

Boredom by Design

How to Do Nothing and Feel Great About it

The science of doing nothing and why your brain needs it



Why This Talk?

We live in the most stimulated era in human history — and it's costing us.

Boredom is backed by real neuroscience, and most people have it completely backwards.

This talk gives you tools you can use today — not someday.

Disclosures

Educational purposes only – not medical, psychological or clinical advice.

Findings cited are drawn from peer-reviewed psychological and organizational research.

No financial conflicts of interest related to this content.

Exercises discussed are general wellness practice – not a substitute for professional support.

What we'll cover

01

What boredom actually is

02

The brain science behind it

03

Proven benefits

04

Actionable exercises

05

When boredom turns harmful

We live in the most stimulated era in human history.

5×

More daily information consumed
than in 1986

Bohn & Short, 2009

96×

Average number of times we check
our phones each day

Asurion, 2023

47%

Of waking hours the mind is not on
the current task

Killingsworth & Gilbert, Science, 2010

PAUSE & REFLECT

When did you last feel genuinely bored?



Turn to the person next to you

Where were you?

Queue, commute, waiting room...

What did you do?

Reach for your phone? Daydream?

What came of it?

Did anything interesting surface?

67%

of people would rather give themselves an electric shock than sit quietly with their thoughts.

Wilson et al., 2014, Science

Learning Objectives

1

Explain what happens in the brain during boredom

2

Identify evidence-based cognitive and emotional benefits of boredom

3

Apply one boredom-based practice into your existing routine this week

4

Distinguish productive boredom from aversive boredom

LIVE POLL

How often do you sit for 5+ minutes with no phone, no task, no media?

A

Never

What's boredom?

1

B

Rarely

A few times a year

2

C

Sometimes

Once a week or so

3

D

Often

It's part of my routine

4

What is Boredom?

Not laziness

Laziness pulls you away from action and effort.

Boredom pushes you toward action.

Not relaxation

Relaxation is a peaceful, restorative state of rest and can be deeply engaging.

Boredom has a restless, aversive pull.

Not apathy

Apathy is flat, lacking emotion, desire or motivation.

Boredom has urgency — the mind demanding redirection.

Bench & Lench (2013) argue boredom works like hunger — an aversive signal pushing you toward a more meaningful goal. It's adaptive, not pathological.

Your brain doesn't go quiet when you are bored...

It gets louder.

1

Default Mode Network (DMN)

Brain regions most active when the mind is at wakeful rest – involved in self-reflection, daydreaming, memory recall, and planning/imagining the future.

2

Active during boredom

fMRI studies show DMN activity increases during boredom and mind-wandering. The brain gets busy.

3

What it's doing

Processing past experiences, simulating future scenarios, connecting distant ideas.



What the DMN Handles



Memory

Autobiographical & episodic recall



Planning

Simulating future scenarios



Self-reflection

Identity, values, inner narrative



Associative thinking

Connecting distant, unrelated ideas



Social cognition

Understanding others' thoughts & feelings

BENEFIT 01

Creativity

Mann & Cadman, Creativity Research Journal, 2014

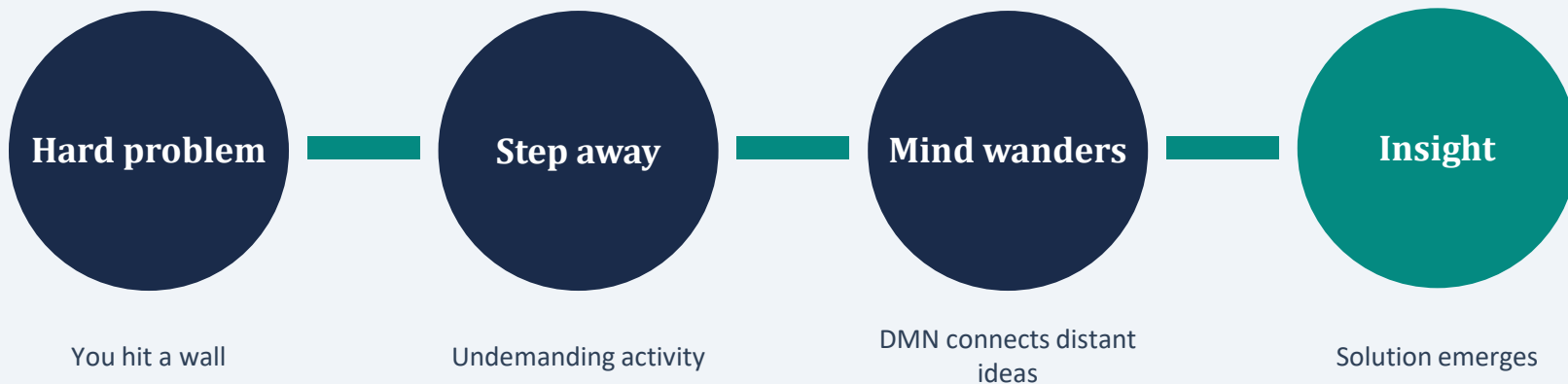
Participants who engaged in boring tasks before a creativity test outperformed control groups who went straight to the test.

Passive boredom (reading) outperformed active boredom (writing).

**More Mental Wandering
=
More Creative Output**

"Shower thoughts" are real

Problem-Solving & Incubation



Baird et al., 2012 (Psychological Science):

After a creative problem, the group given an undemanding (boring) break showed the biggest creative improvement. Mind-wandering during the boring task was the driver.

Self-Knowledge & Goal Redirection

Someone chronically bored at work but energized by weekend side projects isn't lazy.
Their boredom is diagnosing a real engagement gap.

Boredom functions like hunger — an aversive signal pushing you toward a more meaningful goal.

Bench & Lench, 2013

Self-Care, Stress Recovery & Burnout Prevention

Psychological Detachment

Mentally "switching off" from work during non-work time is the key recovery mechanism against burnout. Boring, unstructured downtime is one of the most reliable ways to get there.

Sonnentag & Fritz (2015)

"Checking email for a second" isn't rest — it keeps the stress system engaged.

Boredom as a Reset Signal

Managing boredom draws on the same self-regulatory resources as managing overload. Monotonous work is its own slow-burn stressor — the fix is a deliberate reset, not more effort.

Wolff & Martarelli (2020)

A long, dull Zoom call can drain you as much as an intense one.

REFLECTION

Which of the five benefits surprised you most?

Think about it before we reveal the exercises.

Creativity

Problem-Solving

Self-Knowledge

Stress Recovery

Burnout Prevention

EXERCISE 01 / 05

The 15-Minute Void

The discomfort is the exercise.

How

Set a timer for 15 minutes. No phone, no task, no media. Just sit. Stare at the ceiling. Let your mind go wherever it wants.

Why it works

Wilson et al. (2014) found most people find this genuinely hard — which is the point. Tolerating the pull to reach for stimulation is the skill being trained.

Key takeaway

Builds tolerance for unstructured thought — the prerequisite for all other benefits.

EXERCISE 02 / 05

The Boring Walk

Step away to let your brain catch up.

How

Walk a familiar route — same one every time. No podcast, no music, no phone. Let your eyes wander and your mind follow.

Why it works

Baird et al. (2012): an undemanding (boring) activity — not full rest — produced the biggest creative gains. The walk IS the incubation period.

Key takeaway

Use it specifically when stuck on a real problem. This is not just a wellness habit — it's a cognitive tool.

Queue Journaling

Resist the reflex. Notice what surfaces.

How

Next time you're waiting in a line, lift, or waiting room — don't reach for your phone. Let the boredom sit. After, jot one word or phrase about where your mind went.

Why it works

Builds the habit of noticing the urge for stimulation rather than automatically acting on it. Small reps, compounding effect.

Key takeaway

Lowest friction entry point — no extra time, no equipment. Just a micro-practice of restraint.

Single-Tasking Chores

No extra time required.

How

Do one routine chore — dishes, laundry, vacuuming — with zero media. No podcast, no TV in the background, no music. Just the task.

Why it works

Sonnentag & Fritz (2015): psychological detachment during non-work activity is the key recovery mechanism. Chores with media don't count — the brain stays half-engaged.

Key takeaway

Easiest on-ramp for sceptics. You're not adding anything to your day — just removing a layer of stimulation from what's already there.

EXERCISE 05 / 05

Weekly White Space

A recovery practice, not a gap to fill.

How

Block 30–60 minutes of unscheduled time in your calendar each week. No agenda, no plan. The only rule: don't fill it.

Why it works

Protects the incubation, detachment, and consolidation processes that every other benefit in this talk depends on. Regular dosing beats irregular big blocks.

Key takeaway

This is the Sonnentag intervention made simple. If you only pick one exercise, make it this one.

It Works in the Real World

How deliberate boredom has been applied by companies and high performers

Google — 20% Time

Employees given unstructured, low-pressure time each week. Products born from it include Gmail and Google Maps. The "boring" hours between structured tasks are where innovation actually happened.

Novelist J.K. Rowling

The idea for Harry Potter came during a delayed train journey — bored, without pen or paper, just letting her mind wander. The entire wizarding world surfaced in a moment of enforced boredom.

Elite Athletes & Rest

Sports science now recognises "cognitive recovery" — deliberately boring, unstimulating rest — as a performance variable. Teams that protect mental white space perform better in high-pressure moments.

When Boredom Turns Harmful

Chronic, involuntary boredom or boredom proneness is a different beast.

Productive Boredom

Brief duration

Voluntary (you chose it)

Creativity & insight

Self-awareness

Aversive Boredom

Prolonged duration

Involuntary (imposed)

Distress & escapism

Depression & anxiety risk

Which exercise will you try this week?

01

The 15-Minute Void

No phone. No task. Just sit with a timer – Embrace discomfort.

02

The Boring Walk

Familiar route. No podcast. Use it when stuck on a real problem – Step away to let the DMN work.

04

Single-Tasking Chores

Dishes or laundry with zero media. No extra time needed – Strip a layer of stimulation.

05

Weekly White Space

Block unscheduled time with no plan to fill it – Practice boring, unstructured downtime.

03

Queue Journaling

Next time you're in a line, resist the phone – Let your mind drift.

TAKEAWAY

**Stop reflexively
eliminating boredom.**

A small, protected dose of unstimulated time is where
the brain does some of its best background work.

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Q & A

**What questions
do you have?**



Thank You

Go be bored. On purpose.