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Mindfulness 24/7

Why the Real World Is the Best Place to Meditate

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Hip-Hop Artist and Mindfulness Instructor

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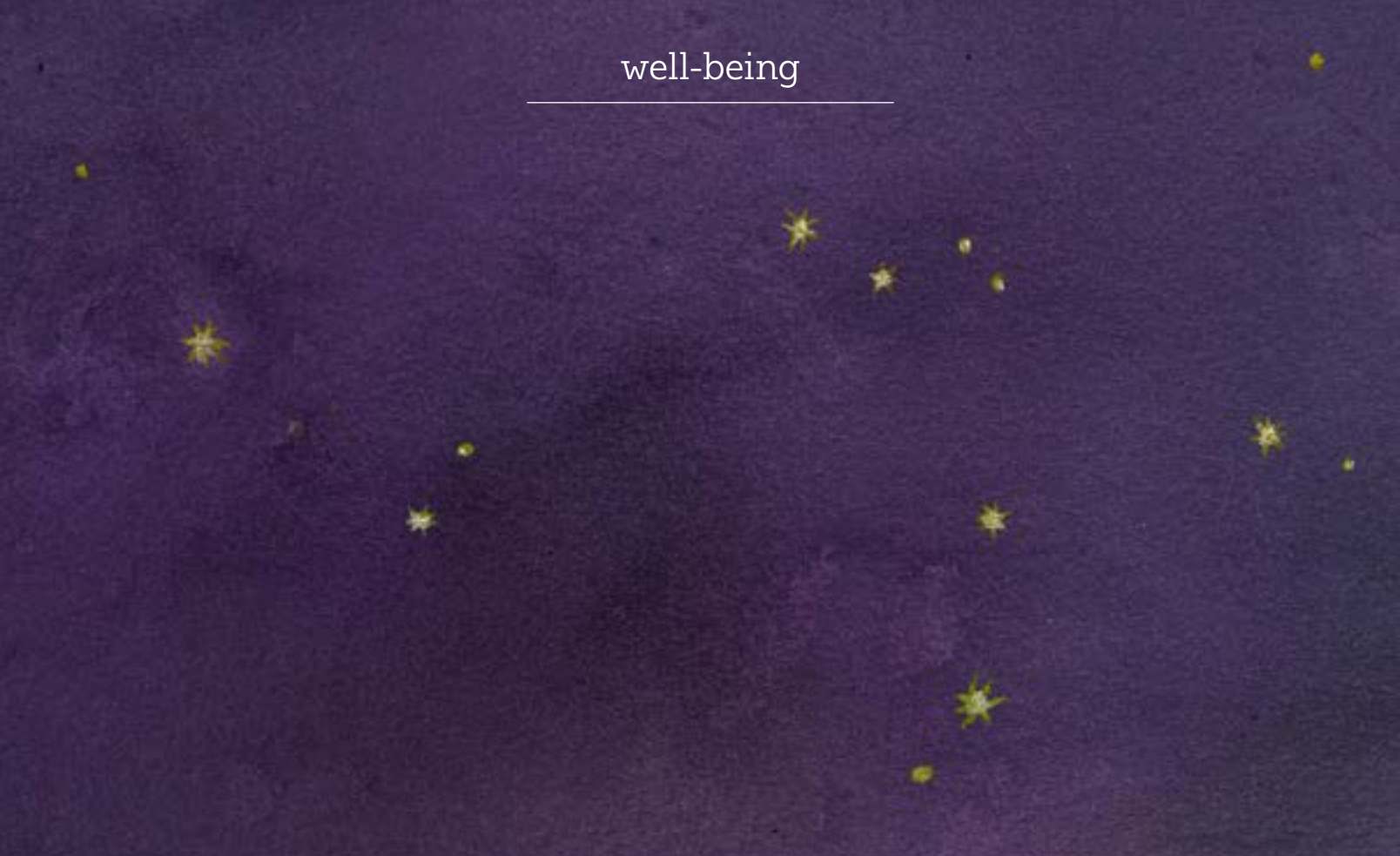
Is Boredom All Bad?



When your mind spins and your body itches to do ***something***, anything, what's really going on? Meditation is a great way to find out.

By **Ed Halliwell**
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Søren Kierkegaard called it the root of all evil. Arthur Schopenhauer said it was one of the two enemies of human happiness. And Jean Baudrillard described it as the world's second worst crime (the first: being the cause of it). But it doesn't take a philosopher to know that humans hate being bored.

Indeed, a study by University of Virginia psychologist Timothy Wilson showed just how far people would go to avoid a state of boredom. In 2014, together with colleagues from Harvard, Wilson ran a series of experiments inviting participants to sit on their own for six to 15 minutes, with nothing but their own thoughts as entertainment. Most of the participants rated the experience as unpleasant—their minds wandered and they struggled to concentrate. Of those asked to carry out the task at home, without supervision, one-third admitted to cheating—they couldn't manage a quarter of an hour of stillness without getting up, turning on their phones or seeking some other distraction.

The researchers then went further. A new group of subjects was given a mild electric shock to the ankle before the experiment started, and each subject was given the option of self-administering that same shock during their time of quiet. Despite having all agreed they would pay to avoid repeating the jolt, two-thirds of the men and one-quarter of the women took up the option of shocking themselves. One man zapped himself *190 times*. →

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For anyone who has meditated, these results perhaps won't come as a total surprise. While many of us practice for inner peace, what we find when we stop and sit is rather disconcerting: Our minds flit on a seemingly endless loop of tedious thoughts, and our bodies itch and ache. We realize we'd rather be anywhere than stuck with our antsy selves. Like a teenager desperate for stimulation, we feel like screaming into space: "I'M SO BORED." Meditation instructors often cite the tale of when a master teacher instructed a group of new students just to "be," a hand shot up from the audience. "Sir, how long do I have to *be* for?"

What's going on here? Why is it so hard just to be ourselves, alone, without embellishment? And what is this strange experience we call boredom, which seems to fuel our relentless drive always to be getting somewhere, *doing something?*

According to psychologist John Eastwood of York University in Toronto, boredom is "the unfulfilled desire for satisfying activity," characterized by "an unengaged mind." Basically, we want to connect to our world, but we cannot find anything in our current environment—inner or outer—that seems worthy of attention. So instead we try to escape the unease, impelled to seek relief elsewhere. Our minds wander around and around, and our bodies buzz with desire to flee.

From an evolutionary perspective, this makes sense: We are primed to seek the pleasant stimuli that help us survive—food, shelter, social interaction—and actively avoid threats to our well-being, such as predators or poisons. We aren't programmed to stop and rest for long, which would make us simple prey for hunters (in the wild, meditators would be sitting ducks). Wired for vigilance, we start to feel like something's awry when we stop seeking pleasure or running from pain. The nagging pull of boredom is partly the brain's reminder that you're putting your life at risk when you're still.

Our culture reinforces this. Writ large, the urge to survive and thrive is expressed in the race for better houses, jobs, friends, and reputations. Smartphones and social media are designed to give us ever more means to seek satisfaction, and we come to rely on them for the pleasurable hit that comes from each virtual interaction. It's a truth almost universally acknowledged that busyness is good, and by correlation, boredom is not. If we're bored, something *must* be wrong.

But is this true? If we are privileged enough to live in a part of the world where war and hunger aren't daily concerns, then what purpose does our constant fidget serve? What might in some situations be good for survival isn't conducive to happiness. Being prone to boredom has been linked with depression, drug abuse, high-risk gambling, and overeating, not to mention poor attention span, performance errors, impulsivity, and unconscious biases. It seems that with our bid to escape ennui, life actually becomes shallower, more frantic, and more desperate. While it might have short-term adaptive value, boredom might not even be good for your longer-term prospects: In a study of British civil servants over more than two decades, those who reported being most bored were also more likely to die an early death, compared to those who felt engaged with life.

The more we react by trying to get rid of boredom, the less equipped we are to deal with it. Distracting ourselves again and again, we never learn how to cope with the uncomfortable sensations that come when we *can't* get satisfaction. Even meditation can end up on the list of discarded cures, when it fails to deliver the quick bliss we crave. And yet discomfort is an inevitable part of life; it's hard to avoid boredom forever, and we can't avoid ourselves. Unless we spend our entire lives running (and many of us try), we need to find some other way of managing the irritation, the lethargy, the rumination, the not-right-in-our-own-skin feeling of sheer, stark, please-turn-me-to-stone-I-can't-stand-this-another-minute boredom.

Mindfulness offers an antidote. Not to the experience that we usually label as boredom, →

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Awaken Your Interest

A 5-Senses Practice

Boredom is a sign that we've become habituated. We're getting stuck on automatic pilot, and losing touch with actual experience, which can always be interesting if we bring our curiosity to it. By helping us shift modes of mind from thinking into sensing, this practice invites us to rediscover interest, beyond our expectations. Linger on each step for at least three minutes.

Seeing anew

Take a familiar object from your home (such as a mug you've owned for years, an old photograph, a piece of clothing, or furniture) and examine it as if you've never seen it before. Let your thoughts about the object drop into the background as you offer it your full attention. Is there something you'd forgotten or never noticed before, or is your experience or reaction altered by your interest?

Feeling anew

Now, take a different object and this time offer attention to its texture, touching it as if for the first time. Or you could choose to work with an inner feeling, directing awareness to a part of your body, noticing what sensations (if any) are present. In either case, notice how the experience feels right now, as you interact with it.

Hearing, smelling, and tasting anew

Now, take your attention in turn to three everyday objects in your environment that you can hear, smell, or taste (for example, the ticking of a clock, a flower, a piece of fruit). Let go of expectations, and instead allow your senses to lead you into the direct experience of hearing, smelling, or tasting itself.

Once you've got the hang of dropping into each sense in turn, try opening to all of the senses together at moments of so-called boredom in life, such as when washing up, standing in a queue, or stuck in a long meeting. Can you offer a full, embodied interest to the people and places around you, as well as what's going on in your mind and body?

When Your Practice Feels Boring

Is It All in Your Head?

When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life, for there is in London all that life can afford.
—Samuel Johnson, English writer

Like Dr. Johnson's summation of the cosmopolitan life of 18th century London, mindfulness offers us full and open access to every experience. So does that mean if we're bored in meditation, we're also bored by our lives? And if so, what can be done about it?

Meditation shows us our habitual patterns of mind; how we typically relate to the world. If we find the practice boring, our tendency may be to blame the experience—to think it's our breath, body sensations, or thoughts that are boring. Yet, if we observe what's happening carefully, we see that we're actually relating to it *in a bored way*: We label meditation uninteresting, and we identify with the desire to get away from it. However, it's actually our mind that creates the boredom, rather than what we're attending to. After all, what could be more amazing and interesting than the mystery and magic of conscious experience, the very facts of breathing, sensing, thinking, and the wonder of being aware?

With dissatisfaction as our basic mindset, we'll likely seek an unsustainably high level of stimulation in order to avoid a boredom that's actually being created at source, by the mind. When life doesn't deliver, we'll likely be bored. A lot.

The good news is that mindfulness practice itself provides a remedy, because it invites us to be interested in *every* aspect of life, even the so-called boring bits. If we can stay with it, we start to reverse the old habits of retreating into fixed ideas, distraction, and reactivity, which steal our attention from the magic of the moment. As soon as we get interested in what our boredom feels like, by definition it's no longer boring.

Of course, this paying attention with interest is not so easy to develop—the mind frequently wanders into what we *think* is happening rather than what's actually happening, and the body gets jumpy. This is why it's important to repeat the practice, on a regular basis, for short periods at a time. In doing so, we gently and gradually develop our capacity for ongoing curiosity.

So, noticing boredom in meditation? Willing to experience it, with a friendly interest? You're on the right track.

Mindfulness invites us to see boredom not as something to reject, but rather to know, understand, and even embrace.

but to our categorization of it as *a bad thing*, and our hurried attempts to be rid of it. Mindfulness invites us to see boredom not as something to reject, but rather to know, understand, and even embrace. In mindfulness practice, we change our ideas about boredom and our relationship to it. Actually, we stop being bored by boredom. And if we are no longer bored by boredom, isn't it something different already? Boredom thus dissolves not with resistance, but by getting familiar with it.

Embracing boredom

With a mindful approach, there are three steps to getting familiar with feelings of being bored. The first is curiosity—after all, the opposite of boredom is interest. When we offer our interest to the experience of boredom, we may discover it's anything but dull. Actually, researchers have identified no less than five types of boredom

corresponding to a wide range of inner states. Those with **indifferent boredom** feel calm but withdrawn, while **apathetic boredom** feels a lot like helplessness. **Calibrating boredom** is characterized by a wandering mind and the desire for something different, but without being clear as to what's really needed. **Searching boredom** is a restless searching for alternative activities, driven by feelings of discomfort, while **reactant boredom** comes with high arousal and strong negative emotions: we're aggressive toward the world around us, desperately wishing we were somewhere else.

As soon as we approach these states with interest, we've already stepped out of our identification with them; we've started to view boredom with a nuanced observer's eye. We discover

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that what we thought was boring is actually a multifaceted kaleidoscope of sensory and mental events. Of course, this is easier said than done. But it *can* be practiced, by repeatedly paying attention to what's happening in the moment.

Try it for yourself. When you find yourself attaching the label "bored" to your experience, ask, *Where in my body am I feeling this? Can I describe the actual sensations—hot, cool, numb, tight, itchy, tired? What thoughts are percolating in my mind—are there ideas of wanting to get away, wishing things were different, or am I identifying as helpless, unbothered, or restless? Underneath the big blanket label of boredom, do more subtle aspects emerge, such as irritation, perhaps, regret, or fear?*

Through mindfulness, a stagnant, stale state is imbued with fresh energy. Research suggests this approach is related to positive mood—various studies have found that well-being increases by attending with interest to body sensations and routine activities. Simply put: It's hard to be bored when you're in touch with the magic of being alive. →

7 Habit-Changers

Overcoming boredom might just be a matter of freshening up your routine.

Another way to awaken interest is to seek out new situations and experiences, inviting a different perspective. Try one of these each day for a week and notice what happens.

1. Take an unfamiliar route to work, or to a regular appointment. Change your mode of transport—if you usually drive, take the bus, or train, or walk.

2. Follow a recipe for a meal you've never tried, with at least one ingredient you've not before cooked with.

3. Start a conversation with someone you've never really talked with: the barista at your coffee shop or someone from a different department in your company who you sometimes see in the elevator—ask them how their day is going and be prepared to listen with interest.

4. Go to the cinema without checking what films are showing. Watch the first one that starts after your arrival.

5. Read a different newspaper/news site to the one you're used to—perhaps one that doesn't confirm your usual political views.

6. Join a class for a sport, activity, or hobby that you think you won't enjoy. Keep an open mind and resolve to find out one new thing about this activity from the teacher or other participants. Can you discover what others find engaging about it?

7. Turn off all internet connections for one day. Be open to alternative means of finding out information and connecting with others and the world.

There is even evidence that allowing the mind a spell of boredom—in effect, resting the brain—leads to more creativity in subsequent tasks, an effect psychologists call the "incubation advantage."

The second step to practicing with boredom is to stay with it. The difficulty of this should not be underestimated (remember, it drove some people to zap volts at their ankles) so it's important to go gently. With compassion, we can acknowledge that what we're attempting *is* hard—we're going against the grain of our evolutionary history and current culture, so it's hardly surprising we encounter some resistance. The fact that we've noticed our boredom is good news: It means we've stepped out of the autopilot of compulsively seeking distraction. We can also remind ourselves that each time we stay present to what's coming up, rather than reacting on impulse, we're honing resilience. We can approach boredom softly, with kindness, perhaps for short sessions of a few minutes to begin with, knowing there's no goal to achieve except awareness and acceptance of the thoughts and sensations that arise from moment to moment. "Excellent," we might say to ourselves as we sit in the tedium, "just for this time I've set aside, I'm noticing boredom and all my desires to react to it. Well done, me!"

Sometimes, when boredom is an enduring theme in our practice and our life, it can be a signal to take a third step, which is making a change. Boredom may be a sign that we need to engage with more meaningful activities, that we've somewhat lost touch with our sense of purpose. As we watch our mind and body, we will likely notice this as something different from the restless craving or numbness that we usually call boredom. It's a deeper sense of yearning inside—a heartfelt, authentic voice, calling us toward a meaningful life. When we hear this voice, we intuitively know we can trust its message. We are also more likely to notice it as we deepen our practice—we can distinguish its quiet call from the cacophony of other inner voices, and we develop the capacity for courageous choice: to follow our hearts carefully, steadfastly, intentionally, rather than being driven by impulse. Because most of us are easily seduced into making reactive changes when bored, it's helpful to practice the first two steps first, and not be rushed too soon into action.

It's sometimes said that boredom is three steps from equanimity. If we can stay with it, rather than fixating on and reacting to it, we can start to experience a more restful ease. This usually takes time and practice, but as we become friendly to boredom, we let our inner emotional temperature drop from unbearably hot to a cooler, more refreshing equilibrium. There is even evidence that allowing the mind a spell of boredom—in effect, resting the brain—leads to more creativity in subsequent tasks, an effect psychologists call the "incubation advantage." And that's got to be better than an electric shock, hasn't it? ●

Isn't *this* interesting?

A shift in perspective can open us up to the fundamental wonder of being alive. Next time you're sitting with yourself and can't seem to bear it, remember how remarkable you really are...