



# In Praise of Boredom: A king's Tale

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This article explores the enigmatic nature of boredom, starting with a fairytale about a bored king. What this tale illustrates is that a life without challenge can easily become a fertile place for boredom. Subsequent to the fairy tale, boredom is discussed from a literary and philosophical perspective. It is suggested that boredom is often included with such phenomena as alienation, anomie, disenchantment and depression, conditions of the mind that indicate that we are all human, pointing out that boredom is an inevitable part of human nature. It is also noted, however, that boredom makes for this uncomfortable, conflicting feeling of wanting to do something, but also not wanting to do anything—creating a tense space between action and inaction.

The article goes on to explore the evolutionary and psychodynamic origins of boredom. It points out that boredom has been a major cause of various kinds of addictive behaviors. In addition, with respect to the need for stimuli, a difference is made between philobates and ocnophils. Some people seem to have a greater need for external stimulation and excitement than others. Also, in the context of boredom, the repetitiveness of work is explored, noting that what is repeated too often—when there is too much routine—will create a sense of tedium. Boredom is also discussed in the context of emotional management. There it is pointed out that some people suffer from alexithymia, making them colorblind vis-à-vis emotions. Furthermore, episodic and chronic boredom are also addressed. A major part of the article, however, is in praise of boredom. It is pointed out that boredom should be seen as a warning sign, a clarion call for action. It tells bored people that they need to do something about the situation they find themselves in as it is no longer satisfying. In this context, various “cures” for boredom are suggested. As with any psychological problem, understanding what’s happening is the first step in overcoming it. It is noted that boredom will always be caused by a disequilibrium between people’s internal and external worlds. However, if people try to understand the roots of their boredom, they may find out what they need to do to overcome it. In the context of seeking such a “cure”, a major factor will be relationship management. It is pointed out that Homo sapiens is a social creature, looking for a sense of belonging. Thus, shifting the focus away from more self-centered activities towards those that strengthen one’s sense of community could provide an avenue away from boredom. In addition, if boredom becomes chronic, it is suggested to look for helping professionals who can assist these people in regaining their sense of purpose and passion in their lives. Finally, the article pays some attention to the explosion of boredom in contemporary society given all the external stimuli available.

**Keywords:** Boredom; Depression; Addictive Behavior; Philobath; Ocnophil; Thrill Seeking (Type T) Personality; Alexithymia; Evolutionary Considerations; Self-awareness; Self-knowledge; Helping Professional

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*Is life not a thousand times too short for us to bore ourselves?*  
—Friedrich Nietzsche

*I've got a great ambition to die of exhaustion rather than boredom.*  
—Thomas Carlyle

### **A king's tale**

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there lived a king, who, after accomplishing many heroic deeds, fell into a stage of extreme boredom. As things stood, he was tired of presiding over elaborate banquets, waving to his subjects from the royal balcony, and cutting ribbons to open new buildings. Being forced to attend all the jousts and events held in his honor became a major irritant, reinforcing all the more how deeply bored he was with his existence. Naturally, when his courtiers noticed his boredom, they tried everything to amuse him. After all, they were concerned that this emptiness in him could run wild. A bored king is capable of doing anything. And they could easily imagine the worst.

To amuse the king, they presented to him as entertainment many exotic animals. But to no avail. His cooks then created the most mouthwatering dishes for him. But despite their efforts, he didn't touch a thing. Looking for another way to amuse him—as the king was a bachelor—the most beautiful women were paraded before him. But even then, he didn't lighten up. It was like the king had lost all desire. It was as if he lacked even a sense of lacking. Such was the state of his boredom. Where there once had been desire, there was now a mind-numbing emptiness. Where there once had been a sense of purpose, there was now a black hole.

What also troubled the courtiers was that the king's boredom had made him grumpy. Given his dark state of mind, they were worried that his boredom might quickly turn to disillusionment. And heaven forbid, this disillusionment could morph into self-pity, which in turn, might lead the king to take actions that could create chaos. A bored king could do unfathomable things. Who knows, simply to relieve his boredom, he might undertake a new military campaign—at the cost of many lives. The kingdom could not endure that.

After taking a hard look at the situation, the grand vizier sent out a proclamation that whoever was able to relieve the king of his boredom, he or she would be amply rewarded. As expected, the announcement brought out people from all over the land, trying to cure the king. Poets, jugglers, philosophers, acrobats, clowns, and dancers, they all made an effort to amuse him. But nothing worked. There was nothing they could do that would bring even the faintest smile to his face.

Gradually, despite all these efforts, the king grew even more morose. Clearly, his mood was worsening. And with this dark mood, he became increasingly selfish and inconsiderate, making the lives of all who had dealings with him extremely miserable. No wonder that his entourage was close to their wit's end. Something more needed to be done. It seemed that nothing short of a dramatic intervention was required. If not, they were afraid that their king, who had always adored the noise of action, might die of boredom.

At long last, the court's jester made a somersaulted entry into the royal chambers, saying, "Your Majesty, everybody is very worried. Your misery has been affecting the country. Everybody agrees that it is most urgent to find a cure for your boredom. And to do so, we have all been searching far and wide. Fortunately, good fortune has struck. By chance, in the royal library, I came across an ancient book of magic. After leafing through this massive tome, I discovered that the cure for boredom is having Your Majesty issue a very specific proclamation. You should declare that in your kingdom all your subjects will be given a holiday of two-weeks paid leave. After all, they deserve it in recognition of what they have done to make your kingdom the shining diamond among all other kingdoms. But that's not all. Your Majesty should also be thinking of the other family members of the people who work in your realm. As happy families make happy workers, every child in the kingdom should be given nice toys to play with. After all, children should be joyful. They represent the future of Your Majesty's kingdom. Furthermore, as your birthday is soon forthcoming, you should tell your subjects that you want to give a great party with lots of food, music, and dancing to celebrate this occasion. It will be another way to show your gratitude for what all these people have done for Your Majesty."

Listening to what his jester had said, the king cried out: "You idiot, you want me to waste all this money on these extravaganzas. As if the royal purse has no bottom. How stupid can you be!" Angrily, he tore the book of magic out of the jester's hand. But the jester said, "I have told you only what's written in this book, Your Majesty. See for yourself," she said, pointing to the book, knowing full well that the king was almost illiterate."

"You're a liar. And you are nonsensical to make these outrageous recommendations," the king cried. "Off with your head! And take away this useless book!"

The knights dashed into the royal court to take the jester away, but before they had a chance to behead him, the jester made another great somersault to face the king once more. "But Sire, I am not finished yet. Let me read the complete passage written in this book."

"Sire, this book of magic also explains that you are the grandest person that has ever lived. Given your accomplishments, your subjects cannot but respect and admire you. In addition, this magic book also notes that the reason the country is ruled in such an exemplary manner is all because of you, Sire, our marvelous king."

"What else does it say," asked the king, who started to mellow a bit. Encouraged by this change in attitude the jester added: "It tells us that no one in the land must go hungry. That everyone deserves to have a full belly; that there should be a chicken in every pot, that kings have the duty to create the conditions to provide prosperity for all. Basically, it states that all your subjects should be joyful. But to make that happen also means that the king should be joyful. And if so, this joy will spread around. According to this magical book, commoner and king alike, and, if they wish not to be bored, if they want to live a good life, they must also do things for others. They need to make an effort to go beyond their own personal desires. Being kind to others and expressing gratitude for the things that they have received are integral to this life free of boredom. Sire, if the book is correct, it seems that factors such as meaning,

purpose, belonging, empathy, compassion and gratitude are the secret antidotes to boredom.”

Having said all this, the jester put the book aside. “Shall I throw the book in the fire, your gracious king?”

“Oh, no,” the king responded, “Put it safely back into the royal library. And be so kind as to send out a proclamation to my people with these words: ‘In a few days, as it will be my birthday, I declare a day of celebration. Be joyful, my subjects. There will be food, drink, and music for everyone! Our kingdom flourishes because of all you have done for it and for me.’”

And then, for the first time in a very long time, the king smiled. Everyone was amazed, but also worried that this smile wouldn’t last. Yet the king kept on smiling. Then he cried out, “Squires, bring me my hunting clothes! Before I devote myself to the important matters of state, creating a better life for my people, I too shall celebrate. Sometimes, for the sake of mental health, it doesn’t hurt to play.”

For you see, the king had learned just in time several important lessons. First and foremost, he realized that in order to prevent boredom, he needed to have dreams that were bigger than himself, dreams that not only pertained to him, but would also pertain to the other people in his realm. It had dawned on the king that if he would pursue activities that would transcend his narrow self-interests, these would be of a transforming nature. These activities would help to make his life feel meaningful again. In addition, as another way of making him feel better, he needed to show to his subjects compassion and empathy. Expressing these feelings would turn into the glue that would help him build deep connections. If he was to feel really good in his own skin, he should not just be a taker but also a giver. By doing so, he would be rewarded most likely by receiving gratitude in return. Another miracle drug for fighting boredom was to be found in expressing gratitude for what other people had done for him.

The king had realized that to be merely a decorative asset to his subjects wasn’t the role he should play. In the past, he had focused only on externalities and failed to pay attention to his inner world. However, as time went by, he had discovered that a life of mere pleasure would only breed boredom. But now he had come to realize that selfless acts for others could affect his inner world. It could have a positive influence on his physical and mental health. It had dawned on the king that it is better to give than to receive, and that such acts made him feel much more engaged and joyful. Thus, even though it had taken quite some time, the king had finally realized that he would be much happier if he would spend money on others than on himself. To transcend boredom, he needed to throw himself into activities he believed in with all his heart, activities that he would live for, and activities that he could die for. And if he thought that these activities were valuable, he would find the joy that had been escaping him for so long.

Along with this, the king had discovered how tiring boredom could be. After swimming for so long in a sea of boredom, he had realized how much better it was to be engaged. Now, he realized that his boredom seemed to have been the manifestation of a profound sense of despair at not having found anything meaningful in his life. Clearly, before the king had discovered the importance of meaning, he had been wasting his

time on frivolities, and nothing of substance. But as the French mathematician/philosopher Blaise Pascal once observed, “Man finds nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort.”<sup>1</sup>

The story also suggests that we may even have to feel sorry for kings if all they need to do is to express their desires to get what they want. It may explain why among the very wealthy, boredom is one of the most common causes of unhappiness. And it is likely to happen, despite all the opportunities they have to be distracted, despite all the things that their money can buy. In comparison, people who find it hard to make a living, who face many challenges, aren't as easily bored.

What the king's tale also tells us is that a life without challenge is not a life worth living. When life becomes too comfortable, it may turn into a fertile place for boredom in which small delights of life like satiating hunger or thirst, or the passions of love, no longer are of any interest. Yet, we must acknowledge that not to feel bored always requires a modicum of anxiety. It necessitates a degree of tension. However, conversely, when we do enjoy the 'comfort' of possessing everything imaginable and when there is nothing left to dream of, another danger lurks—we could die of boredom.

In fact, if a person can obtain a prize without any effort, then that prize will likely be of very little value to that person. To illustrate, why would we even want to play cards when we know that we cannot lose? And if the card player was the king, wouldn't it be a truism to say that his courtiers knew what kind of card game they needed to play? It wouldn't take them very long to figure out that the king might become quite angry if he would lose. Obviously, knowing this, they would go out of their way not to make it happen. But what thrill is to play cards without ever running the risk of losing? Clearly, it would be no thrill at all.

All too often, people like this king are flattered too much, pampered too much, and waited on too much. No wonder that for them, boredom becomes very predictable as they're living a life devoted to pleasure. No matter what their desire will be, it will immediately be taken care off. And what becomes even more disturbing is the fact that people like these kings may not even have to express what they desire. It is as if the attentive eyes of their courtiers are reading their thoughts even before they have such thoughts. Sadly enough, however, despite all these efforts—or perhaps due to these efforts—these kings may end up being quite bored.

Clearly, in the case of the king in this story, it was high time to have him regain his sense of wonder. He needed to overcome his feelings of disenchantment, re-engage with his passions, and connect to the things he truly cared about.

### **What's boredom?**

Some very successful people are like these kings of ancient times. Despite their efforts to fabricate capricious desires—after having tried everything—nothing seems to be of any interest. Given their successes, they have the means to acquire anything. However, there seems to be a limit to the things we can buy. Eventually, what good

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<sup>1</sup> Blaise Pascal (1670/2011). *Pensées*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

will it be to own extravagant villas, impressive yachts, private airplanes, renowned art collections, or great vineyards? If so, we may wonder whether there are still any “toys” available that will amuse these people? And even if there are new “toys,” their amusement value might be quite transitory. Naturally, there are also the women who would parade before these people. Sadly enough, however, their amusement value also doesn’t seem to last very long. Clearly, there is a limit to the things that money can buy. No wonder that the very wealthy are the ones who seem to be most easily bored.

Boredom, however, isn’t only the disease of the very wealthy. Even though traditionally, it was considered a characteristic of the social elite—the leisure class—it can be found among all social strata, even if the reasons to have these feelings aren’t identical. In fact, at some point in our lives, boredom is an existential vacuum that we all seem to experience. As a universal experience, it also seems to be common to all ages. However, as we become older, boredom may be experienced in different ways. Adding to the complexity of the puzzle that is boredom, there is also the socio-cultural dimension. As civilization advances, we are presented with more and more opportunities to be bored.

Our ancestors were largely focused on survival. Apart from the need to reproduce, they spent most of their time securing food or shelter. Given the many dangers they faced, they didn’t have much time to get bored. In fact, even as recently as a few hundred years ago, essential tasks that we now take for granted would have taken a very long time to complete. In our day and age, however, our minds need to work much harder to find activities that occupy the same amount of time. In addition, what has amplified the situation—given the advances of technology and the introduction of a very fast pace of dealing with the essentials of life—is the fact that our attention span may be decreasing. When people have a very short attention span, they also may become much more easily bored.

### *Philosophical reflections*

One of the earliest accounts of boredom dates back to Roman times, when the philosopher Seneca may well have begun the long tradition of moaning about this condition. During a ponderous exchange of letters with a friend, he asked “*Quo usque eadem*”—“How much longer [must we endure] the same things?” From there, he continues with “I do nothing new. I see nothing new. Eventually there’s a nausea even of this. Surely, I will yawn, I will sleep, I will eat, I will be thirsty, I will be cold, I will be hot. Is there no end?”<sup>2</sup>

Centuries later, there was the medieval preoccupation with “acedia,” taken from the Greek word for indifference, which was thought of by the Catholic Church as a state of listlessness, sinful apathy, or slothfulness. In fact, during the Middle Ages, the monks complained of the “noonday demon,” the personification of *acedia*—the torpor of not caring or not being concerned about their position or condition in the world. And appreciating the timing of this experience, this feeling seemed to take place between the hours of ten and two. Most likely, its origin was the repetitiveness of their daily lives which would be responsible for feelings of exhaustion, listlessness, sadness,

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<sup>2</sup> Seneca, *Epistulae Morales*, 24.26, Cambridge, Mass: Loeb Classical Library.

dejection, and restlessness. In addition, it may have had something to do with an aversion to the cell and the ascetic life, the humdrum of their daily activities, and the yearning for their previous lives. The church leaders, however, viewed acedia as a dangerous form of spiritual alienation—a rejection of the world and its creator.

Although the English word “boredom” was invented in the early 19th Century, it didn’t enter public consciousness until the British author Charles Dickens slipped it into *Bleak House*. But he wasn’t the only one interested in this subject. This concern about boredom was also reflected in the writings of Anton Chekhov. In fact, he would mention boredom more frequently than any other writer. In *The Cherry Orchard*, the character Trofimov stated, “We just philosophize, complain of boredom, or drink vodka. It’s so clear, you see, that if we’re to begin living in the present, we must first of all redeem our past.” Evidently, Chekhov wasn’t alone in his concern about boredom. His Russian colleague-writer Leo Tolstoy, referred in his work *Anna Karenina* to boredom, talking of this feeling as “desire for desires.”

Not surprisingly, many philosophers joined the fray. For example, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard would say, “Since boredom advances and boredom is the root of all evil, no wonder, then, that the world goes backwards, that evil spreads. This can be traced back to the very beginning of the world. The gods were bored; therefore, they created human beings.”<sup>3</sup> The German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer went even a step further, citing boredom as proof of life’s emptiness and lack of value. He noted, “The two enemies of human happiness are pain and boredom.”<sup>4</sup> And he would add, “If the world were a paradise of luxury and ease, a land flowing with milk and honey, where every Jack obtained his Jill at once and without any difficulty, men would either die of boredom or hang themselves; or there would be wars, massacres, and murders; so that in the end mankind would inflict more suffering on itself than it has now to accept at the hands of Nature.”<sup>5</sup> His philosophical colleague, Friedrich Nietzsche in his book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, also touches on the question of boredom. He would observe, “Against boredom even gods struggle in vain.” Furthermore, to continue this line of thought, the British philosopher Bertrand Russell suggested that “boredom is therefore a vital problem for the moralist, since at least half the sins of mankind are caused by the fear of it.”<sup>6</sup> And always ready to give his two cents worth, the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre viewed boredom as a form of nausea, as an estrangement from the world, referring to this phenomenon in his books *Nausea* and *Being and Nothingness*.

Boredom is often included with such phenomena as alienation, anomie, disenchantment and depression, conditions of the mind that indicate that we are human, making it an inevitable part of human nature. In fact, boredom occurs when we feel like doing nothing, when we have no interest in whatever we’re doing. In other

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<sup>3</sup> Søren Kierkegaard (1843/ 1992). *Either/ Or: A fragment of Life*, New York: Pinguin Classics.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer (1818/ 1969). *The World as Will and Representation*. New York: Courier Dover Publications.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer (2015). *The Suffering of the World*, New York: Simon and Schuster, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Bertrand Russell (1932). Boredom and Excitement. In *The Conquest of Happiness*. London: George Allen & Unwin, p. 61.

words, it is a psychological state that we experience whenever we are indifferent to what we are currently preoccupied with. The result is this uncomfortable, conflicting feeling of wanting to do something, but also not wanting to do anything—this tense space between action and inaction. Or to say it differently, boredom is an unpleasant emotional state—a negative affective experience.

When we're bored, we are typically in a state of longing for an activity, while also being unaware of what it is what we desire. And when we have this feeling, everything we do seems to be a waste of time. And as the example of the king in our fairytale showed, boredom occurs when we may feel energetic but have nowhere to direct our energy. There is nothing we seem able to focus on, leaving us instead with this sense of emptiness. We become impassive; we feel fatigued, nervous, and jittery.

In fact, it is this combination of lethargy and restlessness that distinguishes boredom from feelings of apathy. More specifically, boredom results from the recognition that whatever we do is no longer stimulating, making for a desire to change the current situation—to look for alternatives. In contrast, apathy refers to a state of mind where there is no desire at all. It is characterized by a lack of motivation and a failure to seek alternatives.

### *Evolutionary advantages*

Taking an evolutionary perspective, boredom can even be looked at as a kind of survival mechanism. In fact, it can be argued that Homo sapiens has always been interested in two major things—to survive and to reproduce. Anything that's superimposed on that—given the socio-cultural development of the human animal—may contribute to feelings of boredom. And if that occurs, it could be viewed as a kind of evolutionary warning signal. It is time to make sure that Homo sapiens' most important activities are in place. It may be time to explore new avenues for food and reproduction.

Taking these factors into consideration, it may very well be that our fear of boredom is what has fostered our progress as a species. The sheer frequency with which boredom is experienced on a cross-cultural basis suggests that this state may have been important for human growth and development. Clearly, contentment tends to lead to complacency—which could be a dangerous evolutionary strategy. Boredom, however, forces the human animal to look for other horizons. Whether it is moving to new locations, trying out new foods, or seeking new mates, boredom may have been the impetus to expand the repertoire of human possibilities. It would have created future options beyond the “boring” present.

It could very well be that only the most evolved animal species are capable of boredom due to the development of consciousness. From that perspective, boredom could be looked at as the consciousness of repetition, leading to the realization that something needed to be done about it. It could have been the state of boredom that provided an opportunity for thought and reflection, prompting those experiencing it to ask themselves whether what they have been doing is still appropriate. Boredom would have made our early ancestors realize that their past activities have run their course.

However, looking at the animal world—as animals aren't so likely to remember the past—we may hypothesize that they're also unlikely to experience boredom.



Therefore, as mentioned before, for the more conscious human animal, boredom would have created the motivation for exploration, for discovery. This interest in exploration may have contributed to its survival. In effect, boredom may have been an essential instrument for social change, motivating our early ancestors to learn, to do new things—to expand the repertoire of human possibilities. Boredom would have been a sign that a specific activity was a waste of time—and thus not worth continuing. It would have enabled our early ancestors to create future options beyond the “boring” present. Some of these explorations proved to have adaptive significance for our species, while other approaches may have led to dead ends. In that respect, boredom could even be credited in playing an important role in the rise and fall of civilizations. Even in the present, transcending *Homo sapiens*’ evolutionary history, to feel bored pushes us to try new activities or to explore new interests. Thus, we need to be grateful for boredom as this feeling will steer us towards realizing our potential, to live full, meaningful lives.

### **The many colors of boredom**

Boredom can be caused by many different factors. Gender, age, educational attainment, and personality are among the factors at play. Men seem to be more easily bored than women, as are children and adolescents, which for these younger people may be related to a feeling of having to live with many rules. There is also a positive link between very low educational attainment and boredom. It might very well be that people with less education have not as rich an internal life compared to people who are more educated. In addition, extroverts, in particular, seem to more be prone to boredom, as well as those with neuro-developmental disorders such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or autism spectrum disorders (ASD) often suffer from boredom.<sup>7</sup> After all, it is hard to be interested in something when you have difficulties concentrating.

As boredom is such a disturbing feeling, people may do all kinds of things to ease it from coming to the fore. These activities aren’t always constructive ones. In fact, boredom is believed to be a significant motivational factor contributing to all kinds of violent and (self)-destructive forms of behaviors. For example, boredom has been a major cause of addictive behavior. The chronically bored appear to be at a higher risk of drug addiction, alcoholism, compulsive gambling, eating disorders, anger control, and low work or school performance. In fact, many of the mentioned addictions could be looked at as ways in which people deal with a despondent state of mind. It is as if a boredom EpiPen is helping these people in managing their boredom. It appears to be that these people don’t have the mental resources to take care of themselves.

### *Philobats and ocnophils*

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Smith (1981). Boredom: A Review. *Human Factors*, 23(3), 329–340; Patricia Meyer Spacks (1996). *Boredom: The literary history of a state of mind*. The University of Chicago Press; Peter Conrad (1997). It’s Boring: Notes on the Meanings of Boredom in Everyday Life. *Qualitative Sociology as Everyday Life*, 20(4), 123–133; Michael Gardiner and Julian Jason Haladyn, (Eds.). (2016). *Boredom Studies Reader. Frameworks and perspectives*. London: Routledge; James Danckert and John D. Eastwood (2020). *Out of My Skull: The Psychology of Boredom*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press; Mariusz Finkielstein (2023). The Significance of Boredom: A Literature Review, *Journal of Boredom Studies*, 1, 1–33.

Furthermore, referring to the many colors of boredom, some people seem to have a greater need for external stimulation and excitement than others. In fact, we could even divide people into two groups in terms of motivational vectors. One motivational vector is constructed in such a way that it incites people to discover new things. The other one tends to pull them back into a safe place. The first cohort of people—the ones searching for novel, complex, intense experiences—may be described as having more of a thrill-seeking or “Type T” personality.<sup>8</sup> They appear to be addicted to stimulation, excitement and arousal. Most likely, these sensation seekers find that the world moves too slowly for them. This need for external stimulation may also explain why extroverts tend to be particularly prone to boredom. Novelty seeking and risk-taking can be seen as the way in which they self-medicate against boredom. Only by taking extreme risks—only by engaging in disinhibited behavior—do they seem to obtain the exhilaration that they are looking for. Without it, however, they may become bored.

In fact, long before the Type T personality was introduced, Hungarian-British psychiatrist Michael Balint distinguished between two kinds of people: the ocnophils, and the philobates.<sup>9</sup> According to him, ocnophils are the non-adventurous types. And to explain the way they behave, it appears that in their inner world the fear of abandonment plays an outsized role. They prefer to clutch at something firm when their security is at risk. In contrast, the philobates seem to be much more confident and more independent souls. It is this state of mind that encourages them to seek out thrills. They are like adrenaline junkies who like to live on the edge and thrive on danger. Here, we are looking at the kinds of people who jump out of airplanes, travel to exciting places, or try exotic foods. While novelty-seeking and risk-taking serve as a means of self-medication, such activities often get them into trouble. On the other end of this continuum, we find the anxious, more timid, stay-at-home types, people who may end up avoiding new life experiences because of their fears. Most probably, people who are on the extreme ends of either of these behavior patterns tend to be more boredom prone.

#### *The repetitiveness of work*

Frequently, work has been looked at as the obvious escape from boredom. As a proverb goes, “The best cure for boredom is hard work.” Hence, it is ironic that when people say that they are bored, they are often speaking of their work experiences. In fact, when dealing with boredom and work, there seems to be a very a predictable pattern. Initially when people start a job, they feel excited and even nervous about doing something new and challenging. Their brains are stimulated processing the new experience and trying to work through all these new stimuli. But as time passes, and they become more familiar with the job (and there are no new challenges), boredom can come to the fore. Often, this feeling of boredom manifest itself through mind wandering—referring to shifts in attention away from the current task which creates unrelated cognitions and feelings. Predictably, every job will have some build-in boredom factors. What is repeated too often—when there is too much routine—can make for a tedious experience.

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<sup>8</sup> Marvin Zuckerman (2007). *Sensation seeking and risky behavior*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Balint (1959) *Thrills and Regressions*. New York: International University Press.

Clearly, to feel alive, we need to do new things; we need variety. But when everything becomes totally predictable, we may die of boredom. In fact, any experience that's repetitive and too easy is likely to become boring. And when this happens, we may go on automatic pilot. Sadly enough, this seems to be the trajectory of most experiences.

If we are in that state, we don't have the sense of being totally immersed in a challenging task—in short, there is a lack of “flow.” Not having flow suggests that we aren't engaged in a task that has clear goals, an activity that's also providing immediate feedback.<sup>10</sup> Instead, most likely, we will be bored. But according to the originator of this concept of flow, the Hungarian American Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a greater understanding of boredom will be of importance to all people “interested in enhancing the quality of life” because this feeling has a significant effect on people's well-being.<sup>11</sup>

### *Emotional management*

Feelings of boredom will be part of our emotional repertoire. And in this context, emotions should be looked at as a signaling device. They appear to be the vibrational signals in our bodies and our brains that something is going on within our experience and in ourselves. Emotions will tell us when something isn't right.

To interpret what a particular emotion tries to signal to us will be helpful in not only understanding ourselves and our current experiences, but also how to use this signaling device to decide what we are going to do. Unfortunately, there are quite a few people who seem to be emotionally illiterate. Instead of paying attention to their feelings—given the way their personality is developed—they tend to somaticize their feelings. As a result, instead of emotionally processing their feelings—paying attention to these affective experiences—they will be preoccupied about the way their body is reacting. If that's the case, these people may be suffering from alexithymia, a psychological term for people who have difficulties in describing or identifying their feelings. They may find it hard to distinguish between their bodily sensations and their feelings due to an inhibited inner emotional and fantasy life.<sup>12</sup>

It is thought that alexithymia might have developed in response to overwhelming stress to avoid experiencing agonizing and unbearable emotions. It is also speculated that it might be linked to a genetic component or certain types of brain damage. Most worrisome, however, is that this inability to decipher their feelings often will contribute to existential boredom. As these people cannot interpret their feelings, as they are unable to really decipher their emotions, they may have a sense of directionlessness that could be experienced as boredom.

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<sup>10</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990). *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper Collins.

<sup>11</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. (2000). *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*. Jossey-Bass Publishers, p. 444.

<sup>12</sup> John Case Nemiah, Harald Freyberger and Peter Emanuel Sifneos (1970). "Alexithymia: A View of the Psychosomatic Process". In Oscar Hill (ed.). *Modern Trends in Psychosomatic Medicine*. Vol. 3. pp. 430–439; Joyce McDougall (1989). *Theaters of the Body: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Psychosomatic Illness*. New York: Norton.

Obviously, we need to look at emotions as guides. And if we lack the ability to perceive them as guides— as do those suffering from alexithymia—we may not understand what’s bringing us pleasure or enjoyment. We may not know what’s meaningful to us. Therefore, it will be difficult to articulate what it is what we desire or want from life. Unfortunately, not knowing what we are searching for also implies that we lack the capacity to choose appropriate goals for our engagement with the world. This can contribute to a sense of meaninglessness. Consequently, many of these alexithymic people lack the inner resources to deal with boredom constructively. They only seem to rely on external stimulation. However, given the absence of an inner-directed capability to invigorate themselves, the external world will always fail to provide sufficient excitement and novelty.

### *Autonomy*

Furthermore, in the context of boredom (as we have seen in work situations), there is also the question of autonomy. Some people believe that they have little control over what they are doing. They tend to be more reactive, rather than proactive, and struggle to take initiative. As a result, they feel stuck. And because they believe that they lack control over their life—as they see no way out—they end up getting bored. At the same time, however, given their rather passive modus operandi, it is as if they’re waiting for something or relying on other people to get them out of their present slump. It is this kind of outlook that we can often find among teenagers. Clearly, one explanation for this mindset is that they believe that they have very little say on what’s going on in their world. Their day-to-day activities are dictated by schoolwork, extracurricular activities, and other things, most of which has been decided by other people. In that respect, these years can be looked at as a peak period for boredom.

### *Episodic versus chronic boredom*

In most instances, boredom tends to be episodic. But there are also those who are prone to chronic boredom, which is detrimental to their mental health. This chronic boredom puts them at an increased risk of anxiety attacks, compulsive behavior, eating disorders, and poor performance at work and school. Furthermore, when people get bored too frequently, it may also be a sign of depression. Combined with other troubling symptoms such as decreased energy level, unintentional weight loss, or sleep disturbances, this type of boredom suggests more deeply rooted issues that could be difficult to resolve as they border on what could be viewed as a form of imaginary suicide.

### **In praise of boredom**

Perhaps, when children are complaining to their parents that they are bored, the most appropriate answer would be to say to them, “That’s great. Now it is up to you to figure out what fun things to do.” We can even go so far as to say that it may even be a good idea to let kids get bored occasionally—that’s how they learn to become more adventurous. Similarly, it may not be a very good idea to try to fix the child’s boredom. It is much better to have them find their inner resources. Of course, it doesn’t mean that adults shouldn’t give their children some help them in finding creative solutions. The question becomes what to do when we are dealing with adults? Should we also let them stew in their boredom? Or should we help them see the flip side of boredom? Should we point out the positives?

In fact, it could very well be that boredom shouldn't be looked at as a purely negative phenomenon since it can be seen not only as a warning sign, but also as a call for action. It can be interpreted as communicating our intention of wanting to withdraw from a current situation we find ourselves no longer satisfying. It tells us that we have settled into a mental cruise control. In other words, what feelings of boredom are really telling us is that we are failing to interact constructively with the outside world. This uncomfortable feeling also tells us that we should pursue something different. In fact, boredom produces an almost irresistible desire to escape this disturbing feeling, a reaction which can lead to positive/creative or negative/destructive actions.

### *A jolt for creativity*

Boredom should be seen as a clarion call for action. It is a message suggesting that we aren't living up to our full potential. It is a reminder that we should do something about this feeling of inner stagnation. As the German American psychoanalyst Erich Fromm once said, "Boredom is nothing but the experience of a paralysis of our productive powers."<sup>13</sup> Given the way we feel, it tells us to be bold, to use our boredom wisely.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, like other negative emotions, such as hate, disgust, envy, anger and sadness, boredom, as we suggested earlier taking an evolutionary perspective, may have evolved to have Homo sapiens look for other avenues. Boredom provides the physiological and psychological motivation to search for new activities. It is an uncomfortable feeling that makes us realize that something is wrong or missing from our lives. But it also tells us that we need to evolve. Thus, quite comparable to hunger, thirst and loneliness, boredom is a negative feeling that might motivate us to change our behavior.

What has become clear is that boredom shouldn't be looked at as an end product. On the contrary, it should be seen as a staging platform for new activities. It could very well be that our brain requires a certain period of boredom—of being stuck—in order to be once more creative. Boredom serves as a catalyst telling us to leave the routines of everyday life. Thus, while we're in a state of boredom, we may be creating the space, the playground, for new interests. Taking a hard look at human activities, boredom has always preceded periods of great creativity. Our most creative ideas tend to pop up after periods of boredom.

Once boredom sets in, our mind begins to wander, which, in turn, contributes to daydreaming and dreaming. These processes may contribute to the creative process, to an impetus to explore new horizons. And as the French moralist Francois de La Rochefoucauld mentioned pointedly, "Extreme boredom provides its own antidote." Clearly, boredom can be a great motivator. It is the emotional signal that we should pursue alternative goals.

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<sup>13</sup> Erich Fromm (2013). *The Sane Society*. London: Routledge, p. 202.

<sup>14</sup> Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries (2015). Doing Nothing and Nothing to Do: The Hidden Value of Empty Time and Boredom. *Organizational Dynamics*, 44(3), 169–175; Manoush Zomorodi (2017). *Bored and Brilliant. How Time Spent Doing Nothing Changes Everything*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

## **The boredom cure**

What may have become clear by now is that it is the destiny of the human animal to experience boredom. To experience boredom, however, is one thing, but to stay bored is quite another matter. In fact, to stay bored will be more of a choice since boredom is ultimately a clarion call for action. And while there is no miracle cure for boredom, there are plenty of actions that can be taken when we experience this feeling.

### *The inner journey*

As with any psychological problem, understanding what's happening to us is the first step in overcoming it. To be in a state of boredom implies that there is a disequilibrium between people's internal and external worlds. Both extremes make for a disquieted state of mind. Thus, when we are struck by boredom, we need to figure out why we have the feeling that psychologically matters are out of balance. But if we are not dealing with this disequilibrium, boredom may turn into a deadly poison. If we are prepared, however, to take the plunge, being bored should be looked at as a great opportunity to explore our interior life. If we are willing to go on this explorative journey, we may discover what's really important to us—in short, what makes us feel most alive and what gives us this sense of flow. In fact, a reflective mind will be the first line of defense against boredom. After all, we cannot fully be human without reflecting on what it means to be human. This inner journey will tell us what specific external stimuli we need to feel fulfilled. Furthermore, to engage in this inner exploration, we would also be wise to accurately monitor our feelings. By understanding what makes us feel alive, they might figure out what we truly want.

Unfortunately, many bored people have little self-awareness. They may have never tried to undertake a journey of self-exploration, and some may even be scared to do so. They can be quite talented in repressing their true wants and desires. For these people, to remain in a state of boredom could be seen as their way to distract themselves from potentially troublesome inner experiences, looking only outwards. To take this inner journey—to explore their emotions—to discover the nature of their “scripts” in their inner theatre, may be far too threatening. For them, boredom may have turned into a defense mechanism, a way of avoiding having to deal with painful, unaddressed thoughts. Consequently, for some people, this internal journey can be quite an uphill battle.

But it doesn't have to be this way. If they would make the effort, this state of boredom could give these people the opportunity to be contemplative, to become more aware of the issues in their lives that do merit their attention. Challenged by their feelings of boredom, they may be willing to reflect on themselves, to get to know what they like/dislike, who they are, and to which end/future/goal they aspire. They may find out what brings meaning to their lives, what externalities they should pursue—the things they perceive externally that could be important to pursue. In fact, as we saw in the example of the bored king, the pursuit of meaning has always been a fundamental aspect of human life. And being prone to boredom may help these people to find out what's most relevant in their lives.

Of course, it can be a challenging proposition to find meaning in what feels tedious. Inner journeys can be very challenging. However, only relying on external stimuli to feel alive will not be the answer. Clearly, as we have seen in the case of the king, his external and internal world had been quite out of sync. It undermined his sense of

himself as the author of his own life. But if we don't deal with this sense of ennui, as the king managed to do, boredom might become chronic. Paying attention to external events, in the end failed to make him feel alive. Clearly, his original *modus operandi* wasn't the way to overcome his boredom. On the contrary, it left him feeling disoriented and quite morose.

Bored people should realize that if they're prepared to make this inner journey—if they're willing to explore why they are bored—it could turn out to be an interesting adventure. They may come to understand that the roots of their boredom lie in a fundamental breakdown in their understanding of what it is that gives them energy, and what provides meaning to their life. And while they are on this exploratory journey, they may find out what they need to do to overcome their boredom.

#### *Overload and underload*

If people would have more self-knowledge and self-awareness, if they come to understand what causes their boredom, they may be better equipped to realize what's needed to prevent it from happening. For example, they may come to recognize the various cognitive and emotional demands that they are subjected to on a daily basis. Of course, while boredom can also be a reaction to feeling overloaded, more likely, there is also the flip side of feeling underloaded. But whether they feel overloaded or underloaded, they should try to understand what causes them stress. They should figure out what drains them of energy, and what is giving them with energy.

Such an assessment will help these people understand what their mental capacity is for taking on new challenges. Facilitated by these feelings of boredom, they may become better at calibration; they might be able to only take on challenges that they believe that they can psychologically handle.

#### *Belonging and transcendence*

Most likely, if people's internal and external world is out of zinc, it is high time to find new ways to invigorate their senses and enrich their inner world. Here, a sense of belonging will be very important. People need intimate relationships. Of course, a major relationship "dance" will always be between couples. Unfortunately, in this context boredom tends to be a common complaint. Clearly, in intimate relationships, sex alone doesn't seem to be good enough. It is quite clear that without factoring in imagination, sex quickly stales into duty and boredom.<sup>15</sup> In fact, intimate relationships often fail not because people have stopped loving but because they have stopped imagining. Without imagination, intimate relationships become stale, easily transforming into boredom.

Thus, in the context of relationships, the flipside in making efforts to overcome boredom is that it may result in a descent into promiscuity. What these people may have found out is that not only being bored alone can be a challenge, but what can be even worse is to be bored together. There are some people who become bored to

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<sup>15</sup> David E Scharff and Jill S. Scharff (1991). *Object Relations Couple Therapy*. Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson; Richard M. Alperin (2001). Barriers to intimacy: an object relations perspective, *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 18, 137-156; Sharron Hincliff and Merryn Gott (2004). Intimacy, commitment, and adaptation: sexual relationships within long-term marriages, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 21, 595-609.

death while they are with someone. In fact, chronic boredom that has long been latent may contribute to adultery. Often, when that's the case, boredom can become the grounds for divorce.

But not only in couple relationships can boredom raise its ugly head, the same observation can be made about relationships in general. We like to connect. After all, by nature, *Homo sapiens* is a social creature. Thus, the absence of meaningful relationships will be a major cause for boredom. Naturally, some activities can get done fine just by ourselves, but depending on our social needs, other activities will make us feel lonely by doing them alone. *Homo sapiens* very much needs to be part of a community. Therefore, efforts should be made to mingle with other people. For example, eating alone at a restaurant, watching a movie alone, or strolling in a mall alone could make us feel very lonely. Consequently, it is helpful (as an antidote to feeling bored) to have somebody accompany us, like a friend or family member, as a way of making these activities more enjoyable. Life can become much more interesting when we have somebody along with us to enjoy the experience, to have somebody to talk with. Naturally, another way to explore new relationships is to embark on a new career path, start a new learning journey, or pursue new hobbies. Many of these activities will also have a relationship component. A person with intimate friends is less likely to get bored. So, making efforts to make new relationships or reinvigorate old ones could serve to alleviate boredom.

Furthermore, in the context of relationship, we could also engage in activities that transcend the self; that go beyond narrow personal interests. As the British author Virginia Woolf said so appropriately, "Boredom is the legitimate kingdom of the philanthropic."<sup>16</sup> A concern for the less fortunate can be of great help to shift the focus away from more self-centered towards community-oriented activities. Therefore, as another possible "cure" against boredom, we could engage in activities that transcends the self; endeavors that would go beyond our narrow personal interests but will prove to be extremely enriching. For example, these community-oriented activities, exemplified in acts of giving, may give feelings of satisfaction that presently elude us. In other words, giving to others, humanitarian, philanthropic activities, can be a highly effective antidote against boredom. And as the king of the opening story had discovered, such activities that benefit others will always be a great antidote to boredom.

### *Finding help*

As suggested before, depression can be viewed as a co-variant of boredom. Therefore, when people experience a sense of hopelessness, helplessness, sadness, irritability, avoidance of interpersonal relations, and self-blame—when boredom is impacting their quality of life—it may be time to look for support. These people should try to prevent such a state of mind from getting worse. And in such cases, an outside supportive resource like a psychotherapist, coach or other helping professional could prove valuable when trying to navigate such a state of mind. After all, in the context of depression, boredom could be looked at as a preview of death, if not in itself a form of death as it can cripple and kill. However, helping professionals can be quite effective

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<sup>16</sup> Virginia Woolf (1977). *The Diary of Virginia Woolf 1915-1919*. Anne Olivier Bell (ed.). London: Chatto and Windus, September 20, 1918.



in assisting these people to overcome these limiting views and recuperate a sense of purpose and passion in their lives.

### **Boredom and society**

We can also look at boredom as a social disease. Even though external stimuli have their limits, as the example of the king illustrated, the art of living requires external stimuli. However, in order to avoid chronic boredom, a delicate equilibrium between our external and internal world is always required. Any position on the extremes might be the cause for problems. For example, the behavioral tendency to engage in solitary behavior, to remove oneself from opportunities for social interaction will be worrisome. Often, it is a sign of depression. At the other side of the spectrum, to be only focused on externalities, will also be a worrisome sign. It might indicate that the person doesn't possess the internal resources to lead a full life.

Unfortunately, in our day-and-age, people may be more bored than would have been the case in earlier centuries. Due to the invention of many labor-saving devices, modern man might have created for himself an artifice filled with boredom. In earlier times, as suggested before, when people were mainly focused on survival, boredom may not have been as common. In fact, most people didn't have the luxury of getting bored. They were far too busy looking for food or shelter. In that respect, boredom can be looked at as a relatively modern luxury. In contemporary society, however, the context has changed. As modern life takes place at a faster and faster pace, we may have become less focused. In addition, the pace of life may have been eating at our capacity for concentration, making us more susceptible to pangs of boredom.

In fact, in this day-and-age, many people seem to suffer from sensory overload. There seem to be too many externalities. Paradoxically, even though we live in an overly entertained society, with endless possibilities to be amused, boredom may have become much more prevalent, reaching, in some demographics, pandemic proportions. Apparently, the easy access to infinite entertainment options seems to be feeding our boredom rather than discouraging it. It could be that being exposed to so many stimulations, we no longer may have the chance and ability to figure out what are our interests, what are our passions. Conditioned as we are with respect to sensory overload, for many of us, it has become increasingly difficult to tolerate the moments of solitude, that would allow for reflection and an escape from boredom.

When we consider the pandemic boredom prevalent in our day-and-age, we could reframe the various forms of entertainment as attempts at self-medication, that seem to be failing. Our obsession with external sources of entertainment—TV, movies, the Internet, and video games—has created a world full of boredom. It also may have contributed to addictive kinds of behavior. Here, reference is made to biochemical (to the dopamine release after a pleasurable experience), the behavioral (the attraction of repetition and routines), and the psychological (the need for social inclusion).

In contemporary society, many people when they are alone or feel a moment of boredom reach for one of the devices that they always keep very close. These devices can easily turn into some form of transitional object.<sup>17</sup> In other words, what was once

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<sup>17</sup> Donald W. Winnicott (1971). *Playing and Reality*. London: Routledge.

our childhood's teddy bear, has now transformed into an iPad, iPhone, or computer. Helped by these devices to fight attacks of boredom, we keep on refreshing our social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, trying to find something that engages us. Furthermore, at all times, we may feel compelled to make unnecessary phone, Facetime, WhatsApp or Zoom calls. And if these activities turn out to be unsatisfactory, we can always switch on our television set with the expectation to see some interesting content. While we are at it, there will be the endless hours of entertainment offered on Netflix, Amazon Prime, HBO, YouTube and Spotify. However, all too often, seeking relief on the internet, can feel like trying to drink from a fire hose.

Unfortunately, these activities have become a crutch that only reinforces our resistance against the primitive anxieties that the world we live in arouses in us. They become our way to prevent dealing with what would be truly meaningful to us. Basically, in our present-day society, we have difficulties sitting still with our thoughts. We seem to be socialized to being addicted to novelty and constant stimulation.

All these forms of distraction can turn out to be a mere anaesthetic to an overload of stimuli, a barrier against the noise coming at us. Unfortunately, these temporarily distractions don't seem to help us to overcome these feelings of boredom. Instead, they may contribute to more episodes of boredom. And as our tolerance for routines and repetitions has been decreasing, it has led to a never-ending quest for new stimulation. This endless cycle of passing from entertainment to boredom and then back again to the next form of entertainment is leaving us void of satisfaction.

### **A word of caution**

But by relying mainly on external solutions to counter boredom, we may undermine the sense of being the authors of our own lives. If we are to author our own lives, then we must cultivate a sense of agency, figuring out through inner forms of exploration what externalities makes us feel most alive. Getting into the causes of what makes us feel alive, and doing something to improve or change these feelings, will help to make our day-to-day activities more enjoyable.

Frequently, as has been suggested, boredom may indicate a reluctance to engage in new learning, a wariness to take chances in life. Instead, we're much better off when we come to realize that our feelings of boredom should be looked at as the beginning stage of a period of great creativity. We must be vigilant in allowing boredom to serve only as an episodic warning, and never develop into a chronic condition. When boredom can function for us in this way, it becomes a tool for a better life or as The French writer Gustave Flaubert put it—"Isn't 'not to be bored' one of the principal goals of life?"

As we have seen, boredom is a multi-faceted, enigmatic emotion. If we can cultivate sufficient self-awareness, we can understand why we do what we do, and learn what we are all about. This, in turn, will better equip us to tackle the enigma that is boredom. And in so doing, we will become more adroit at synchronizing our internal and external life. In time, as we learn how to use boredom to our advantage, we will begin to see it as both a profound opportunity to reflect and a catalyst to search for the new. Boredom then becomes something that aids us to relating to others, engaging with the world, and discovering a new and better self.