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Is Boredom Really That Bad?

Doing nothing is no fun. So why are experts saying that's exactly what you need to do?

BY KRISTIN LEWIS



Your alarm buzzes, and you groggily reach for your phone to check your texts. At breakfast, you nibble your toast while checking some scores on ESPN. Later, as you wait for the bus, you upload some selfies to Instagram. After a packed day at school, you grab your cleats and head to soccer practice. Then it's dinner, piano, homework, and (after some *Minecraft*) bed.

Sound familiar? You are part of a generation that is busier than any other in history. And when you do have a spare moment, there are smartphones, Xboxes, TVs, and computers to keep you occupied.

It's great, right?

Actually, it isn't. In fact, experts are saying we have a big problem: We are never bored.

A Fact of Life

In the past, boredom was a fact of life. If no one was around at breakfast, you just sat there and ate. If your mom was late picking you up, you just stood there and waited for her. Sometimes after school, you might have wondered what to do with yourself.

It's not that kids in the past *enjoyed* boredom. Just like now, it was thought of as a bad thing. (Ever heard the expression "bored to death"?) The difference is that today, boredom is a lot easier to avoid.

Now, it's typical to have activities after school every day and more on weekends. And for those in-between moments—riding the bus, waiting in line, hanging out after school—there is Vine,

Twitter, and *Candy Crush* to keep that dreaded boredom at bay.

Out of Shape

So if boredom is so awful, why do some experts say we need more of it? It has to do with the brain. According to Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, a **neuroscientist** from the University of Southern California, your brain has two "attention networks." One is for dealing with what's happening around you. It helps you listen to your teacher, catch a ball, and joke with your friends. It's the part of the brain you use when you play video games, text, and watch TV.

The other attention network is for **introspection**. It helps you sort out your feelings



Isaac Newton is said to have figured out gravity while sitting under a tree, watching apples fall.

NICOLA TREE/GETTY IMAGES (BOY); SHUTTERSTOCK (APPLE)

about that fight you had with your brother, or recall the joy of baking cookies with your grandma. It's the part of the brain you use to be creative, daydream, imagine your future, and think about what you've learned and experienced.

But here's the thing: These two networks can't both be active at the same time. And if you never pause to use the introspective part of your brain—because your phone is always buzzing, or you're always running from one activity to the next—it will get out of shape.

Can't Cope

On the other hand, the ability to do nothing is a skill—and without that skill, boredom can be agony. It can also be **destructive**—leading to anxiety (*shouldn't I be doing something?*) and bad decision-making (*maybe I'll ride my bike down the stairs; what could go wrong?*). Some studies show that people who can't cope with boredom are more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs.

Even so, Immordino-Yang says we should embrace boredom, not avoid it. Go for a walk without your phone. Do your chores without the TV. Soon your mind will start to wander and you won't feel bored at all. Maybe you'll daydream about flying, acing your math test, or going to the Olympics.

"It's something you have to practice," says Immordino-Yang, "but it will feel much more rewarding than *Fruit Ninja*." ●

What Do You Think?

Do we need more boredom in our lives? Use evidence from the article to support each side of this debate. Write the information on the lines below.



YES

Boredom is important.

1 It is good for our brains.

2

3

NO

Boredom is the worst.

1

2

3

EXAMINE POINTS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE DEBATE—AS WELL AS YOUR OWN BELIEFS—and decide whether we need more boredom in our lives. State your opinion in one sentence below. This can become the thesis statement for an argument essay.



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