

The exciting side of boredom

Our journalist **Ella Rhodes** meets psychologists who think boredom has had a bad press

'If life, in the desire for which our essence and existence consists, possessed in itself a positive value and real content, there would be no such thing as boredom: mere existence would fulfill and satisfy us. As things are, we take no pleasure in existence except when we are striving after something...or when engaged in purely intellectual activity... Whenever we are not involved in one or other of these things but directed back to existence itself we are overtaken by its worthless anti vanity and this is the sensation called boredom.'

In his essay *On the Vanity of Existence*, Schopenhauer, quite ominously, suggested that boredom acted as a reminder of the meaninglessness of human existence. Although I'm cursed with a high propensity for boredom, I can't say it ever left me with existential doubt, more just a great deal of irritability. We have all been there, each of us has felt that aching desperation for something to do, something with meaning and that will engage us in just the right way. A book may require too much mental energy; we'd go for a walk, but the day is a grey reminder of our mental state. Thrashing around in our stagnation, we only wriggle deeper into that pit of irritability.

Boredom has been much spoken about by philosophers, authors and psychologists, but perhaps remains understudied. Why, you may ask, would we want to look any deeper into a state

that seems something of a luxury in the context of busy modern lives, where distractions abound? Perhaps because boredom might have had a bad press – could it have a positive side?

The trap of quicksand

Professor John Eastwood and his colleagues at York University in Canada have been researching boredom for over a decade. They define it as 'The aversive experience of wanting, but being unable, to engage in satisfying activity' (Eastwood et al., 2012). Boredom can be defined in terms of attention: according to Eastwood, it occurs when we are not able to engage our attention with internal or external information (thoughts and feelings, and environmental stimuli respectively) required for participating in satisfying activity, are focused on the fact we can't engage attention and participate in satisfying activity, and attribute the cause of our aversive state to the environment.

In one study (Eastwood et al., 2007) 204 undergraduate students completed questionnaires about their susceptibility to boredom, and about their emotions, including questions on describing feelings and being externally focused. The students who said they suffered from more boredom were also more externally

"could we use this longing for meaning as a way to unlock creativity?"

focused and reported difficulty identifying their emotions.

Eastwood and his colleagues said this shows that our natural tendency to seek outside stimulations and distractions when we're bored is the wrong solution. 'Like the trap of quicksand, such thrashing only serves to strengthen the grip of boredom by further alienating us from our desire and passion, which provide compass points for satisfying engagement with life', they said. Instead the researchers suggest treating boredom as an opportunity to 'discover the possibility and content of one's desires'.

'People are very harsh towards those who get bored'

Professor Eastwood became interested in boredom through his work as both a clinical and cognitive psychologist. He told me that he had been struck by the fact that boredom was a common state that all of us have experienced, some to a debilitating extent, but it remained an understudied area. He suggested it might have been overlooked precisely because it is such a common state.

He said: 'When I started talking to people about my interest in studying boredom, in around the year 2000, I got all kinds of interesting reactions. Some people thought it was weird, crazy or unworthy of study, or I got quite strong reactions from people who said "I'm never bored, people who get bored are weak characters" or people would say "That's really cool, I struggle with boredom and it would be great to understand it". I wanted to explore something that had been overlooked, and from a personal point of view it gave me space to play. If you research a topic that has been looked at a lot in the past the parameters have already been defined by previous work.'

The topic is far from trivial. Indeed, Eastwood explains that part of the appeal is that boredom links with broader questions about how we make life

references

- Blaszczynski, A., McConaghy, N. & Frankova, A. (1990) Boredom proneness in pathological gambling. *Psychological reports*, 67, 35–42.
- Dahlen, E.R., Martin, R.C., Ragan, K. & Kuhlman, M.M. (2004). Boredom proneness in anger and aggression. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 37(8), 1615–1627.
- Dahlen, E.R., Martin, R.C., Ragan, K. & Kuhlman, M.M. (2005). Driving anger, sensation seeking, impulsiveness, and boredom proneness in the prediction of unsafe driving. *Accident Analysis & Prevention*, 37(2), 341–348.
- Eastwood, J.D., Cavaliere, C., Fahlman, S.A. & Eastwood, A.E. (2007). A desire for desires: Boredom and its relation to alexithymia. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 42, 1035–1045.
- Eastwood, J.D., Frischen, A., Fenske, M.J. & Smilek, D. (2012). The unengaged mind. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 7(5), 482–495.
- Mann, S. & Cadman, R. (2014). Does being bored make us more creative? *Creativity Research Journal*, 26(2), 165–173.
- McLeod, C.R., & Vodanovich, S.J. (1991). The relationship between self-actualisation and boredom proneness. *Journal of Social Behaviour and Personality*, 6, 137–146.
- Mercer-Lynn, K.B., Hunter, J.A. & Eastwood, J.D. (2013). Is trait boredom redundant? *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 32, 897–916.
- Philips, A. (1993). *On kissing tickling and being bored*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- van Tilburg, W.A.P. & Igou, E.R. (2011). On boredom and social identity. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37(12), 1679–1691.

meaningful for ourselves. ‘Clinically, I work with people, especially young men, who talk about this “failure to launch”. Maybe they’re still living at home in their parents’ basement and playing a lot of video games... their chief complaint is this unremitting boredom. We find as a culture people are very harsh towards those who get bored. They get upset or judgemental, where they wouldn’t react like that to people with another mental health issue.’

As well as this general cultural feeling that boredom is a ‘bad thing’, Eastwood’s group has also found a link between trait boredom and depression and anger (Mercer-Lynn et al., 2013), and other researchers have found links between boredom and many seemingly negative personality traits, including pathological gambling (Blaszczynski et al., 1990), bad driving (Dahlen et al., 2005), sensation seeking and impulsivity and even lower levels of self-actualisation (McLeod et al., 1991).

Others have looked into the role of boredom proneness in anger expression and aggression. Eric Dahlen and his colleagues (Dahlen et al., 2004) had 224 undergraduates complete measures of boredom proneness, impulsiveness, sensation seeking, anger expression and aggression. They concluded that boredom

because of a lack of external stimulation predicts a person’s propensity to experience anger, and to show maladaptive anger expression, aggression and deficits in anger control.

All of this makes rather sobering reading for someone with this personality trait! But can boredom serve any useful function?

Does boredom serve a function?

Could boredom act as the spur for people to search for meaning in their lives? In one set of studies, conducted in Ireland by Dr Wijnand van Tilburg (University of Southampton) and former colleague Dr Eric Igou (University of Limerick), the researchers found that the ‘search for meaningful engagement’ that boredom sparks is expressed through greater weight being placed on group membership (known to give people a sense of meaning in life). Boring activities led to ingroup favouritism and derogation of outgroup members. In one of these studies participants who were asked to draw many spirals (a boring task) became more lenient towards a criminal offence committed by an ingroup member, an Irishman, but became harsher in their judgement of a criminal outgroup member, an Englishman. The researchers

concluded that this ‘polarisation’ of in- and outgroup attitudes could be attributed to bored people’s increased desire to engage in meaningful behaviour.

Dr van Tilburg told me: ‘Generally speaking, boredom feels unpleasant, and it involves feeling restless and unchallenged at the same time. In our research we have found that boredom fulfills an important function: boredom makes people keen to engage in activities that they find more meaningful than those at hand. Essentially, the unpleasant sensation of boredom “reminds” people that there are more important matters to attend to than those at hand.’

This function of boredom can have both desirable and undesirable consequences, depending on the context in which it is experienced. Dr van Tilburg added: ‘Essentially, the emotional experience of boredom makes people realise that there are more valuable things to do. This can be very helpful when it is important to change behaviour and reduce monotony. On the other hand, if a dull activity really needs to be done, then feeling bored is perhaps not very helpful... whether boredom is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ really depends on the situation. Above all, however, boredom appears to serve an important psychological function – it makes people rethink what they are doing in favour of actions that, at least in the moment, are seen as more meaningful... for better or worse.’

Boredom can make you creative

Although boredom is an unpleasant mental state to find oneself wrapped up in, could we actually use this longing for meaning as a way to unlock creativity? Kate Greene, a freelance journalist who spent four months in Hawaii on a simulated Mars mission for NASA, has written: ‘On Mars I learned that boredom has two sides – it can either rot the mind or rocket it to new places’ (tinyurl.com/q8992wx).

Dr Sandi Mann (University of Central Lancashire) has been looking into suppressed emotions, especially at work, since her PhD. She told me: ‘I started on anger, which is the most commonly suppressed. I then moved to the second most commonly suppressed emotion –



‘I am quite happy when my kids whine that they are bored!’

boredom

boredom. Boredom is a fascinating emotion because it is seen as so negative yet it is such a motivating force! It is a paradox.'

Mann says she gets bored at times, 'like everyone does. But I am also acutely aware that being bored is not the bad thing everyone makes it out to be. It is good to be bored sometimes! I think up so many ideas when I am commuting to and from work – this would be dead time, but thanks to the boredom it induces, I come up with all sorts of projects.'

Mann says the most exciting thing she has found about boredom is that it can make people creative. In one recent study (Mann & Cadman, 2014), she had participants either carry out a boring writing activity – copying out phone numbers from a telephone directory, or not – and then complete a creative task, in this case coming up with as many uses for two polystyrene cups as possible. Participants in the 'boring' condition came up with significantly more uses for the polystyrene cups compared to controls. A second study again found that boring activities led to increased creativity in the final tasks, particularly a 'boring reading' condition.

'It is something that intuitively we

knew,' says Mann about her findings. 'Also that people eat chocolate when they are bored at work... again, not a surprising find, but the extent to which boredom is propping up the confectionery industry is staggering!'

Mann also believes it is important for children to be bored. 'Unlike so many parents today, I am quite happy when my kids whine that they are bored! Finding ways to amuse themselves is an important skill.' This idea was explored by psychoanalyst Adam Phillips in a 1993 essay, exploring the developmental merits of allowing children to form their own sense of purpose or self through being bored. Phillips argues that boredom can pose existential questions for a child, writing: '

Experiencing a frustrating pause in his usually mobile attention and absorption, the bored child quickly becomes preoccupied by his lack of preoccupation. Not exactly waiting for someone else, he is, as it were, waiting for himself. Neither hopeless



It is not in an employer's interest to allow staff to get too bored

nor expectant, neither intent nor resigned, the child is in a dull helplessness of possibility and dismay. In simple terms the child

Oxford Health NHS
NHS Foundation Trust



UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

OXFORD INSTITUTE OF CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY TRAINING

Post-Graduate Certificate in Supervision of Applied Psychological Practice

(Validated by the University of Oxford)

An exciting opportunity for those who use psychological principles in their work to complete a 1 year PG Cert in supervision, validated by the University of Oxford, starting in October 2015, ending in September 2016.

This PG Cert provides comprehensive, high quality training in the key skills required to be an effective supervisor. A broad range of models, theory and research relevant to supervision will be covered and, given the evidence base, there will be particular emphasis on the supervisory relationship.

The course team are experienced trainers, supervisors and researchers in this field, committed to providing a supportive environment for participants' learning.

Applications are invited from applied psychologists, qualified psychotherapists and counsellors, and health and social care professionals who use psychological principles in their work. Successful candidates must have responsibility for supervision and their own supervisory arrangements for the duration of the programme. Fee £3,100.

For more information or an application form please contact: Ms Marianne Peedell, Course Administrator: +44 (0) 1865 226431 marianne.peedell@hmc.ox.ac.uk **Dr Sue Clohessy, Course Director** susan.clohessy@hmc.ox.ac.uk



bored!

always has two concurrent, overlapping projects: the project of self-sufficiency in which use of, and need for, the other is interpreted, by the child, as a concession; and a project of mutuality that owns up to a dependence. In the banal crisis of boredom, the conflict between the two projects is once again renewed.

Phillips argues that the process of being bored and finding an escape from that aversive state can be a developmental achievement for a child. 'In the muffled, sometimes irritable confusion of boredom the child is reaching to a recurrent sense of emptiness out of which his real desire can

crystallize.' The usual reaction of parents to bored children – rushing around to try to find them a way to occupy their mind – is misguided:

How often, in fact, the child's boredom is met by that most perplexing form of disapproval, the adult's wish to distract him – as though the adults have decided that the child's life must be, or be seen to be, endlessly interesting. It is one of the most oppressive demands of adults that the child should be interested, rather than take time to find what interests him. Boredom is integral to the process of taking one's time.'

Mindfulness in tackling boredom

Though boredom is a relatively vague state to be in, some people find they struggle with chronic episodes of it, with nothing to take their minds away from the agitation it causes. Could mindfulness techniques help to tackle this? Professor Willem Kuyken from Oxford Mindfulness Centre told me that mindfulness involves attending to all experience with intentionality and qualities of equanimity, patience and kindness. He added: 'What is so interesting is that once attention is trained to some extent it is possible to bring awareness to all positive, negative and neutral experiences, including boredom. There can be rich learning in this process of recognition ("ah, there is boredom"), noting any automatic reactions to boredom (like agitation, sleepiness and so on).'

Kuyken suggested that a mindfulness teacher might invite a person to allow boredom to be there and turn towards it, rather than away. With curiosity,

equanimity, patience and kindness all sorts of learning can unfold. He concluded: 'For example, I don't often experience boredom, but when I do I can note that it has a tendency to be linked very quickly to agitation, which is manifest powerfully in the body as a sort of turning away and motivation to distract myself. If I can recognise it, allow it to be, give it

some time, inevitably the state shifts and changes. Boredom becomes interesting!'

Out of the chasm

At the beginning of this article, I pondered whether boredom is a luxury in the age of smartphones, social media and readily available leisure opportunities. Yet John Eastwood has been wondering whether we have actually become *more* prone to boredom through being exposed to so many potential distractions. 'I think boredom is such an aversive state that we want to banish it as quickly as possible,' he said. 'We turn to quick and easy ways to banish it, we play a video game or turn the music up or go to a movie. All these things are effective in the short term, we become engaged and we're no longer bored. But when that movie ends or the music stops, there's an even greater chasm of boredom. It's like a drug, an addiction, we need more and more intense stimulation to stave off boredom. I'm wondering whether these short-term solutions are making us more prone to boredom... If we view ourselves as vessels just searching for our next "hit" of the drug of distraction we don't learn who we are or how to connect. Learning to be OK with a lack of stimulation is an important life skill: when we are quiet and by ourselves it gives us chance to get in touch with our feelings and needs, and this experience can arm us with the information we need to go out and connect with the world.'

So, has 14 years of research affected Eastwood's own relationship with boredom? 'It's making me more careful about how I fill my time!' What about his family? 'I have two children, 8 and 10, and my 10-year-old understands a bit about what I do. He knows I study boredom and now when he's bored he'll lie on the floor and he says, with this look, "I'm so bored!" It's as if he's saying "What are you going to do about it Mr Boredom Researcher?!".'

And what does Sandi Mann conclude about boredom? 'Too much boredom is not good for us... it produces a lot of negative outcomes, such as lack of concentration, accidents, risk taking, or even thrill seeking. It is certainly not in an employer's interest to allow staff to get too bored! But it has positive benefits for sure.'

So there is some hope for the boredom-prone among us. At least we can use this time to enhance our creativity, to discover what makes us tick, even to find meaning in our lives.

I Ella Rhodes is staff journalist for *The Psychologist*
ella.rhodes@bps.org.uk



Isaac Asimov

Writing in 1964 with what he declared the 'most somber speculation I can make about A.D. 2014,' science fiction author Isaac Asimov predicted that 'mankind will suffer badly from the disease of boredom, a disease spreading more widely each year and growing in intensity. This will have serious mental, emotional and sociological consequences, and I dare say that psychiatry will be far and away the most important medical specialty in 2014. The lucky few who can be involved in creative work of any sort will be the true elite of mankind, for they alone will do more than serve a machine.'