

Bored? Don't worry, it might be the start of something brilliant

January 16 2014, by Ian H Robertson



Curiosity (and possibly a bone) is the cure. Credit: Jenny P.

A girl called Holly Thompson yawned so hard in a boring school class that she dislocated her jaw and [couldn't close it again](#). The 17-year-old English schoolgirl had to be taken to hospital where the doctor wedged her mouth open to re-engage her jaw.

Now I can only assume that her teacher didn't allow pupils to browse

tablet computers in the class, otherwise Holly could almost certainly have found distraction and stimulation which would have pre-empted the embarrassing trip to the hospital accident and emergency department.

I know how irritated I feel when I see students browsing their smartphones while I am imparting my pearls of wisdom to them but I suppose the challenge is for me to up my lecturing game sufficiently so as to make me more entertaining than the entire internet.

So there's the challenge, how precisely do you learn about the neuroanatomical connections of the [prefrontal cortex](#) or the joys of confirmatory factor analysis without having to put up with a bit of boredom? How can anyone trying to impart this knowledge possibly compete with Twitter, and Facebook?

But outside of classes, you really have to try to be bored these days. The moment you feel that edgy sense of time slowing down that signals this unique emotion, all you have to do is flick on a game, send a tweet or search for a video of bonobos playing chess?

And this is why it is so hard for even very smart students to stop fingering their screens for the 50 minutes of a lecture. But isn't this a good thing not to have to be rushing wedged-open-mouthed students to casualty?

Certainly being too prone to boredom [leaves you vulnerable](#) to all sorts of nasties including problem gambling, drug and alcohol abuse, binge eating, dropping out of school and depression and anxiety.



How about a nice game of chess? Credit: Angi English

Boredom means feeling your attention is not engaged on something either inside or outside your head. The restlessness which comes with it signifies a search for something – but you don't know what. Time goes slowly and there is something gnawing and edgy about the restlessness that is not too pleasant.

Dorothy Parker said "the cure for boredom is curiosity" and she was right. And in a state of boredom it is entirely possible to become curious about the boredom itself – hmm, what is my mind doing, what am I thinking about, what am I feeling, etc?

In fact people over-prone to boredom are [less aware of their own emotional states](#) and tend to focus their discontent externally, blaming the environment for not stimulating them rather than themselves for being insufficiently curious.

And this is important because – and here is a possible downside of all that boredom-averting technology – boredom has a purpose.

Fallow fields

Boredom is an emotion which signals that your current goals are not getting your motivational juices flowing. We become sated with anything that is repeated again and again and our brains are novelty-hungry. Eat your favorite food a few times in a row and you will become bored with it. The thrill of that new car soon fades and romantic relationships have to settle into a slow thrum of everyday contentment after the thrilling passions of the initial romance.

Boredom is a signal that you are searching for new goals and the risk is that we can too-easily satisfy this restless drive – short-circuit it, even – by a simple swipe across the screens of our ubiquitous technology.

By not enduring the restless search which our boredom signifies, we may end up missing big goals which will take much longer – maybe even a lifetime – to satisfy.

By stopping ourselves from ever being bored, we risk feeding our curiosity with constant tidbits of intellectual junk food and blunt its appetite for the sustained curiosity which is the lifeblood of great literature, science and innovation.

Researchers in England showed that workers given a very boring routine task to do were much more creative immediately afterwards than workers who were not bored. This makes sense because the [boredom](#) prevented their attention from latching onto a mind-occupying goal like watching a Youtube clip or reading tweets.

Boredom is the psychological equivalent of fallow fields in agriculture – where they are left without any crops for a while to allow them to regenerate.

Dorothy Parker went on to say that there is no cure for curiosity and this is true. Boredom may not be necessary where a person is driven by big goals and the big curiosity which they generate. Technology can be a great help in finding big goals, the risk is that for some, it may snuff out their appetite for the long hard slog that big questions and big curiosity demand.

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