



[Mind Matters](#) - July 28, 2009

## Imaginary Friends Television programs can fend off loneliness

By Fionnuala Butler and Cynthia Pickett

Stomach growling, but have no time for a meal? A snack will do. Drowsy and unable to concentrate? A short nap can be reviving when a good night's rest is unavailable. But what should you do when you are alone and feeling [lonely](#)?

New psychological research suggests that loneliness can be alleviated by simply turning on your favorite TV show. In the same way that a snack can satiate hunger in lieu of a meal, it seems that watching favorite TV shows can provide the experience of belonging without a true interpersonal interaction.

For decades, psychologists have been interested in understanding how individuals achieve and maintain social relationships in order to ward off social isolation and [loneliness](#). The vast majority of this research has focused on relationships between real individuals interacting face-to-face. Recent research has widened this focus from real relationships to faux, "parasocial" relationships. Parasocial relationships are the kind of one sided pseudo-relationships we develop over time with people or characters we might see on TV or in the movies. So, just as a friendship evolves through spending time together and sharing personal thoughts and opinions, parasocial relationships evolve by watching characters on our favorite TV shows, and becoming involved with their personal lives, idiosyncrasies, and experiences as if they were those of a friend.

In a recent [article](#) published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Jaye Derrick and [Shira Gabriel](#) of the University of Buffalo and [Kurt Hugenberg](#) of Miami University test what they call the "Social Surrogacy Hypothesis."

The authors theorized that loneliness motivates individuals to seek out relationships, even if those relationships are not real. In a series of experiments, the authors demonstrated that participants were more likely to report watching a favorite TV show when they were feeling lonely and reported being less likely to feel lonely while watching. This preliminary evidence suggests that people spontaneously seek out social surrogates when real interactions are unavailable. The authors also found that participants who recalled a fight with a close person in their lives wrote for significantly longer about their favorite TV show than a non-favored TV show. It appears that experiencing a lack of belonging actually caused people to revel in their favorite TV shows, as though the parasocial relationships with TV characters replaced the flawed relationships that had been recalled.

A common experience following a threat to interpersonal relationships, such as a fight, or social rejection, is lowered self-esteem and negative mood. However, the researchers found that those participants who experienced a relationship threat and then watched their favorite TV show were buffered against the blow to self-esteem, negative mood, and feelings of rejection.

This research contributes to a broader literature regarding the fundamental nature of the [need to belong](#). As social animals, humans are driven by an inherent need to win acceptance, and to form and maintain relationships with others. When the desire for connection is met with consistent, meaningful interactions, the



craving subsides, but when it goes unmet, it intensifies like a hunger, forcing action.

Research has demonstrated that threats to belonging elicit a wide array of cognitions and behaviors directed at maintaining social connections. One particularly intriguing [finding](#) is that people appear to become highly sensitive to social cues following social rejection or when lonely. For example, individuals with a heightened need to belong are better at decoding emotional facial expressions and exhibit an enhanced memory for socially relevant information compared to their less socially-needy counterparts.

So, in much the same way as a person on a restrictive diet may salivate while poring over the buttery flakes of a warm croissant, a person who has few or fragile relationships experiences a similar perceptual shift which enhances their sensitivity to interpersonal cues. It follows that such a perceptual shift might cause a parasocial relationship to feel even more “real” or satisfying to a lonely person than to someone who is not lonely.

Unfortunately, the main advantage of a parasocial relationship is also its greatest drawback: its one sidedness. Social surrogates are the safest of social connections insofar as they can provide the psychological experience of a connection with none of the painful slights, time consuming maintenance, or personal sacrifice of a real relationship. A social surrogate is consistently available, at the same time, on the same channel, from week to week. As people’s time becomes more limited by work and obligations, it seems much easier to flip on the TV than to spend time cultivating new friendships and risk rejection by doing so. Seeming to support this is the fact that the average American home has more TVs than people, and the average American watches more than four and a half hours of TV a day. Thus, our ability to satisfying our need to belong through television may ultimately come at the expense of real relationships where the risks are greater, but the potential rewards are greater as well.

It is also the case that even very popular TV shows eventually get taken off the air. In a [study](#) published in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, Jonathan Cohen, of the Department of Communication at the University of Haifa in Israel, examined the responses of television viewers to the potential loss of their favorite television characters. Cohen found that viewers anticipated experiencing the same negative reactions to parasocial breakups as they experience when their real social relationships dissolve. Even though parasocial relationships may offer a quick and easy fix for unmet belonging needs, individuals within these relationships may not be spared the pain and anguish of relationship dissolution.

It remains to be seen whether social surrogacy is like a candy bar in the vending machine, which briefly satiates the hunger of real belonging but is ultimately unsatisfying, or whether it serves as a meal, replacing real relationships in some lasting way.

*Are you a scientist? Have you recently read a peer-reviewed paper that you want to write about? Then contact Mind Matters co-editor [Gareth Cook](#), a [Pulitzer prize](#)-winning journalist at the Boston Globe, where he edits the [Sunday Ideas](#) section.*