



Bored Out of Your Wits? Get Creative!

Kuruvilla Pandikattu SJ
Papal Seminary, Pune 411014

Have you been truly bored? “So bored your mind churns through every chore you have to complete, every aspiration you have yet to accomplish, every fear and every dread, every flaw in your character.”

When Manoush Zomorodi, online reporter, anchor and video consultant, New York, was eight years old, she walked around her house gathering up all the houseplants. She arranged them in rows, gave them all nametags and then performed a concert for their benefit. Why? Because she was bored.

And now? “I suddenly realised I haven’t really been bored in about seven years,” Zomorodi says. “That was when I first got a smartphone.” That realisation prompted Zomorodi to undertake a project called Bored and Brilliant, designed to explore the intersection of boredom and creativity. For the project, she has created an app called Moment, which measures how much time we spend on the phone and also logs how many times you pick it up “just to check it.”

Zomorodi is creating a set of challenges for her listeners to follow, a different one each day. “As we go through the week, we’re going to start giving them assignments to help them be creative in some way. We’re going to ask them to get bored and then complete an assignment.”

The project is based on conversations Zomorodi had with scientists who are examining the issue of boredom and creativity. While science hasn't proven that looking at smartphones inhibits our creativity, there is research suggesting that unstimulated, unengaged states of mind can prompt more creative, divergent thinking, writes Kurt Andersen of the American based Public Radio International.

Zomorodi uses the term 'default mode', which was first coined by Marcus Raichle in 2001, to describe a network in the brain that gets activated when we are bored. She spoke with Jonny Smallwood, a neuroscientist in the UK who studies 'mind wandering'. He saw the same kind of 'default mode' activity in the brain when he asked test subjects to lie in a scanner and just look at a fixed point. When they did so, the brain exhibited "very organised spontaneous activity," Smallwood says. "When you're given nothing to do, your thoughts don't stop. You continue to generate thoughts even when there's nothing for you to do with those thoughts."

Zomorodi uses 'positive, constructive daydreaming', a term coined by the renowned psychologist Jerome L Singer, to describe the state of mind that occurs when our brain gets bored. "You start to do things like problem solve and have original thinking and do 'autobiographical planning,' where you make sense of all the things that are happening to you in your life and you set your goals and you figure out ways of getting to those goals," Zomorodi says.

This is precisely the kind of thinking many psychologists believe leads to creative ideas, intuitive insights and "a-ha" moments — the kind of thinking that may become a thing of the past if we are addicted to smartphones.

Zomorodi found a different perspective on this issue from an unlikely source: Buddhist monks. Alex Pang, the author of a book called *The Distraction Addiction*, talked to monks who are active on the internet and social media. Maybe boredom, isolation and loneliness enable us to get in touch with ourselves helping us to be more brilliant, authentic and deep.

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