

THE OFF DUTY TV ISSUE | GEAR & GADGETS



FRANCESCO ZORZI (ILLUSTRATION)

# Why WFH-ers Turn to TV

Pre-Covid, office workers decompressed after a stressful day while commuting. Now, stuck at home, we're immersing ourselves in TV drama to detach from job dramas. But is it working?

By CLINT CARTER

**S**AMANTHA LEFAVE used to walk home from her office in downtown Denver every day. For those 20 minutes, the 31-year-old content marketer was unavailable on email. Often, she'd put on headphones and pull up music or a podcast to ensure her mind didn't wander to thoughts of deadlines.

When the pandemic took hold, however, Ms. Lefave's "commute" shrank to the distance between her home office and the sofa. In search of a stress-relief alternative, she now streams an episode or two of "Survivor" once her workday is done. "TV has become the signal that it's time to relax," she said, adding that she doesn't even walk her dogs until the Tribal Council renders a verdict.

Though many of us complained about traffic and train delays, our work commutes—be they by foot, car, train, or bus—gave us a buffer between work and life. Intentionally or not, we often used the time alone to do important mental work. We shed the fiercely focused mindset that makes us good bosses or salespeople. Alone in our cars or lost in headphones, we created space for the gentler traits of a parent or spouse. A favorite show might have a similar effect, said

Charles Spence, a professor of experimental psychology at the University of Oxford and the author of "Sensehacking: How to Use the Power of Your Senses for Happier, Healthier Living." Television, as he explained, "captures our attention and perhaps stops us ruminating about that last bad meeting or work problem. It may also modify our mood or give our attention time to recharge."

For many in the cubicle class,

**'TV has become the signal that it's time to relax.'**

commutes might be over for good. A Pew study released last December revealed that 71% of people were doing their jobs from their kitchens, living rooms and home offices. And it seems unlikely that in-person work will ever fully return to pre-pandemic levels. According to a 10,000-person survey conducted in May and July and sponsored by the University of Chicago and other research institutions, roughly 75% of Americans said they hope to never again spend five days a week inside an office. And a similar number said they expected their employers to honor the wish.

With the loss of our commutes, new routines have emerged to replicate their effects. Earlier this year, Microsoft upgraded its Teams software with a "virtual commute" feature that dials up a Headspace meditation session at your scheduled logoff time. Coping tips, like those Forbes magazine shared this past February, encourage Americans to bookend their days with "fake commutes" that can include walks, stretches, or car rides.

Increased TV viewership suggests another change in routine. Data from analytics firm Nielsen reveals that between December 2019 (when Covid-19 cases were first reported) and October 2020, weekly television time increased by more than 2 hours for work-from-home professionals. A partial explanation: daytime viewing. Some workers run the news all day or use a TV to fill the silence in their home office, Nielsen said. But evening viewing was up as well, perhaps tellingly. A workplace drama like Hulu's "The Chair," which follows the clash between Ivy League professors and their woke students, packs in enough fictional tension to make you forget about your own real-life stresses.

If TV is absorbing the function of a work commute for you, psychologists say there are ways to maximize its meditative properties. "What you really want to do is cre-

ate an emotion in your home," said Mr. Spence. He suggests you feed multiple senses to create a truly transporting experience.

In other words, don't just rely on the sights and sounds of FX's "What We Do in the Shadows." By supporting the viewing experience with soothing smells and soft materials, you can really leave your office behind—even if you're not physically going anywhere.

For some, an evening-only drink supplies the sensory shift needed to fully ease into an episode of "Gilmore Girls." After leaving his home office each day, Joe Poor, a 39-year-old mortgage loan originator in Greenville, S.C., walks a few strides to his kitchen and mixes a cocktail. The menu changes depending on what's in his garden, but lately, he has been using a bumper crop of mint to make mojitos and mint juleps. The Pavlovian beverage has conditioned him to flush work from his mind the way a commute once did, and once he and his girlfriend have their mojitos in hand, they make dinner before pulling up Lorelei and Rory's misadventures to complete the decompression.

"We keep our routine very regimented," said Mr. Poor. "That two-hour block of time—or however long we watch television—is how we unwind." And there's a lot less traffic.

**Transporting Strategies**  
When the workday ends, these tools can help you Netflix and really chill.



**UnHide Li' Marsh**

One reason pets are so effective at relieving stress: Touching the soft fur sends safety signals to your brain, says Mr. Spence, of Oxford. No pet? No problem: This faux-fur blanket is as soft as a puppy. \$95, [unhide.us](http://unhide.us)

**Sengled Smart LED Multicolored Lightbulbs**

These color-shifting smart bulbs will automatically illuminate your office with stimulating blue light during the workday, and soothing warm tones as you head toward TV time. \$25, [us.sengled.com](http://us.sengled.com)



**Platin Monaco 5.1**

This wireless, 6-piece surround-sound set comes with a super-thin subwoofer. Slip it underneath the couch and you'll be able to feel the Demogorgon growl when you watch "Stranger Things." \$899, [platinaudio.us](http://platinaudio.us)



**Zyllion Shiatsu Massage Pillow**

Luxury car makers discovered long ago that heated seats can help drivers relax. This portable pillow brings the heat—plus a set of motor-powered massage hands—to your TV room. \$70, [zyllion.com](http://zyllion.com)



**Aera Smart Diffuser**

The soothing scents of lavender or chamomile can make shows even more relaxing. The Aera app will let you build an aromatherapy schedule so the device kicks in at your scheduled TV time. \$199, [aeraforhome.com](http://aeraforhome.com)

