

Staying Alive



Dare to be dulled — many uses of boredom

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Boring. The word strikes terror into marketing executives, television news directors and most parents of small children. Activities that are tiresome, repetitive and annoying, that slow down one's sense of time, are derided and avoided, often through intense effort. Infants play tailored computer games, and cell phones can play Paris Hilton videos virtually anywhere in the United States. Billions are spent daily to avoid boredom.



Yet boredom has its uses. The brain cannot be constantly at a high pitch of attention — it needs to rest. Rest is restoration, and boredom, particularly in situations where one has some personal control of what you do, can be used profitably.

The trick is to engage psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow, the state of consciousness where mind and body forget the self, forget time and engage focused concentration. Great sports and musical performances often involve flow, as do creative work in all media, even the simple act of reading (including this sentence). Yet how does one obtain a sense of flow when utterly bored?

Csikszentmihalyi, formerly chair of Psychology at the University of Chicago, showed that Detroit autoworkers "bored out of their minds" by endlessly repetitive tasks still found a way to achieve flow. They did it by performing a game with themselves — could they tighten all the axle screws in 14 rather than 15 seconds; could they do it backwards, or in alternating movements; could they

work rhythmically to the music in their head.

Dealing with boredom generally requires mental effort. When stuck in a lecture where you know most of the material and are waiting for a few nuggets of interest, you cannot get up and walk around the lecture hall or do yoga practice in the aisles. Fortunately there are plenty of tasks you can set yourself that may increase analytic skills, support creativity, and give your body and mind useful rest. Here are a few:

1. Ask yourself why the situation is so boring. Are you doing the same thing over and over, the same way? Does the person you're speaking to reply in a monotonous tone? What is it about the situation that makes you want to escape?

Answer these questions and you may learn a lot about yourself, including what subjects you find interesting, what types of performance maintain your curiosity and what you might do to prevent appearing dull to others. If all the world's a stage, try to understand what makes for an enthralling performance.

2. Notice what's going on around you. Do you think other people are also bored? What are those who do not look bored doing? Are there social, political and financial undercurrents that make the situation more engaging than it first looks? (For example, is the new hire in the department desperately trying to look fascinated on hearing the accounting report?)

3. Create your own fictional story. If the events taking place around you leave your brain in default mode, musing on past, future and every possibility, start using your daydreaming abilities. Imagine you are writing up what you see as an entertaining short story. What's needed to make it funny? Tragic? A thriller? Is it possible to imagine your angry, bootlicking supervisor a spy for a foreign power? Is the boss' attention-seeking secretary secretly

in love with cubic zirconium rings, which she will do anything to obtain?

4. Learn patience. Much of American work and non-work life frantically attempts to attain "boredom avoidance." Do you really have to work so hard to not be bored? Don't you find some aspects of your own mind interesting? For example, why do you like what you like? What are you good at? Can you amuse yourself by rummaging through your past, comparing the present situation with others you've experienced while noting the sometimes hilarious parallels? Do you have the mental means to create an epic poem or even just a short limerick to describe what you feel right now?

5. Engage social solidarity. Look at the people around you — are they sensing the same boredom you are? Are they broadcasting their annoyance? Can you exchange sly smiles or just a raised eyebrow to give the sense that you too are in on what's going on, creating the first foundation for a community response?

6. Doodle. Let hand engage mind without much filtering. Can you take a single black line and make it express the essence of your emotions? Or is it more fun to model the back of your friend's head? Consider how much you might improve your cartooning skills at such moments.

7. Meditate. Find a word, a place, an image, and focus on it. Relax and concentrate, seeing nothing else.

Learning to self-amuse, to become self-aware, to create something in your head out of "nothing" might bring out your best traits. And your creativity.

Boredom does not have to be boring. Sometimes it can even be fun.

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KeyTravel



Spain's Salamanca sings

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Salamanca's Plaza Mayor, Spain's grandest square, seems to celebrate life. Strolling across the square with Carlos, my guide, we passed a young man walking alone who suddenly burst into song. I asked Carlos why and he said, "Doesn't it happen where you live?"

Northwest of Madrid (three hours by train), Salamanca is youthful and un-touristy, displaying its mighty monuments, clusters of cloisters, and magnificent square with quiet pride.

Carlos and I sat down at a table with a prime view of the square and all its people action. Carlos ordered us a simple but elegant meal: a plate of cured ham, patatas bravas (chunks of potatoes with tomato sauce) and glasses of robust local red wine. When the ham arrived, he told of his grandpa thinly carving a jamon, supported in a jamonero (ham holder) during Christmas, painting a holiday image that reminded me of my dad carving the turkey at Thanksgiving.

Our view was filled with people. Plaza Mayor has long been Salamanca's community living room. The most important place in town, it seems to be continually hosting some kind of party. Spaniards love their paseo (evening stroll) — it's like multigenerational "cruising" without cars. While the old-timers gossiped and "tsk-tsked" at the promiscuous young people, those young singles were out to

see and be seen. Carlos explained that historically, the square is a big viewing arena where the men circulate one way and the women circle the other so everyone gets a chance to check everyone out. Flirting rages as the boys are on a quest for the perfect queso (cheese), meaning a cute dish.

Perhaps the best time of all for people watching is Sunday after Mass, when the grandmothers gather here in their Sunday best.

The Plaza Mayor is just the starting point for a Salamanca visit. Salamanca University, the oldest university in Spain (1230), was one of Europe's leading centers of learning for 400 years. Columbus came here for travel tips. Today, many Americans enjoy its excellent summer program. The old lecture halls around the central cloister, where many of Spain's Golden Age heroes studied, are open to the public. Some of the rooms are still used by the university for prestigious academic ceremonies. The entrance portal of the university is a great example of Spain's Plateresque style (Spain's version of Flamboyant Gothic) — the style



Rick Steves shakes a tambourine with a tuna band on Salamanca's Plaza Mayor.

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named for masonry so intricate it looks like silverwork.

In the university's Hall of Fray Luis de Leon, the tables and benches are made of narrow wooden beams, whittled down by centuries of studious doodling. The professor used to speak from the church-threatening catedra, or pulpit. It was here that freethinking Fray Luis de Leon angered Inquisition forces by bringing the scriptures to the people in their own language. After being jailed and tortured for five years, he returned

to his place and started his first post-imprisonment lecture with, "As we were saying . . ."

Near the university stands the Church of San Esteban, dedicated to St. Stephen (Esteban) the martyr. The church contains impressive cloisters, a pantheon of tombs, and a museum with illustrated 16th-century choir books. But everything is overwhelmed by the church's Churriguera altarpiece, a textbook example of the style named after the artist.

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