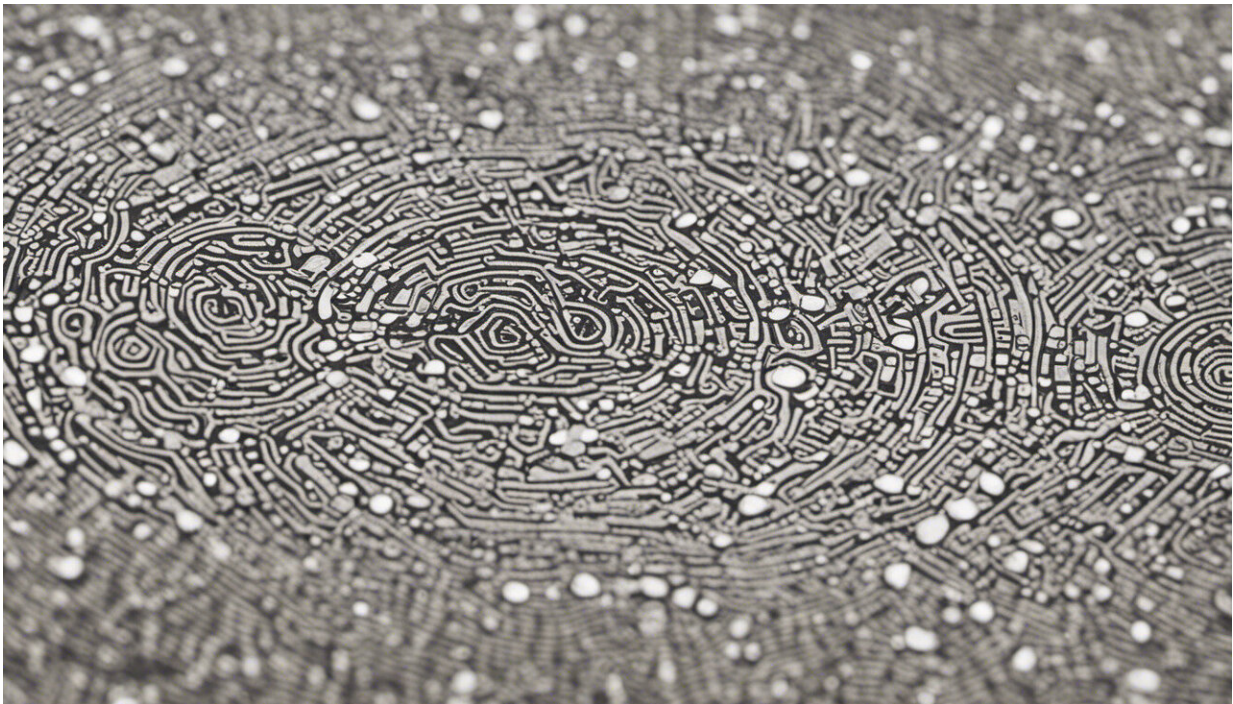


Depressed or bored? How COVID-boredom intensifies the fear of missing out

February 8 2021, by Julian Jason Haladyn



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

We begin 2021 still in the midst of a pandemic: still social distancing, still self-isolating, still wearing masks, still feeling as if life is on *pause*. These restrictions, as necessary as they are, mean that most of us are living in a limited environment with limited activities to occupy ourselves, to satisfy our need for meaningful experiences.

The repeated denial of even the possibility of such experiences results in profound moments of boredom directly related to the pandemic: COVID-boredom.

After almost a year of pandemic restrictions, many of the [social and cultural distractions](#) meant to occupy and entertain us are proving inadequate. A number of people I know have confessed they have been unable to fully binge TV programs because it felt *pointless*.

Even watching the news, which in times of crisis can border on compulsion, has become monotonous. We are presented with the same basic stories, the same series of facts about the virus, the same fears and concerns, repeated over and over with only minor differences. This is why fake news and conspiracy theories have thrived. They have become "[more psychologically pleasing and convenient \[than reality\]](#)" and make "simpler sense than a complex phenomenon." Having to live the reality of life under COVID-19 is proving baffling.

Boredom in the pandemic

Boredom plays an interesting role in the way of life we lead during the pandemic. Having written on boredom in the past, including co-editing the [Boredom Studies Reader](#), it is fascinating to explore these ideas now.

Being bored does not appear to [stop people from engaging in apparently pointless activities](#), but instead pushes us to take on more and more.

To solve the problem of our boredom we add layers to the things we are already doing. If bingeing a TV program feels pointless, we start bingeing several programs simultaneously. We engage in more—more watching, more buying, more rethinking our lives—to hyper-stimulate ourselves. But the ironic effect of these added activities seems to be more boredom.

Individual activities are now taking on increased significance as they are weighed against the loss of possible experiences we feel like we are missing out on as a result of the pandemic. It is as if people are trying to get too much meaning out of their immediate activities, in order to make up for the sense of a lost future.

The pandemic has put [so much of life on hold](#), from work and education to medical procedures and travel. Decisions are being postponed, plans put off as we wait for the moment we can *un-pause* our lives.

Depressed or bored

During the pandemic "boredom" has become a code word for any experience in which people feel disconnected, when life appears meaningless or uninteresting. [Psychiatrists have pointed](#) to the distinction between an acute sense of boredom and the clinical diagnosis of depression. While being bored challenges our sense of self, the experience does not carry the serious impairments that define clinical depression.

The inability to distinguish between boredom and depression points to a larger problem. It has become harder to tell the difference between experiencing a lack of interest and an inability to experience interest. With COVID-boredom our lack of interest is exaggerated to the point where daily life feels like an existential malaise that seems endless.

In her [new book about the outbreak in Wuhan](#), Chinese author Fang Fang writes: "And now, although we are no longer living in terror and the sadness has dissipated a bit, we must face an indescribable boredom and restlessness, along with endless waiting." Here she captures how COVID-boredom is the other side of an overarching anxiety about the pandemic and its consequences.

Like the layers of stress and worry that can be felt throughout the world as the pandemic lasts longer and longer, our boredom with this reality is also layered.

Boredom in the [pandemic](#) is not a single experience, but rather layers of boring experiences that together feel personally overwhelming. In many ways, people are bored with being bored, which is why we see it as depression. But this indescribable [boredom](#) asks us important questions about the ways we are thinking about this feeling of life being on pause.

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