

Why boredom can be good for you

January 23 2018, by Teresa Belton



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Being trapped in a tedious job, with no possibility of escape, is a recipe for real boredom. This kind of boredom is unpleasant and [definitely bad for us](#). But a [flurry of](#) recent media interest [on the subject of boredom](#) suggests that it is a frequent experience that really bothers people and is not limited to the workplace. This must tell us something about contemporary life.

One of the defining features of today's culture is the near ubiquity of [mobile digital](#) technology, and [smart phones](#) in [particular](#). Look around any bus, waiting room or queue, and chances are that many of the people confined there will be head bent, thumbing-tapping or scrolling down. Even at home, phones and their menus are never far from reach.

To be able to be transported to any time or place, real or virtual, to access unlimited information and entertainment, or to carry out unfettered communication, is an extraordinary possibility, with untold positive potential. Nevertheless, increasing numbers of people now sense that constant connection is not good for them and feel the need for a ["digital detox"](#).

Go with the 'Flow'

Turning to one's smart phone in order to fill or kill time in the hiatuses of life has become a widespread, unthinking habit, an automatic response to a lull in activity. It is a distraction from the impatience of waiting for time to pass. Paradoxically, such an attempt to avoid [boredom](#), may, it seems, actually result in a kind of dissatisfaction, which is itself experienced as boredom. Psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's [concept of "Flow" explains why](#).

Flow is the satisfying feeling of complete absorption we get when we're wholly focused on an enjoyable, open-ended activity, of which we are in control but which stretches our abilities – such as rock climbing, writing, solving an equation or building a piece of furniture. But if our skills are greater than those needed to accomplish the activity – such as casual internet use – boredom is the result. Consequently, digital "surfing" can be psychologically as well as physically superficial.

In our hectic lives, in which we're bombarded by attention-grabbing external stimuli, the chance, instead, to withdraw for a while is an

important opportunity to recharge mental batteries. Moments when there seems to be "nothing to do" are times when we can turn inwards, to reestablish our relationship with our self and cultivate an inner life.

We can revisit past experiences, enjoy them afresh, maybe see them in a different light and gain new understanding, or rethink future plans. Such times also offer us the chance to be fully in the here and now. We can look around and notice new details, developing our familiarity with our own environment and our sense of belonging to it and it to us. This is important for well-being. A longer period with time on our hands can lead to the discovery of a new interest – if it's not frittered away with distractions.

But if we are used to being constantly busy, unoccupied time, alone with our thoughts, can be [hard to tolerate](#). If so, these suggestions might help.

Try to see the challenge of learning to be still as a form of adventurous living; to look forward to having "down time" or "quiet time" rather than fearing boredom; or to borrow from clowning tradition the practice of ["staying with the problem"](#), that is, actively engaging with a problematic situation until a novel solution suggests itself.

Just pottering, carrying out simple tasks like washing up, deadheading garden flowers or mending, or lying on the grass looking up at the sky, can help the mind to disengage from purposeful thought and wander where it will, daydreaming, making new connections, reflecting, problem solving. Indeed, such free range mental activity is now understood by neuroscientists to be important for [healthy brain function](#).

Embrace the gaps

While boredom signifies a lack of stimulus, gaps and pauses in engagement are potentially of great personal value. People who fully

appreciate this are the those who say they never get bored: they are always able to find something that interests them to think about or do, or can find contentment in simply being. In business parlance, time is money, but time has its own intrinsic value. We need to learn to appreciate and enjoy raw time as a precious resource.

Indeed, people like the happily modest material consumers who took part in a study for my book [Happier People Healthier Planet](#) are notable for actually preferring to have control over their time than plentiful spending money. Viewing unassigned time as a positive asset encourages the development of inner resources, such as curiosity, playfulness, imagination, perseverance and agency, out of which all sorts of fulfilling activities can emerge.

A number of creative professionals have spoken of the benefit of boredom for their [creativity](#). Novelist Neil Gaiman, for example, finds that getting really bored is the best way to come up with new ideas, and because constant social networking makes boredom impossible he committed himself to a [period offline](#).

Millionaire businessman Felix Dennis, meanwhile, finding himself grounded in a hospital bed and bored silly without his phone, looked around for something else to do. As all he could find was a block of Post-it Notes on the nurses' station and "you can't write a novel or a business plan on a Post-it Note," he tried his hand at writing a poem. Several published [volumes of poetry followed](#).

Winnie the Pooh understood the need for a vacant mind. "Poetry and Hums aren't things which you get," [he said](#) in The House at Pooh Corner. "They're things that get you. And all you can do is go where they can find you."

Farmers learnt long ago that land which is allowed to lie fallow from

time to time becomes more productive. It seems that the same can be true of the human mind.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Why boredom can be good for you (2018, January 23) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-01-boredom-good.html>

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