generate emotions. Sound effects and stirring music contribute to the hypnotism and by the end of the film we may be feeling warm and satisfied that our on-screen love affair had a happy ending; or be flopping back in relief, literally exhausted by our imaginary ordeal. What we have just experienced, however, was someone else's life in a bottle, a very minute part of it that was resolved in two or three hours. It only seemed real because we filled in the gaps with reality from our own lives, much the same as we did as children, but with a significant difference: this boogie-man was more than just imagination - we actually saw it! Actually? Of course not - it was simply a digital representation. Once we switched off it was over, gone, its momentary influence returned to the video cabinet. Or was it? Weren't we still a wee bit on edge, maybe inclined to jump at the odd shadow; didn't we continue to ponder how similar some of the movie was to our own situation; don't we still? In truth, the scenes and associated emotions from that clever piece of film-making are in our memories and have already begun to influence the way we see life.

Accept it or not, like it or not, that's what happens each time we are exposed to information, whether new or a repeat of something already known. We take it in, store it and use it. With a bit of thought, it will be to our advantage; adopted casually, carelessly it may be a source of regret. Most of the time, however, it won't even be realised that many of the ideas influencing our actions aren't our own at all. We can't blame the media: they only broadcast what we crave - moments of love and affection, endeavour and achievement, violence and fear. What we do with these

addictive stimulants is our choice. Some of the time, anyway.

I am influenced by the media as much as anyone, so I have difficulty trying to decide which fears are a result of my own personal experience as opposed to those suggested by events I've only ever witnessed second-hand. Whether this is good or bad depends on circumstances and the individual. Being forewarned of possibilities must be beneficial as long as a sense of perspective and objectivity is retained. Even knowing how others cope with situations similar to our own, especially when the resolution would satisfy our agenda, can be reassuring; however, it should be remembered that we are looking through keyholes and are able to view only a small part of what's happening beyond doors that we may never pass through. Conversely, everything on our side is freely available to experience, enjoy and, if necessary, worry over. I have no problem comparing the way things are for others with the way they might be for me, but that's where I draw the line. I reckon living one life at a time is scary enough.

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