

The big idea: should we embrace boredom?

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- How often do you feel bored? What jobs or tasks do you find particularly boring? Why?
- What do you do when you feel bored? How good are these things at making you feel less bored?

2 Key words

a. Find the words from the wordpool in the article. Then complete the definitions with the words.

absorb	associated with	distract	experiment	opportunity
adds up to	concluded	electric shock	form	pressure
alone	device	evidence	meaningless	

1. If you feel _____, it's because of too much worry or stress.
2. _____ means to stop someone from giving their full attention to something.
3. A(n) _____ is a test to learn more about something or see how it works.
4. _____ means to take in something like an idea or a piece of information.
5. When you are _____, you are without other people.
6. _____ means something was decided after thinking carefully.
7. _____ is when something does not have a clear reason or meaning.
8. A(n) _____ is a chance to do something, especially something good or useful.
9. A(n) _____ is a small piece of equipment that does a special job, often using technology.
10. When something is _____ something else, it is connected in people's minds with that thing.
11. _____ is the information that shows something is true or real.

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12. To _____ means to create something, especially ideas.
13. When something _____ a number, it equals a certain amount.
14. A(n) _____ is a sudden and painful feeling you get when electricity passes through your body.

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity in the correct form.

1. I didn't touch the wire, but I still got a small _____ that hurt my hand.
2. It's hard to focus on reading when something is there to _____ you every five minutes.
3. The business manager _____ the meeting by thanking everyone for their time.
4. All the data we collected in the _____ showed the same result.
5. When you add the rent, bills and food, it _____ over £1,000 a month.
6. A smartphone is a very useful _____, but it's also very easy to waste time on it.
7. There was no clear plan, so the meeting felt completely _____.
8. The manager said there might be a(n) _____ for me to work abroad for six months.
9. Some people believe stress is strongly _____ heart problems.
10. It's important to _____ your ideas clearly before you start writing.
11. Sam was completely _____ in the house all weekend and didn't speak to anyone.
12. The police didn't have enough _____ to make an arrest.
13. Try not to speak too quickly – give people time to _____ what you say.
14. Lexi was under a lot of _____ before the exam and couldn't sleep well.

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Smartphones offer instant stimulation, but do they silence a deeper message?

Sophie McBain
11 June, 2025

- 1 In 2014, a group of researchers from Harvard University and the University of Virginia asked people to sit alone for 15 minutes. The only thing they could do was press a button that gave them a painful electric shock. Almost half of the people in the experiment pressed it. The study's authors concluded that "people prefer doing to thinking", even if the only thing to do is painful.
- 2 Since the development of smartphones, most of us have been walking around with a device that can stop us feeling bored, even if it's not good for us. We often reach for our phones for something to do. This isn't always a bad thing, but it's worth noting that most people distract themselves in very similar ways.
- 3 Smartphones have also increased the pressure to use our time well. To sit and do nothing is seen as a waste of time. But that ignores the fact that when we're doing nothing we're often thinking quite hard. What happens to all those difficult thoughts that start to form in the seconds before we look at our phones again?
- 4 Most psychologists would agree that boredom is a useful emotion. According to Erin Westgate, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Florida, we become bored if something doesn't absorb our attention, or when we believe it to be meaningless. But when we are bored, we *should* realise the need to do something more interesting. However, if people don't react in the right way to their boredom, they may find themselves becoming chronically bored. That is associated with a number of different problems, including depression and anxiety.
- 5 There is evidence to suggest that chronic boredom is becoming more common, and that this is because of smartphones. In a study published in 2024, researchers noted that the number of students in China and the US who described themselves as bored increased in the years after 2010, when smartphones became popular. Why did this happen? Research has shown that the main reason we pick up our phones is because we are bored, but that the behaviour actually makes it worse. One study, for instance, found that people who were bored at work were more likely to use their smartphones – and then felt even more bored.
- 6 The average American spends more than four hours a day on their smartphone and more than seven hours a day in total online. That adds up to spending 17 years of your adult life online. When boredom strikes, we should try not to reach for our phones instantly. Instead, we should see it as an opportunity to connect with friends or our community or try something different or new. The people who don't mind being bored, at least for a short time, may actually experience less of it. It could even be the first step towards a life that feels more meaningful and freer.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Decide if the statements are True or False according to information in the article.

1. More than half of the people in the Harvard experiment chose to give themselves electric shocks rather than sit quietly. True / False
2. The author believes that using smartphones to avoid boredom is always harmful. True / False
3. According to Erin Westgate, boredom happens when we find something uninteresting or pointless. True / False
4. Students in China and America reported feeling more bored after smartphones became widely used. True / False
5. Research shows that using phones when bored at work helps people feel less bored. True / False
6. Americans spend over a decade and a half of their adult lives browsing the internet. True / False

4 Key language

a. Find the words in bold in the table in the article. Then complete the table with the other word forms.

Verb	Noun	Adjective	Adverb
-	(1) _____	painful	(2) _____
(3) _____	(4) _____	meaningless / meaningful	(5) _____ (6) _____
(7) _____	development	(8) _____	(9) _____
react	(10) _____	(11) _____	(12) _____
(13) _____	boredom	(14) _____ / (15) _____	(16) _____

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b. Complete each sentence with the correct form of the word in brackets. Use the word forms from the table in the previous activity.

1. The dentist told me that the treatment might be quite _____ but that it would only last a few minutes. (pain)
2. Jamie has _____ a bad cold and won't be in school today. (development)
3. The teacher spoke so _____ that half the class fell asleep during the history lesson. (boredom)
4. If I told you I had won £1 million, what would your _____ be? (react)
5. The art gallery was full of _____ paintings that no one seemed to understand or enjoy. (meaning)

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- Think about how much you use your phone. What online activities feel meaningful, and which ones feel like you are wasting your time?
- Would you be willing to try a 'digital detox' (e.g. not using your device for a certain number of hours or days per week)? Why or why not?

6 In your own words

a. Work in groups. Follow the instructions to complete a class survey on boredom.

Step 1: Create your questions.

Write 6-8 survey questions using these ideas to help you. Then ask your questions to other groups and make a note of their answers.

- How often do you feel bored during a typical week?
(Never / Rarely / Sometimes / Often / Very often)
- You're waiting for a train but have no phone battery. What do you do?
- Put these activities from most to least boring: *lectures, social media, household chores, waiting in queues.*

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- When you feel bored, what's the first thing you reach for? Why?
- How long can you sit quietly without feeling bored?
- Do you think you get bored more or less easily than your friends? Why?

Step 2: Analyse your data for patterns or interesting findings.

Step 3: Prepare a three-minute presentation. Include details about:

- your research focus and key questions
- the most surprising discovery
- one recommendation based on your findings