

## The big idea: should we embrace boredom?

### Level 3: Advanced

#### 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 at times when you feel bored and how effective are these things in relieving your boredom?

#### 2 Key words

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

absorb	exacerbates	paradoxically	socials	untamed
assuage	left to their own	pastime	solitude	
coincided with	devices	pointless	swiftly	
creep in	manipulated by	resist the urge	technophiles	
efficacy	mass adoption	rumination	unstimulating	

- \_\_\_\_\_ means to take in something, such as information.
- \_\_\_\_\_ is to make an unpleasant feeling less intense or to relieve it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ is when one thing happened at the same time as something else.
- \_\_\_\_\_ means to gradually start to affect something, often without being noticed at first.
- \_\_\_\_\_ is the act of being effective or able to produce the result that you want.
- \_\_\_\_\_ means it makes a problem, situation or feeling worse.
- If someone is \_\_\_\_\_, they are allowed to do what they want without being controlled or helped.
- If you are \_\_\_\_\_ someone, you are influenced or controlled in a clever or dishonest way without realising it.

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9. \_\_\_\_\_ is when a large number of people start to use or accept something, like a product or idea.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ means happening in a way that seems contradictory or the opposite of what you'd expect.
11. A(n) \_\_\_\_\_ is a hobby or leisure activity.
12. If something is \_\_\_\_\_, it has no purpose, meaning or useful result.
13. To \_\_\_\_\_ means to try not to do something you strongly want to do.
14. \_\_\_\_\_ is the process of thinking deeply about something, often in a repetitive or negative way.
15. \_\_\_\_\_ are the social media platforms people use.
16. \_\_\_\_\_ is the state of being alone and enjoying the peace of it.
17. When something happens \_\_\_\_\_, it means that it happens quickly or without delay.
18. \_\_\_\_\_ are people who love and embrace new technology.
19. A situation that is \_\_\_\_\_ is dull or without interest or excitement.
20. \_\_\_\_\_ is when something is wild or not controlled or cultivated by humans.

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

1. The \_\_\_\_\_ of electric vehicles hasn't been as dramatic as the government had hoped despite cash incentives.
2. The charity issued a statement to \_\_\_\_\_ public concern following the data breach.
3. The documentary captured the raw, \_\_\_\_\_ beauty of the northern wilderness.

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4. Unfortunately, the meeting was entirely \_\_\_\_\_, and nothing of any significance was achieved.
5. Harriet's resignation \_\_\_\_\_ a dramatic drop in staff morale.
6. Laurence's refusal to engage constructively is \_\_\_\_\_ the existing tension in the marketing team.
7. When \_\_\_\_\_, I often just watch TV or play video games for hours on end.
8. The jury was clearly \_\_\_\_\_ the emotionally charged witness testimony.
9. Despite his doctor's best efforts, Aiden failed to \_\_\_\_\_ the importance of regular exercise and a healthy diet.
10. Researchers are still debating the \_\_\_\_\_ of mindfulness in treating chronic anxiety.
11. For people who love the outdoor pursuits, hill-walking is a popular \_\_\_\_\_.
12. Doubts about the project's feasibility began to \_\_\_\_\_ as new logistical problems emerged.
13. The house sale progressed \_\_\_\_\_ once reports were in from the surveyors.
14. \_\_\_\_\_ on his past failures as a father and husband only deepened Chris's feelings of unhappiness.
15. For many people, checking their \_\_\_\_\_ is the first thing they do when they wake up in the morning.
16. This new location device will appeal to first-time users as well as to experienced \_\_\_\_\_.
17. Lisa struggled to \_\_\_\_\_ to respond to the rude email from her colleague.

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18. \_\_\_\_\_, limiting screen time seemed to improve the children's attention span.
19. The textbook was so \_\_\_\_\_ that even the most motivated students lost interest.
20. Omar withdrew into \_\_\_\_\_ not out of sadness, but as a conscious decision to preserve his mental health.

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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 with their thoughts for 15 minutes. The only available diversion was a button that delivered a painful electric shock. Almost half of the participants pressed it. One man pressed the button 190 times – even though he, like everyone else in the study, had earlier indicated that he found the shock unpleasant enough that he would pay to avoid being shocked again. The study's authors concluded that "people prefer doing to thinking", even if the only thing available to do is painful – perhaps because, if left to their own devices, our minds tend to wander in unwanted directions.
- 2 Since the mass adoption of smartphones, most people have been walking around with the psychological equivalent of a shock button in their pocket: a device that can neutralise boredom in an instant, even if it's not all that good for us. We often reach for our phones for something to do during moments of quiet or solitude, or to distract us late at night when anxious thoughts creep in. This isn't *always* a bad thing – too much rumination is unhealthy – but it's worth reflecting on the fact that avoiding unwanted mind-wandering is easier than it's ever been, and that most people distract themselves in very similar, screen-based ways.
- 3 Smartphones have also increased the pressure to use our time productively, to optimise every minute of our lives. 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 or untamed half-thoughts that start to form in the milliseconds before we dig into our pockets and pull out our phones again?
- 4 Most psychologists studying boredom would agree that, while it can feel unpleasant, it's useful. According to Erin Westgate, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Florida, we become bored if something fails to absorb our attention, or when we perceive it as meaningless. This is not to say that something needs to be both engaging and

meaningful to keep us interested. Watching paint dry is both unstimulating and pointless, which is why it isn't a common pastime.

- 5 In any case, when boredom strikes it should ideally serve as a prompt to do something more engaging or meaningful. If you don't react appropriately to your boredom, or perhaps if engaging or meaningful things aren't available to you for whatever reason, you may find yourself becoming chronically bored. That is associated with a range of problems, including depression, anxiety, poor life satisfaction, lower academic achievement, substance abuse and excessive risk-taking.
- 6 There is evidence to suggest that chronic boredom is becoming more common, and that this uptick has coincided with the rise of smartphones. In a paper published last year, researchers noted that the proportion of students in China and the US who described themselves as bored steadily increased in the years after 2010, during the first decade of smartphone dominance. Why might digital media have this effect? Research has shown that the main reason we pick up our phones or check our socials is to relieve boredom, but that the behaviour actually exacerbates it. One study, for instance, found that people who were bored at work were more likely to use their smartphones – and subsequently feel even more bored.
- 7 It may be that checking your phone only addresses part of what you need when you start to feel bored. Digital devices are very good at attracting your attention, but much of what we do online doesn't feel meaningful. 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 browsing the internet. I expect that even the biggest technophiles would agree that this isn't how they want to spend their one precious life.
- 8 Phones' efficacy allows us to swiftly avoid messages that we might need to hear, such as "Why am I feeling this?" or "What do I need that I'm not getting?" If we pause and listen, then perhaps we can make a choice rather than being manipulated by software engineers. When boredom strikes, we should resist the urge to assuage it instantly and ask ourselves: are we in search of pure entertainment or something more purposeful, an opportunity to

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connect with friends or our community or something different, something new? The people who choose to embrace boredom, at least for a while, may paradoxically experience less of it. It could even be the first step towards a life that feels more meaningful, creative and free.

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First published in *The Guardian*, 11/06/2025

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#### 3 Comprehension check

a. Decide if the statements are True, False or Not Mentioned according to information in the article.

- |   |                              |
|---|------------------------------|
| 1. Nearly half of the participants in the Harvard experiment chose to self-administer electric shocks rather than remain alone with their thoughts. | True / False / Not Mentioned |
| 2. According to the author of the article, smartphones are universally harmful and should be avoided.   | True / False / Not Mentioned |
| 3. The majority of researchers studying boredom consider it to have no beneficial function for mental health.                                       | True / False / Not Mentioned |
| 4. Research shows that smartphone usage to combat boredom actually makes people feel more bored.  | True / False / Not Mentioned |
| 5. A typical American will dedicate almost two decades-worth of time over their lifespan to being online.   | True / False / Not Mentioned |
| 6. Students in European countries showed increased levels of boredom after 2010 when smartphones became commonplace.                                | True / False / Not Mentioned |
| 7. Persistent feelings of boredom correlate with diminished educational performance and dangerous behavioural choices.                              | True / False / Not Mentioned |
| 8. While electronic gadgets can give us a focus, the online activities we engage in rarely provide a sense of purpose.                              | True / False / Not Mentioned |

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#### 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) _____	<b>diversion</b>	(2) _____	(3) _____
(4) _____	(5) _____	<b>meaningless / meaningful</b>	(6) _____ (7) _____
<b>optimise</b>	(8) _____	(9) _____	(10) _____
(11) _____	<b>dominance</b>	(12) _____	(13) _____
(14) _____	(15) _____	<b>excessive</b>	(16) _____
<b>neutralise</b>	(17) _____	(18) _____	(19) _____
(20) _____	<b>boredom</b>	(21) _____ / (22) _____	(23) _____

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

- The council's efforts to \_\_\_\_\_ patient health care has yielded generally positive results over the past decade. (optimal)
- Research suggests that social media \_\_\_\_\_ our attention away from face-to-face interactions with friends and family. (diversion)
- The pharmaceutical company's \_\_\_\_\_ of the global market has been challenged by emerging competitors from developing nations. (dominate)
- Critics argue that celebrities behaving \_\_\_\_\_ sets a dangerous example for impressionable young people. (excess)
- Foreign diplomats are working hard to \_\_\_\_\_ the escalating tensions between the two neighbouring countries. (neutral)



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6. Many great thinkers have questioned whether life has any deeper \_\_\_\_\_ or if we must create our own sense of purpose. (meaningless)
7. Some college students are so \_\_\_\_\_ during lectures that they have taken to playing games on their phones. (bore)

### 5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- The article distinguishes between engaging content and meaningless scrolling. Analyse your own digital consumption. What online activities feel meaningful to you, and which feel like time-wasting? How could you change your digital habits to increase meaningful interactions?
- The author suggests that embracing boredom might lead to a more creative and meaningful life. 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.*
- 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?

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**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