

## Is Boredom Dangerous?

By Breanna MacLeod

*Boredom: We've all been there. Sitting at home, twiddling your thumbs, with absolutely nothing to do. It's an uncomfortable feeling, but is it really a dangerous one?*



Many people experience boredom on a daily basis. It's not a pleasant feeling. The state can cause a range of emotions including anger, anxiety, frustration and even sadness. It's no wonder, then, that several professionals have called boredom "dangerous", especially with regards to teens.

Boredom has been studied by experts from a variety of disciplines. Philosophers, neuroscientists, psychologists and educators alike have examined this human condition, looking for its causes and potential cures. However, despite the attention it has received, there is no modern universal definition of boredom. Nor is there a consensus on how to counter it (Robinson, 2012).

One thing that has been discussed is the negative effect boredom can have on an individual. One particularly vulnerable group is that of young adolescents. At this stage, youth begin to separate themselves from their childhood identity and become overly self-conscious. Criticism, no matter how small can have a tremendous effect on early adolescents. More prone to internalizing negative comments, criticism can significantly lower their self-esteem (Pickhardt, 2009).

Given the fact that adolescents are already experiencing significant emotional changes, boredom is much more than an uncomfortable or inconvenient condition. Boredom to a young teen can equal loneliness. A bored teen feels like they are disconnected from others, which can lead them to feel like they are in a state of limbo. This in turn can cause them to feel restless, irritable or depressed at a time when they are already unsure of themselves (Pickhardt, 2009).

## YA Hotline: For a Rainy Day

In a more general context, boredom has reportedly been linked to such problems as alcohol and drug abuse, anxiety, depression, over-eating and acting on poor judgement. A recent article by Dr. John Eastwood, entitled the “Unengaged Mind” states that boredom is the result of a failure of attention. Attention, according to Dr. Eastwood, is what helps you to focus on a specific task while blocking out all of the other stimuli that surround you. If our attention fails, the other stimuli can get in and overwhelm you, which in turn can lead you to make mistakes or become anxious and depressed. (Robinson, 2012). This can be especially hard on teens, many of whom are already under pressure associated with school and growing up, and are therefore vulnerable to feelings of anxiety and depression anyway.

Another reason that boredom can be “dangerous” (or at the very least negative) is that it has the potential to make an individual dislike the object they perceive is causing the boredom. For students, this can mean books on the class syllabus or classes that are of little interest. An example of how this can happen comes from an article entitled “What is Boredom” by Art Markman. In this article Markman notes that in his senior year of high school, he was forced to read *Moby Dick*. At the time, he found the book to be boring, and felt negatively towards the novel. To this day, he still cannot pick up *Moby Dick* without feeling annoyed or frustrated. The negative feelings generated by the boredom he felt in high school have caused him to dislike the book throughout his entire life (Markman, 2012).

Finally, boredom can also affect how a student performs in school. Students who feel like they are not being stimulated enough can begin to slack off, causing grades to fall. A case study done by Kanevsky and Keighley (2003) looked at gifted high school students who became disengaged from class work. Researchers found that the reason for this sudden lack of participation came from students becoming bored with the class. In order to become re-engaged and bring their marks back up, Kanevsky and Keighley state that five factors need to be present: control, choice, challenge, complexity, and caring teachers (Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003).

So how do we alleviate boredom? The aforementioned study gives some good insights into this answer. Firstly, individuals need to have a sense of control over the task they are doing. They must have chosen this task, and the task must be complex enough to engage their full attention. Caring and understanding supervisors, parents, or teachers are necessary to ensure the previous four factors exist. The following list suggests tasks which meet these criteria!

## YA Hotline: For a Rainy Day

### Ways to alleviate boredom

- Visit your local library and select a great book to read
- Rent a movie from your local video store
- Write a poem, start a blog, or write a short story
- Play a board game with family/friends
- Create a game, and then try it out
- Take up a sport
- Try out a teen program, either at your local library or your community centre
- Volunteer
- Take up scrapbooking
- Make a bucket list
- Write a play, or visit your local theatre

### References

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