

Workplace matters

The hidden benefits of boredom

Sandi Mann

Much has been written and said over the last few years (largely, by me) about the pernicious effects of boredom, particularly in the workplace. Indeed, one of my first columns for *Counselling at Work* (in 2013) examined the 'real cost of boredom in the workplace' which, I explained, includes poor performance at work, accidents, absenteeism, errors, stress, increased risk taking/thrill seeking, sleepiness, stress-related health problems eg heart attacks, job dissatisfaction and even property damage.¹

So, you could be forgiven for raising your eyebrows at what you might see as somewhat of a *volte-face* if I am now advocating that boredom is good. But the truth is that researchers have only recently begun to appreciate that boredom, like all emotions, has its benefits too. For a start, boredom allows us to habituate to repeated stimuli – if we did not get bored of routine, monotonous stimuli, we would never be able to cope with the amount of information that bombards our senses throughout the day. We would walk around constantly thrilled and excited by every little thing; even things we have seen or experienced a hundred times would seem new and novel to us. Imagine how distracting this would be. The capacity to get bored then, allows us to stop being stimulated by the routine, the mundane and the ordinary, and thus save our energy and resources for new and novel stimuli. In evolutionary terms, as long as a stimulus proved itself not to be either dangerous or rewarding, it was appropriate that we should lose interest in it and turn our attention to other things that might either offer greater reward or that needed monitoring for danger.

But the benefits of boredom may go even further. When we are bored, we seek out novel and new stimuli in order to increase the neural stimulation that we need to keep us optimally engaged (levels of which vary from person to person). We might seek this stimulation externally by looking at new ways to do things or by devising new systems or

processes. Would man have invented fire or the wheel or even bread, had he (or maybe she) not had time on his hands to fill? It might commonly be said that necessity is the mother of invention, but it is more likely to be boredom.

If we are unable to look for external solutions to our low levels of stimulation (eg when trapped in a hideously dull meeting at work), we might turn these stimulation-seeking processes inwards, with mind-wandering and daydreaming. These can be equally valuable since these processes have long been associated with creativity;² daydreaming allows us to try out different ideas or come up with varied concepts that we might not ordinarily consciously think about. Could boredom then, really be good for us?

The turning point for me was a piece of research I conducted³ with a student at my 'Boredom Lab' at the University of Central Lancashire. We wanted to test the idea that being bored could make us more creative. We got people really bored by asking them to read or copy out numbers from a phone book (the most boring task we could think of), then gave tests to measure their creativity; for example, we asked them to come up with as many uses for two plastic cups as they could think of, and also gave them word puzzles. We found that those people who were thoroughly bored came up with more creative responses than those who were not bored. And, we found that reading the phone numbers increased creativity even more than writing them down, a finding that we felt proved the importance of daydreaming to the creative process; it is easier to daydream during the more passive activity of reading than the more active one of writing. Daydreaming is, of course, one of the main coping responses to enforced boredom.

Nowadays, so many of us seem to fear boredom. Parents fill every moment of their kids' lives with stimulating activities – and we all turn to our devices the moment ennui threatens. Even employers are afraid of boredom; in one piece of research I did, an MD refused to allow me to study boredom in his

organisation, insisting that his employees were never bored.⁴

I think it is time to turn the tables on boredom and stop demonising this much maligned emotion. A little boredom can do us the power of good, and in my latest book, *The Upside of Downtime: why boredom is good*, I advocate strongly for allowing boredom back into our lives. Being bored can allow us time to think, to ponder and to breathe. When we are bored, our minds paradoxically become more active and this can lead to creative problem solving, imagination, resourcefulness and innovation.

So next time you are bored, whether at home or work, don't fight it – embrace it! You might just benefit.

References

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- 3 Mann S, Cadman R. Does being bored make us more creative? *Creativity Research Journal* 2014; 26(2): 165–173.
- 4 Mann S. Boredom at the checkout: causes, coping strategies and outcomes of workplace boredom in a supermarket setting. *Journal of Business and Retail Management Research* 2012; 6(2): 1–14.



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