

Why We Can't Stop Bingeing Old Shows During The Pandemic

August 28, 2020

NPR's Lulu Garcia-Navarro speaks to media psychologist Pamela Rutledge about how our brains are responding to the pandemic and driving our TV viewing choices. Hint: We're craving predictability.

LULU GARCIA-NAVARRO, HOST:

* You may be finding yourself watching and re-watching and then re-watching the same TV shows during your quarantine. They're cozy. They're familiar. They're predictable and usually always happy. It turns out our brain science has something to do with why we're not venturing far from our favorite shows. Dr. Pamela Rutledge is a media psychologist and the director of the Media Psychology Center, and she joins us now from Orange County.

Welcome.

PAMELA RUTLEDGE: Thank you. It's lovely to be here.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: It's lovely to have you. So old shows like "Friends" and "The Office" are seeing enormous streaming rates now. Why is that, in your view?

RUTLEDGE: Yes, they are actually the most downloaded shows right now, the most streamed, and it's because these shows are shows that we're familiar with. And when you're familiar with a show, you actually develop a sense of a relationship with the characters, so they do feel like friends – no pun intended to the name.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: (Laughter).

RUTLEDGE: And you know, they make you feel more comfortable. And right now, we're socially isolated. We actually are craving time with our friends, and so these become kind of a proxy for that experience. And we know the plots. They're funny. We get the neural reward of a little chuckle.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: And we get to spend time with Joey and Rachel (laughter).

RUTLEDGE: Exactly.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: Does the format of these shows contribute?

RUTLEDGE: Well, you know, the format contributes in the sense that they're short periods of time. So it's a half-hour increment, so there's not a big cognitive drain to follow something that's complex and long. But it's really the structure and the predictability of the television shows and the plots that allow it to be so easily consumed.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: What's happening in our brains when we sit down to pick a TV show, especially now during the pandemic?

RUTLEDGE: Well, I think any number of things, and it really depends on the emotions at the moment. And so I think that's really an important thing for people to recognize – is, how am I feeling right now? What do I want to watch? But shows like this – so we sit down. It's like, I'm tired from the stress. I mean, we're basically exhausted all the time because we're under the stress of uncertainty. So what do I want to watch that will give me some comfort and some rewards that's easy, that doesn't drain my energy but gives me some back? And that makes shows like "The Office" or "Friends" a very good choice.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: What role do you think anxiety plays in this?

RUTLEDGE: Well, anxiety plays a role because of the uncertainty that it makes us much needier of comfort. It makes us already sort of used up. Our – you know, our energy's a little bit used up from the stress. And so we're really looking for something that we can enjoy that isn't going to use more of our energy, that's going to actually reinforce or relax or allow us to escape and give us a little bit of a vacation rather than tax our brains to figure out what's going on in a very complex plot.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: I have to say, when you say that, it just reminds me – the thing that I find so comforting about it is that they even have laugh tracks, right? So you're even cued to know when you're supposed...

RUTLEDGE: Right.

...