

## BOREDOM - PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS TO THE CHALLENGES OF BOREDOM

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**Abstract:** *Boredom is a real problem in the lives of schoolchildren and contemporary people. Although important steps have been taken in the theoretical understanding of this phenomenon, we are still witnessing a struggle that many people/students are losing because they do not know how / have not been taught how to relate to it. This article comes up with some concrete proposals to address boredom, in the light of recent scientific research, so that we can emerge victorious from the confrontation with boredom.*

**Keywords:** *boredom; academic boredom; types of boredom; boredom coping strategies: corrective measures; educational interventions.*

### **Boredom and academic boredom**

It is easy to describe the experience of boredom that we have experienced in different contexts of life, in the family, at school or in the professional environment. We can distinguish between being bored and not being bored, between being bored in general and bored in certain situations or never bored (Martin et al., 2006).

The experience of boredom (Martin et al., 2006, pp. 203-204) can be described as the feeling of being trapped and restless (like a lion in a cage), but still lethargic (tired), most often associated with guilt (unproductive use of time) and depression (I can't see anything good for me in the future). Boredom is the experience of being disengaged and stuck in an endlessly unsatisfactory present (Eastwood et al., 2012).

Regarding the detection of boredom, we can observe whether the other person is bored or not, referring to observable behaviours specific to boredom (communication monotony, passivity, lack of involvement, collateral activities, low performance) or those opposed to it (interest, enthusiasm, involvement, efficiency).

In general, we blame an external source for our boredom, and we don't think it has anything to do with us. Sometimes we say that we are bored to mask our lack of concentration, commitment, motivation. In other situations, we shy away from supposedly boring activities or give up certain activities that we don't like, citing boredom.

Academic boredom (Pekrun et al., 2010) can be defined as a negative deactivating emotion, with several components (being a multidimensional construct): *the affective component* (unpleasant feelings, aversive), *the cognitive component* (lack of stimulation, altered perceptions of time, mental absence, mental scattering), *the physiological component* (reduced arousal), *the expressive component* (low, monotonous facial, vocal and postural expression) and *the motivational component* (motivation to change or leave the situation).

Without a doubt, academic boredom affects students, it is a challenge for teachers who interact with them in the classroom, it raises problems for parents interested in blocking their children from boredom, but also for education specialists who have perhaps too little data on the complexity and magnitude of this phenomenon.

### **A few landmarks in the fight against boredom**

The proposals formulated here in the form of concrete applicable actions are based on theoretical foundations, i.e. the results of recent research, and have the role of guiding the person concerned, aware that they are facing this phenomenon, but also people who have the role of education, being interacting with bored children (in class and beyond).

(1) Boredom can be defined as an unfulfilled desire for a satisfying activity (Gerritsen et al., 2014, p. 27) - that is, the person experiences boredom as a feeling of deficiency, as an unpleasant state (Pekrun et al., 2010). Acee et al. (2010) identify self-centred boredom, i.e. the situation in which the focus is on the negative feelings associated with boredom (dissatisfaction and frustration).

*Proposal:* Recognition of boredom or silent enemy.

Unlike other emotional states that have a noisy or obvious manifestation, boredom has good manifestations, not disturbing for others. Only the person in question can decipher the intensity of the unpleasant feelings. Boredom is not a neutral state but involves a negative disabling state. The personal emotional barometer tells us exactly when we are experiencing boredom, and in addition, some manifestations betray this: states of fatigue (physical and emotional exhaustion), decreased performance, feeling inefficiency and uselessness.

Boredom should be differentiated, not to be confused with hopelessness, lack of interest, lack of motivation and depression.

(2) Boredom is a negative and disabling (disengaging) emotion that occurs when we face a lack of control over the activity (too hard or too light) and/or when we do not see the value of the task to be performed (Pekrun et al., 2006, 2010) - that is, compared to the control-value theory, boredom occurs when the person negatively evaluates the value of the *activity and perceives a low control*. Acee et al. (2010) talk about *task-focused boredom*, which refers to the lack of meaning of task or the fact that we focus on the boring features of task. The same study shows that people distinguish between self-centred boredom and task-focused boredom only in the case of overly challenging tasks.

*Proposal*: Reassessment of boring activities. What we think we can do is different from what we can do. What we think is worthless at the moment, however, has value in itself.

Boredom is related to the lack of control (which is perceived as a causal influence of an agent on actions) and the lack of value (perceived valences of actions and results) that are associated with the task/activity (Pekrun et. al., 2010).

Boredom can also occur when there is a lack of control over the activity because the requirements exceed the individual's abilities (person's abilities), but also in the case of gifted children when the requirements are below the level of abilities (Acee et al., 2010). Factors that contribute to boredom are variations in control and value assessment, such as lack of control, choice, challenge, and significance (Acee et al., 2010).

The practical solution would be to help children perceive the positive values of an activity/task and to make sure that they have this perception of control. Another solution would be to pay special attention to potential environmental triggers or precursors in the occurrence of boredom (quality, difficulty, attractiveness, usefulness of tasks).

(3) Boredom involves a state of high or low arousal, with the inability to experience the optimal level needed to achieve satisfaction in an activity (Leary et al., 1986) - that is, the inability to have sustained attention, to which we focus optimally and may be related to environmental characteristics that favour both under stimulation and overstimulation. The person is unable to identify with the offer of the environment, to get involved in the current activity and wants to do something else.

Bored people have impaired attention skills (Hunter & Eastwood, 2016) or have difficulty sustaining attention in monotonous tasks or require increased vigilance.

Goetz et al. (2006), considering the level of arousal (low/high) and valence (positive/negative) identify the following situations of boredom:

- *indifferent boredom* (low excitement / slightly positive valence) manifested as indifference and withdrawal from the outside world.
- *calibrating boredom* (higher arousal, but still relatively low / slightly negative valence) manifested as a wandering of thoughts, not knowing what to do and a general openness to unrelated behaviours, receptivity to options to reduce boredom.
- *searching boredom* (greater excitement / more negative valence) manifested as restlessness and an active search for alternative actions.
- *reactant boredom* (increased arousal / negative valence) manifested as the need to get rid of the situation, to avoid those responsible.
- *apathetic boredom* (very low excitement / very high negative valence combined), manifested as helplessness similar to despair, lack of reaction.

These observable manifestations show us the areas of difficulty and can suggest concrete measures to get out of the trap of boredom quickly, here and now, the common element being: *immediate action*.

*Proposal:* Confrontation with boredom. Attention and effort are important weapons in the face of the desire to escape the situation.

(4) Westgate (2020, p. 34) in the Meaning-and-attentional-components model of boredom (MAC) shows that boredom is an affective indicator of failed attentional involvement in congruent-purpose activities. Attention deficit (attention component) and attention deficit disorder (significance component) cause equally boring. The effects are different (Westgate & Wilson, 2018): inattention, lost mind, poor concentration (*attentional boredom*); high arousal, feeling of sadness and loneliness, distorted perception of time, desireless disengagement (*meaningless boredom*) and to these, other characteristics are added such as agitation and frustration or apathy, depending on the challenge of task (*mixed boredom*).

The lack of value or meaning can lead to this inattention, but there are situations in which boredom also occurs in significant activities, translating into an *inability to cognitive engagement* when tasks are either underchallenging or overchallenging (Westgate et al., 2017).

*Proposal:* Small changes with big effects. Actions with a positive effect on getting out of the boredom zone.

Westgate (2020) proposes several ways to alleviate attention deficit boredom (given attention and significance deficits):

- Adjusting cognitive demands (adjusting tasks, neither too hard nor too easy, splitting tasks, alternating tasks)
- Adjusting of cognitive resources (rest, caffeine, skill development)
- Adjusting the value of the goal (setting long-term goals, introducing significant new goals for the person)

- Changing activities (choosing new activities that involve interest or pleasure depends on what the person is looking for). Novelty and complexity increase interest and reduce pleasure, while certainty increases pleasure and decreases interest (Silvia, 2006).

(5) Eastwood et al. (2012) show that boredom theories are inclusive of a psychodynamic aspect (repressing the desire to do something meaningful) and existential (existential emptiness or lack of purpose in life, paralysis of the will).

Yeager et al. (2014) show that the existence of a learning goal that has a self-transcendent component (to serve the other, to support an idea, a social cause, in a broad sense to help the other and society), that is, it goes beyond self-interest, has a particular impact on: self-control, persistence in tedious tasks, increased resistance to distractors or tempting alternatives, increased academic performance over time, deep learning in the event of a tiring task, increased self-discipline even if the task is unrelated of the future, increasing resistance to temptation even when boredom increases.

*Proposal:* Formulation of transcendent learning goals (I learn to be useful to people by practising profession X)

Introducing transcendent learning goals can be a very effective alternative, much more effective than trying to do interesting tasks.

### **Causes and consequences of boredom**

Fisher (1993), Goetz et al. (2014) note that there can be multiple causes of boredom:

- External causes: a perception that freedom is restricted (excessive authority, over-control); poor environmental stimulation (monotonous, simple, repetitive, uninteresting and unstimulating tasks by their nature); lack of communication between the persons involved (unclear objectives, poor feedback, ambiguous messages); social contagion (bored colleagues or boring colleagues) and self-belief that the environment is boring, etc.
- Internal causes related to individual characteristics: extraversion, predisposition to boredom, impulsivity, type A behaviour, neuroticism (Watt & Vodanovich, 1999)
- Inadequate environment - a person: an incompatibility of needs-demands, lack of meaning of work, incompatibility of role, high or too low skills about the activity, wrong school / professional options, etc.

From our point of view, these are factors (not causes) that support boredom, because the cause depends on the person, on how they relate to these predisposing factors.

*Proposal:* Discovering novelty and challenge regardless of the context. Avoid alternative counterproductive activities.

Of course, changing the characteristics of the environment could bring improvements in terms of alleviating boredom, in the same line the adequacy of stimulation to the characteristics of the person would be desirable, but these things are difficult to achieve because people are in a permanent dynamic and it would be difficult to obtain this match all the time.

Pekrun et al. (2010) highlight some of the consequences of boredom in the context of school activities/tasks:

- Cognitively, boredom leads to reduced attention span, increased distractibility, and irrelevant thoughts about task, thoughts focused on alternative content.
- Motivationally, boredom reduces the effort invested in the activity and induces the motivation to avoid the activity, the motivation to get involved in activities irrelevant to the task.
- In terms of learning strategies and self-regulation, boredom leads to superficial information processing, reduces the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in solving tasks.
- Boredom harms overall performance.

Daschmann et al. (2011), Pekrun et al. (2010) draw attention to some extremely unpleasant consequences of boredom: deviant behaviours, poor grades, absenteeism and dropping out of school. To which are added other social problems such as addiction to various substances, gambling and screens, depression, eating disorders and hostility.

Some studies show that there are aspects that negatively correlate with boredom, so they can be a kind of allies in the fight against boredom: intrinsic motivation, internal place of control, self-concept, the existence of reasons for achievement, the existence of learning objectives, valorisation of academic results, educational involvement and the existence of a career plan (Goetz et al., 2006), attention and effort invested in learning, self-regulation of learning (Pekrun et al., 2010).

*Proposal:* Managing the level of boredom by being aware of the advantages and disadvantages arising from resistance, respectively giving in to boredom.

*Proposal:* Develop a plan to increase resistance to boredom.

### **Strategies to combat boredom**

Nett et al. (2010) identify three types of coping strategies used by students/individuals to get rid of a boring situation:

- *The evaders* or those who do other things to get rid of the boring situation, use cognitive and behavioural avoidance strategies (I think of something else /I talk to my bank colleague).



- *Criticizers* or those who disapprove and blame the other / situation/ teacher for the boring situation, use behavioural approach strategies (I ask the teacher for more interesting tasks).
- *Reappraisers* or those who realize that boredom is a state that derives from within and make an effort to re-engage in the activity, use priority strategies of cognitive approach (I pay more attention to the teacher's explanations).

Daschmann et al. (2011) identified eight factors that contribute to boredom (precursors of boredom): being over-challenged, being under-challenged, being bored by an unchanging routine, not finding meaning in learning, having more better to do than being in class, not liking the teacher, feeling uninvolved and bored in general.

Daniels et al. (2015) show that cognitive approach strategies correlated negatively with most precursors of boredom, while avoidance strategies (cognitive and behavioural) correlated positively with all precursors. Behavioural strategies have been positively correlated with over-challenge, teacher dislike, lack of involvement, and general boredom. The more precursors and the higher the intensity, the higher the risk come to light the profile of the evaders.

### **How can we re-evaluate our way of dealing with boredom?**

We propose several solutions on the two axes: (a) boredom deriving from the outside, respectively (b) boredom deriving from the inside.

*(a) Being trapped in an environment or in a situation you do not want (enemy from outside).*

Proposal: Decision to get involved despite obstacles. Is there anything good in this situation? What I like to do in the moment helps me, develops me, is it related to my future goals?

Proposal: Testing resistance to a boring situation. What good did this boring experience that I took part in offered me?

Proposal: Reactions to boredom and humour. How do I react to boredom? What do others do when they get bored? Does humour help me in this situation?

Proposal: Natural consequences and complications of boredom. What are the effects of my boredom now? What problems might arise next? What are the risks of giving into boredom?

Proposal: Search for what was valuable in the boring situation. What important purchases have we made? What has changed as a result of my active participation?

*(b) To be defeated by one's boredom (the invisible enemy within)*

Proposal: Personal skills with which they can overcome boredom. What helps me overcome boredom?

Proposal: Manage your level of boredom. What can I do to avoid becoming a victim of boredom?

Proposal: Differentiate the enemy. Is it boredom or something else?

### Conclusion

Research has shown that boredom and the tendency to experience boredom are associated with several psychological, social, and physical health problems (Eastwood et al., 2012).

First of all, we need to differentiate between chronic boredom and transient boredom, between boredom as a disposition or trait of the person or a temporary state generated by a certain transient context that is too unrelated to the person.

Secondly, we must identify which aspects of the environment are boring or what we can change about these external stimuli to be relevant or how we can change a person's attitude towards this perceived boring environment. At the same time, we need to assess whether there are certain dysfunctions related to the person who generates boredom (attention deficits, cognitive deficits, attributional deficits, deficits related to self-control, etc.).

Thirdly, we need to understand that even boredom that is not remedied by accumulation can have serious consequences for the person's further development and performance.

For this reason, it would be essential to increase the abilities of children/people to cope with boredom, in which case we would cancel their vulnerability to uncontrollable external influences.

In this study, based on recent research in the field, we have indicated some directions for action in situations where we face this silent enemy called boredom.

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