

Psychologists warn about risks of binge-watching TV anti-heroes on mental health



[Kate Emery](#)The West Australian
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If you surround yourself with terrible, often violent people who act without concern for others and possibly murder those who get in their way it stands to reason it could have an effect on your mental health.

And if those amoral anti-heroes who more often than not get away with it are characters on TV, rather than real life people? Well, it might still be messing you up.

That is the warning from psychologists who say that the combination of the rise of binge-watching and the popularity of TV anti-heroes such as Breaking Bad's Walter White, The Sopranos' Tony Soprano, and Ozark's Marty Byrde could be having an effect on a generation's mental health.



The cast of The Sopranos, from left, Tony Sirico, Steve Van Zandt, James Gandolfini, Imperioli and Vincent Pastore. Credit: Supplied

Long before binge-watching became a socially acceptable lifestyle choice, research has suggested long-term exposure to violent or depressing media, especially for children, could translate into aggressive or fearful behaviour.

Research around binge-watching is in its infancy but at least one US study has suggested that self-binge-watchers are more likely to report high stress, anxiety and depression, though it is open to interpretation which came first.

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Dr Janet Hall, a retired psychologist of 40 years, said it was a matter of "garbage in" equals "garbage out".

"That is, being constantly flooded with negatives will have a negative result on your mental processes," she said. "You might feel angry at life or even hopeless because you perceive that most people who are criminal or antisocially minded get away with with bad behaviour."



The Roy family in the TV show Succession. Credit: HBO/HBO

Dr Hall said that while a casual viewer would have time to process what they saw on-screen, a binge-watcher “loses this objectivity”.

Perth psychologist Marny Lishman said she would not go so far as to say excessive consumption of violent or depressing subject matter could cause mental health issues in an otherwise healthy person, but they could exacerbate them.

“I think any consumption of violent or depressive subject matter, whether it be real or imaginary, will affect us, even when we don’t think it is,” she said.

“Our brain is wired to take notice and store in our memories, even subconsciously, anything in our environment that is fearful or threatening, even when it is imaginary. So I would think that the more fearful stories we consume, the more it would make us more on high alert and our perception of the world slightly skewed to the negative.”



Bryan Cranston, left, and Aaron Paul in a scene from "Breaking Bad." Credit: Frank Ockenfels/AMC

The so-called golden age of TV, considered to have been ushered in by the likes of the Sopranos, the Wire and Mad Men, in the early 2000s, has been characterised in part by a fascination with gritty stories, uber violence and anti-heroes who simultaneously encourage the audience to root for them while behaving terribly and usually getting away with it.

Many of the TV shows between 2000-2019 that have made the biggest pop culture splash have either dealt with horrific violence — True Detective, the Sopranos, the Walking Dead, and Deadwood — featured amoral characters — Mad Men, Ozark, Breaking Bad, and Arrested Development — or quite often both.

Terrible behaviour by the uber wealthy has been glamorised by the likes of Succession and Billions, while political dramas House of Cards and Scandal and even supposedly light-hearted comedies such as Veep have done little to engender trust in the politicians in charge.

“Clearly we are all fascinated by criminals and serial killers,” Australian Psychological Society president and clinical psychologist Ros Knight said, “whether that’s because we wonder how the other half lives or it stimulates the fear factor.”



Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson in True Detective. Credit: Jim Bridges/Jim Bridges/HBO

Ms Knight said if a happy and healthy person occasionally binged on dramas about awful people and situations it was unlikely to have serious consequences. But she said people with a predisposition for violence and anger might seek out TV that fed those tendencies, while the same could be true for a depressed person.

“If it starts to impact on your view of ‘is the world safe?’, ‘are these people real?’ or ‘I can’t go to sleep because I’m scared there’s someone in the cupboard with an axe’ then that’s not great,” she said. “Does it desensitize us? Probably.”

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