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How boredom can make us do creative things

The pandemic revealed what researchers have long known — ennui could be the gateway to re-engaging with the world

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Despite the layers of meaning we have attributed to it, boredom is in itself amoral. (Source: Getty Images)



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himself, to bring form to thought, and to discover meaning in experience?

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Or is it just something to do when he is bored?

— Calvin from *Calvin and Hobbes*

Read any number of Sherlock Holmes' adventures and the fictional detective is often introduced lounging lazily in his dressing gown at his Baker Street residence. With his superior intellect, Holmes finds ordinary life boring, and ordinary crime, even more so. His only escape from this dullness — and his only vice — is cocaine.

For that matter, *The Sign of the Four* (1890) begins with Holmes administering himself a cocaine injection. His defence: "Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram...I can dispense then with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence...That is why I have chosen my own particular profession — or, rather, created it."

The great consulting detective was, like most of modern society, just terribly bored. Boredom propelled him to seek the most fantastical cases, to lead a more imaginative life, landing somewhere between cocaine and ambition. Boredom is what made the genius relatable.

It's obvious, therefore, why boredom has a bit of a bad rep. It has long been associated with cautionary tales of a wasting mind, and, in an extreme sense, with risk behaviours, trauma and addictions. In 2014, American social psychologist Timothy D Wilson and team published their findings on how participants placed in a room, with nothing to do, preferred external stimulation than be left alone with their thoughts. The participants' only option in this room was to give themselves mild electric shocks. The researchers observed that participants did not enjoy spending six to 15 minutes by themselves, with several choosing to administer the electric shock at least once.

Researchers are looking at how boredom can also spark creativity and problem-solving. In *The Science of Boredom: The Upside (and Downside) of Downtime*



Central Lancashire, the UK, published a research paper on how being bored can lead to increased creativity in terms of quantity, but not necessarily quality. They stated that if we are looking for creative solutions, then undertaking a boring task might help. Mann says, “We think the link between boredom and creativity is daydreaming.”

My favourite six-year-old, the titular hero of Bill Watterson’s comic strip Calvin and Hobbes, is a champion daydreamer. When Calvin is not with Hobbes but stuck at his school desk, there is a permanent scowl on his face. The dreariness of lessons is broken only by his adrenaline-fuelled space fantasies, including a passage to a fifth dimension world where “time has no meaning”.



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Saeer Koranne-Khandekar's thalineeth crackers (Courtesy: Saeer Koranne-Khandekar')



says, it is important we don't judge ourselves for "wasting" time daydreaming. In 2008, Koranne-Khandekar worked as an instructional designer with an e-learning company. She had too much time on hand at home, and, on a "bored afternoon", she started blogging about it — kitchen tales and other anecdotes. In time, the blog grew into a food-ideas space, and she found her current vocation. Just because Koranne-Khandekar shifted careers, it didn't mean that she escaped boredom altogether. Working with food can also get boring, especially with one kind of cuisine or technique. While writing her book, *Pangat, A Feast: Food and Lore from Marathi Kitchens* (2019), she was struck by the limited interpretations of Marathi cuisine in eateries and homes. "If one tries to eat Marathi food out, the usual suspects are misal, vada pao or chicken Kolhapuri, which is just another name for a standard red gravy with extra chilli powder," she says. It forced her to reimagine the cuisine, to reinvent thalipeeth as crackers served with a dip or tostadas with seasonal toppings.

One of the best ways to understand boredom is as a "desire conundrum", as James Danckert and John D Eastwood discuss in *Out of My Skull: The Psychology of Boredom* (2020). To be caught in a desire conundrum means "wanting to do something but not wanting to do anything". They write, "So our mind is unoccupied and we want to do something, but we can't figure out what we want to do — that's boredom in a nutshell." It is this search for stimulation and engagement that turns boredom into a paradox and transforms idlers into seekers.

If we weren't bored before, last year ensured it. Graphic designer Tirtha Gandhi, 28, was among those who were caught in the pandemic's boredom conundrum. In March last year, Gandhi packed an overnight bag for a weekend visit to Vadodara to check on her ailing father. Nearly a year later, she is yet to return to Mumbai. That weekend, the first lockdown came into effect in India. Weekdays, spent working remotely, rolled by. Sunday was a different story. She had left her DSLR camera and sketchbooks back in Mumbai. It helped, however, that her childhood home came with a garden. Eventually, she began strolling there, catching the afternoon light, observing the trees and the birds. In summer, she collected lemons. By October, the Saptaparni's heady scent meant Diwali was near. Ordinarily, as a practising



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origami, recreating the garden's fruits and flowers. She says, "I am not trying to become an origami pro. It's just my way of preserving things in a tangible way."

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Graphic designer Tirtha Gandhi with an origami champa. (Courtesy: Tirtha Gandhi)

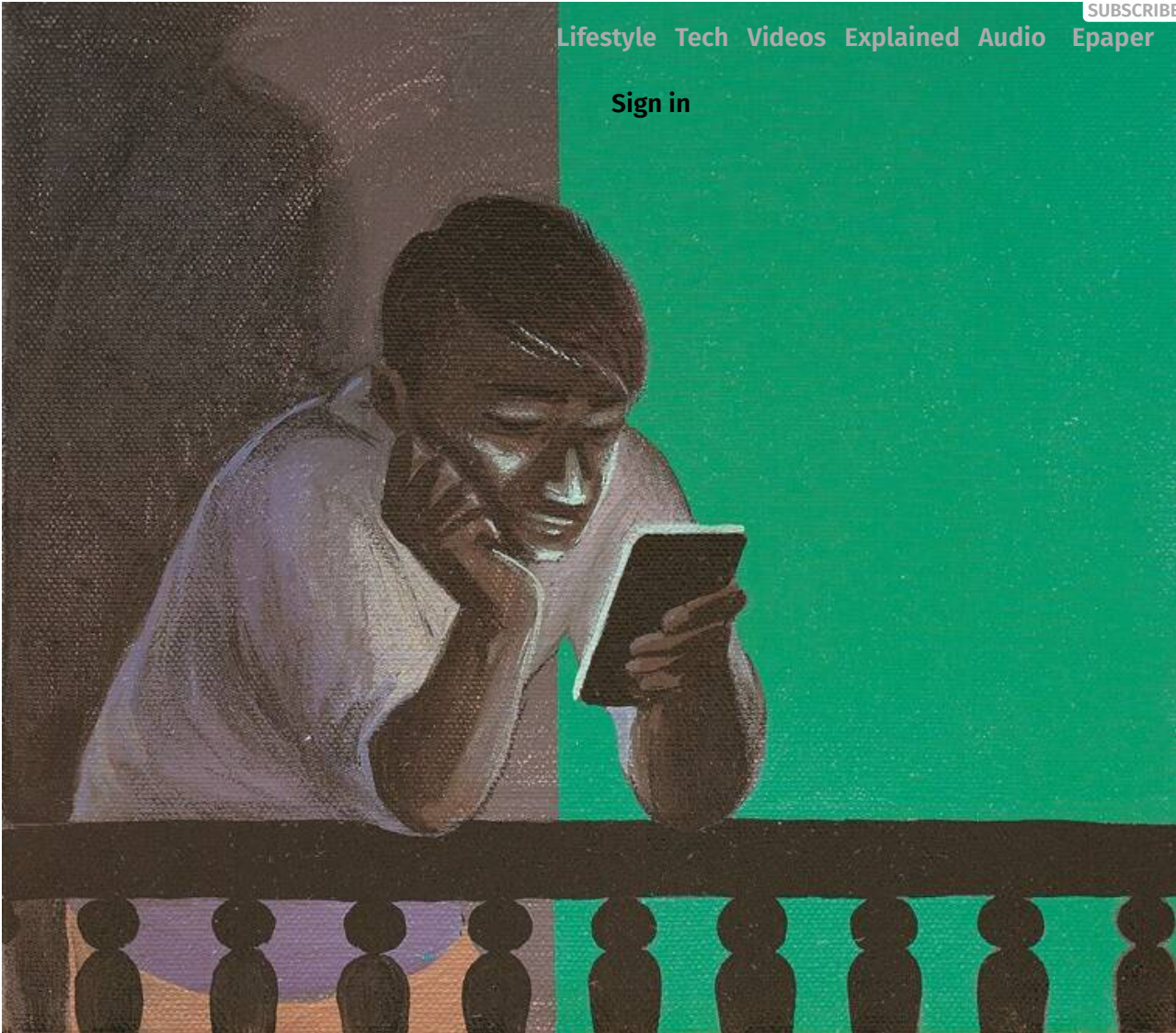
Gandhi, unlike many, managed to cure her boredom without the constant company of a smartphone and social media. Smartphones make us think we are “busy” and



Mann believes that there are a number of reasons why we are more bored than ever. One is the availability of more leisure time. **Sign in** The other problem is that a lot of things we do to engage our minds are the same activities. We are swiping or scrolling our boredom away but those are all repetitive actions. “The problem with repetition is that it becomes boring,” she says. If you look at the hashtags #boredom on Instagram, that has 3.6 million posts, or #BoredomMadeMeDoIt, a majority of them are simply selfies experimenting with bizarre filters. In Sameer Kulavoor’s ongoing exhibition in Mumbai, “You Are All Caught Up”, the artist shows a number of works with figures glued to their phones. In one telling work, titled Notification (2019), a lone figure hangs by some railings, hand resting on chin and looking bored out of his mind. The other hand is engaged, though — thumb on screen. The figure has none of Calvin’s exasperation. When Calvin is bored, he daydreams.



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Notification (2019) by Sameer Kulavoor. (Courtesy: Sameer Kulavoor)

Kulavoor's figure, on the other hand, appears opiated, preferring to do anything not to "think". It's also one of the key reasons why people fear getting bored. Who knows what questions, what memories the mind will bring to the surface in a quiet moment? The pandemic, for instance, has been a live lab for researchers, with latest studies showing the link between emotional trauma and boredom, and how highly boredom-prone people are more likely to endorse that [Covid-19](#) is a hoax. It's why the idea that boredom can be a source of creativity is a tricky one. Eastwood, founder of Boredom Lab in Toronto, says that the link between boredom and creativity is indirect, accomplished if we allow for constructive mind wandering. He explains that when bored, we disengage from the world, and if we can tolerate the discomfort of boredom long enough to turn inward and reflect on who we are



So, is there a right way of “doing” boredom? Canadian author Chris Bailey, known for his “productivity experiments” (alifeofproductivity.com), spent a month some years ago getting deliberately bored for an hour every day. The boring hour was fixed with a task, like reading iTunes’ terms and conditions, waiting at a hospital, watching his girlfriend read, and removing the seeds of a strawberry with tweezers. Some of these hours were more fun, where the mind wandered, without a goal or intent. That smartphones are an easy escape is a bit of a personal value judgement, Eastwood says. “We don’t have a lot of data on this. Generally, the more active a person is — I don’t mean physically active necessarily but self-determined and mentally active — the more they are doing something involving creativity and reflection such as daydreaming, reading, journaling, the more likely they will be able to ‘do’ boredom well,” he adds.

Despite the layers of meaning we have attributed to it, boredom is in itself amoral. Eastwood explains that how we respond to the signal of boredom is the key question. All feelings, negative or positive, “tell” us something important about how we are in the world. Pain, for example, tells us we are in danger of damaging our body and we need to stop what we are doing to protect our body. “Boredom is similar. It tells us we are stagnating; that we are not using our cognitive abilities and expressing ourselves in the world in our own unique ways...it tells us we need to reclaim our agency,” he says. But what about those who are forced into boring situations, some that stretch for years, with no end in sight? The homeless, the aged, the bedridden, the imprisoned — their options are limited. In a region like Kashmir, where curfews were the norm even before 2020, it’s hard to imagine that people will stay anxious forever. At some point, anxiety gives way to boredom, as vigilance becomes normalised. “Boredom could be seen as unproductive or as rust over the creative mind. (But) building upon (Martin) Heidegger’s notion of boring yourself with something, boredom... can help actively create spaces for radical outbreaks in a given situation,” says Srinagar-based artist Moonis Ahmad Shah, 28. Shah, who is at present a doctoral candidate at the University of Melbourne, recalls the times in Kashmir where there were long durations of curfews enforced on the people. When



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An image from Moonis Ahmad Shah's installation *Accidentally Miraculous Everyday From That*. (Courtesy: Moonis Shah)

In an installation, *Accidentally Miraculous Everyday From That Heaven* (2019), Shah used photogrammetry to stitch 3D reconstructions of Kashmiri people living in a state of exception. Broken and fractured, the figures often seem weary or bored. In one image, a geographer sleeps at noontime on a Monday instead of working. “Rather than thinking of boredom as a passive thing, resistance occurs — it’s a very active process. If you think about it, a geographer sleeping on Monday afternoon is a revolutionary act,” Shah says. Seen in this light, daydreaming can be



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scientists and writers who made path breaking discoveries or created masterpieces in similar conditions of lockdowns and working from home. We insist on making every second count. Instead, I often think of John William Godward's women languishing by serene Mediterranean waters, teasing a kitten, playing with a parrot or twiddling a grape between their fingers — they are asking carpe diem to go take a hike. Godward was painting his idling women, many of them called Dolce far Niente (Italian for “the sweetness of doing nothing”), at the turn of the 20th century, after mechanisation had claimed a firm grip on Victorian societies. What better way than daydreaming to resist the tyranny of the clock?



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