

How to Deal with ADHD and Boredom

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by Ari Tuckman, PsyD, MBA, and Jeff Copper, PCC, PCAC, MBA

WE ALL GET BORED SOMETIMES, even in today's high-stimulation, constantly connected world. Kids with ADHD may feel like involuntary experts on the topic, but even some adults with ADHD may feel like it's a constant battle to seek new and exciting things to keep boredom at bay. Research shows that people with ADHD (among others) report higher frequencies of boredom. Contrary to what your ten-year-old says, boredom won't kill you, but it can gnaw away at your life satisfaction and can also lead to other problematic behaviors and situations. Research suggests performance at work or school suffers when one is bored.

Although there is no universally accepted definition, we feel bored when we have an unfulfilled desire for an interesting activity. We want to be engaged with our environment or our thoughts, but, for one reason or another, are not able to be. The key to boredom is that something is interfering with our ability to be involved in something enjoyable or meaningful at a specific time or our brain isn't sufficiently stimulated. Sometimes what we desire is an external activity, such as talking to friends; sometimes it's an internal experience, such as thinking about an entertaining event from the day or brainstorming solutions to a problem.

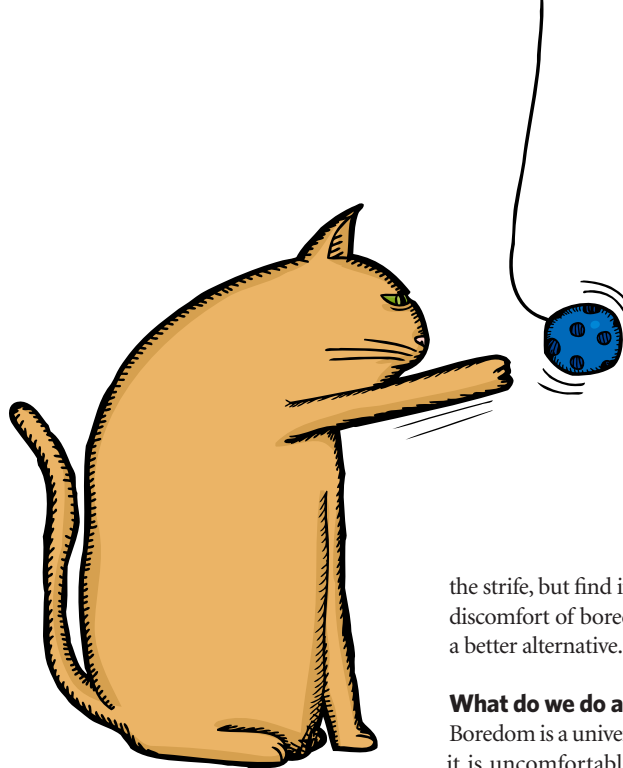
We feel bored when we don't have desirable options or can't engage our attention with the options that are available to us. Each of these two components plays a role. People with ADHD may struggle more with regulating their attention and staying engaged with an activity over an extended period of time. They may find that their attentional arousal (mental energy) fades more quickly, especially when engaged in an activity that isn't very interesting or important or has gone on too long. As their attentional arousal fades, they may run out of the ability to hold their attention on the task, feel bored by it, and seek more interesting activities to spike up their arousal and reduce the boredom. Sleep deprivation and fatigue from sustained effort also reduce arousal, making it harder to stay engaged.

By contrast, people who don't have ADHD tend to have a greater ability to sustain effort and tolerate less interesting activities. One of the ways they maintain their arousal is to remind themselves of the ultimate outcome or bigger picture, which makes the effort feel worth it. This is harder for people with ADHD, who tend to feel less motivated by the future and therefore are less effective at self-generating arousal to stay engaged, so they feel bored more easily.

What's interesting about boredom is that, even though everyone knows what it feels like to be bored, there is no single experience of boredom. Broadly speaking, there seems to be two different types of people based on where they look for stimulation and how they react when they can't find it. Some people seek out internal stimulation and are better able to entertain themselves. When they do feel bored, they tend to get lethargic and apathetic. By contrast, others seek out external sources of stimulation and tend to get agitated when bored. They experience boredom as an almost physical discomfort and are more likely to feel depressed when bored.

This is pure speculation on the part of the authors, but it may be that those with ADHD who are primarily inattentive are more likely to be in the group that seeks internal stimulation. They may be more prone to the inertia of boredom and have difficulty thinking of things to do and then getting up and moving.

Those who have more of the hyperactive and impulsive symptoms, on the other hand, may tend to seek out more external sources of stimulation and fall easily into boredom when there isn't enough going on around them. They are more likely to be thrill-seekers who go for intense experiences to fight off the slow creep of boredom. This can be an asset if they act as a ringleader who moves the group from one interesting activity to the next, since they are the first to get bored and then seek something new. This can be a positive influence as long as there are reasonable options available. However, it also makes them more prone to problematic behaviors—creating some drama or starting a fight in an effort to escape boredom, for example. They don't necessarily enjoy



the strife, but find it preferable to the greater discomfort of boredom when they don't see a better alternative.

What do we do about boredom?

Boredom is a universal experience. Although it is uncomfortable and we try to avoid it when we can, it is inescapable. So it becomes a matter of what we do about it.

Sometimes boredom can be a sign that we are tired of the status quo and serve as an impetus to get creative or try something new. Unfortunately, if people don't have the inner resources to deal with boredom constructively, they might do something destructive to cope with the discomfort. In these cases, the real problem isn't boredom itself but rather insufficient coping skills.

If you are prone to seek problematic situations or behaviors when bored, then you need to more actively manage your relationship with boredom and how you respond to it. If you are the parent of an easily bored child, then you will need to play a more active role in helping the child deal with boredom and ultimately better learn to manage it independently.

Since play activities now tend to be more structured than they used to be, children and teenagers have fewer opportunities to create their own fun. The constantly connected world of smartphones and other aspects of technology create a situation in which entertainment is almost always available instantly. This gives kids, teens, and adults fewer times when they need to create their own fun or tolerate being bored.

THE COST OF BOREDOM

Research suggests that boredom is correlated with:

- Depressive symptoms
- Poorer performance at school and work
- Lower job satisfaction
- Higher incidence of substance abuse, gambling, overeating, and other problematic coping mechanisms

Make it less boring

Since we all face boring activities that we must complete, it can help to find ways to make them at least a little more interesting.

- **Don't fight the inevitable.** Boring situations are easy to predict: long drives, waiting in line, long events like sitting around a Thanksgiving dinner table listening to relatives talk about nothing. Recognizing these times will empower you to adjust the environment so it is more stimulating, such as by

bringing a book, puzzle, game, or problem to solve. It can even mean allowing your children to be excused from the Thanksgiving table to do something else periodically. Being flexible may work better than fighting with them about staying seated when they refuse to be bored.

- **Spice it up.** Just because you have to do something boring doesn't mean you have to suffer. Make it more enjoyable by cranking up the music, calling a friend, doing it with

someone else, and so forth. Just be sure the fun doesn't become a distraction from actually getting things done.

- **Make it a game.** Kids especially benefit from making the activity a game or competition. Get creative and get silly.
- **Treat depression and anxiety.** Depression can cause you to feel bored because you are disconnected from what is going on around you. Both depression and anxiety can stop you from doing what you need to do or pursuing interesting activities.

Find some fun

Sometimes boredom comes from a perceived lack of interesting options. Picture a kid lying across a couch, saying, "There's nothing to do...." At these times, the challenge is to find something interesting to do.

- **Avoid problematic behaviors.** If you get restless when bored and tend to gravitate toward unhealthy coping mechanisms (starting some drama, drinking, smoking, kicking a ball in the house, or other unhealthy behaviors), then the first and most important thing to do is to stop and replace these behaviors. Notice those triggers before acting on them, then use the other strategies in this list instead.
- **Don't get pulled into the drama.** If your child or romantic partner is a drama queen, it may be helpful to remember that the drama is a means to an end, one of which may be avoiding boredom. Allowing yourself to get drawn into an argument helps them avoid boredom, but there are probably better ways. So talk about what the drama does for them. Identify the need; then brainstorm better ways to meet that need and cues that you can each use to indicate that drama may be on the way.
- **Brainstorm your fun list.** If you have a hard time thinking of interesting options in the moment, then take some time beforehand to create a list of things you could do. Think of activities you tend to enjoy, as well as some new options. Maybe even set up the stuff you will need so that doesn't become a barrier.
- **Fake it till you make it.** There can be an inertia to boredom, so you may need to just get moving on anything and then let that carry you to something better. What you start moving on doesn't matter much as long as it gets you going. Then let the momentum carry you to something that you really will enjoy.
- **Get to work.** We feel bored not just when there isn't anything interesting to do, but also when we lack meaningful activity. So find a job to do and focus on the benefits of doing it. The sense of accomplishment can override boredom.

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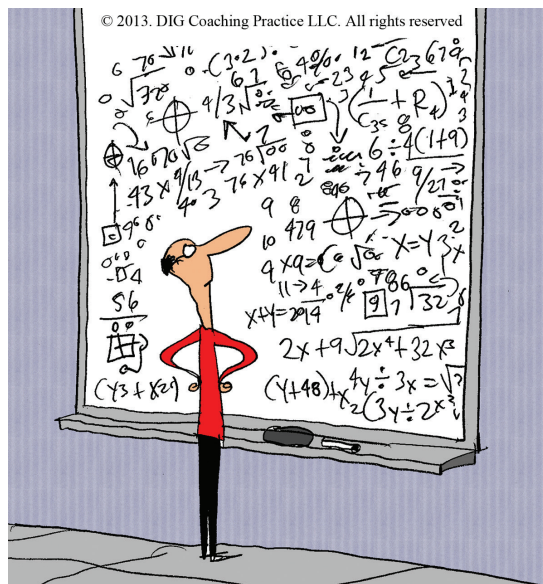
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Learn to live with it

The above strategies can help to reduce boredom, but it's still important to be able to tolerate it when it's unavoidable. This is an important life skill that we are not practicing as often these days because technology provides easy entertainment.

- **Avoid catastrophizing.** Repeatedly telling yourself (and others) how bored you are only makes it feel worse and makes it harder to think of alternatives. Think past the current situation and remind yourself that better times will come.
- **Use the time to think.** If there really is nothing to do but sit and wait, then use the time to reflect on a thorny problem, reflect upon where your life is going, reminisce about enjoyable times, plan the rest of your day, or think about romantic things to do for your partner (my wife made me put that in).
- **Remember the bigger picture.** If you need to do something boring, remind yourself of the rewards for working on it or perhaps the punishments for not doing it now. (Tip: Working toward positives is more motivating). It may also help to reduce the pull of other more interesting activities that will hijack your attention away from the boring task.
- **Be mindful.** Mindfulness training helps one identify and then tolerate uncomfortable experiences and emotions, including boredom. This is just one of the benefits of mindfulness training. (For more information,



Joe Normal discovers that those with ADHD refuse to be bored.

see the articles in the June 2011 and June 2012 issues of *Attention*.)

People with ADHD seek brain stimulation, especially when bored. By hook or by crook, they are going to find something that stimulates them. Since many potentially problematic behaviors and situations can fill that need, it's important to understand boredom and its impact on you. The greater your awareness and understanding of when, where, and how you get bored, the better you'll be able to anticipate, plan, and manage it, before and during such times. **A**

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Less Deficit: Success Strategies for Adults with ADHD (Specialty Press/ADD Warehouse, 2009), and Integrative Treatment for Adult ADHD (New Harbinger, 2007).

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