Reading

Time Out

Contrary to the popular myth that only boring people get bored, it seems that embracing monotony and allowing ourselves to drift away could be good for us.

A Consider any public place where people used to enjoy a spot of silent contemplation – from train carriages to parks – and these days you'll see people plugged into their electronic devices. All this information overload seems like a modern-day problem. However, one unique thinker actually stumbled on a neat solution nearly a century ago: radical boredom. In 1942, a German writer called Siegfried Kracauer wrote of the massive over-stimulation of the modern city where people listening to the radio were in a state of 'permanent receptivity, constantly pregnant with London, the Eiffel Tower, Berlin'. His answer was to suggest going cold turkey on stimulation – to cut ourselves off for controlled periods to experience 'extraordinary, radical boredom'. On a sunny afternoon, when everyone is outside, one would do best to hang about the train station,' he wrote. And as a quick fix, 'stay at home, draw the curtains and surrender oneself to one's boredom on the sofa'.

B Kracauer believed that actively pursuing boredom in this way and making it a priority was a valuable way of unlocking creative ideas and, better still, achieve 'a kind of bliss that is almost unearthly'. It's a beautiful theory and one that would definitely hold an appeal for many people. Plus, modern research suggests that it might actually have a sound psychological basis. To test the potential positives of boredom, psychologist Dr Sandi Mann asked a group of 40 people to complete a task designed to showcase their inventiveness. But before they got started on it, a subgroup was asked to perform a suitably boring task – copying numbers from the telephone directory for 15 minutes. The data pointed to the group that had previously experienced boredom displaying more creative flair during the task than the control group. According to psychologists this is normal, because when people become bored and start to daydream, their minds come up with different processes and they work out more imaginative solutions to problems.

C This would suggest perhaps, that by over-stimulating our minds, we're not just making ourselves more stressed, we're also missing out on a chance to unhook our thoughts from the daily grind and think more creatively. Psychologists also point out that despite its bad reputation, boredom has a definite evolutionary purpose. Mann says 'Without it, we'd be like toddlers in a perpetual state of amazement. Just imagine it: "Wow – look at that fantastic cereal at the bottom of my bowl!" It may be very stimulating, but we'd never get anything done.' Personally, I think that's a neat description of most adults who are addicted to social media and smart phones. We are like attention-seeking toddlers scurrying around the internet screaming 'Look at this! Look at them! Look at me!' while the real world beyond our electronic devices continues on untroubled and unexamined. Meanwhile, as Mann points out, we're teaching our actual toddlers that boredom and lack of stimulation is something to be feared rather than embraced.

D Professor John Eastwood and his colleagues at York University in Canada have been carrying out research on boredom for a number of years. In one investigation, undergraduate students were asked to complete questionnaires to determine their predisposition to boredom. The students were also questioned about their emotions. The students who said they suffered from higher levels of boredom also tended to be more externally focused and reported difficulty identifying their feelings. Eastwood and his colleagues explained this reveals that our natural tendency to look for distraction when we're bored is, in fact, an improper solution. According to the researchers, boredom should be viewed as an opportunity to 'discover the possibility and content of one's desires'.

E So how do you learn to tactically embrace periods of radical boredom? The first step is realising that it's different from simply taking time to ponder your day. 'Using boredom positively is about creating new opportunities when your mind isn't occupied and you can't focus on anything else,' says Mann. This could be as simple as staring out the window or watching the rain come down. Or heading off for a solitary walk with no fixed destination in mind, or your smart phone in your pocket. Anything that gives your mind the rare chance to drift off its moorings. 'I can really recommend it,' says Mann. 'It's a very positive experience – like taking a holiday from your brain.' I'm definitely sold. I'm trying to keep my phone turned off during the weekends and allow myself to relax on the sofa during the week, time permitting. And the best thing: it works. After taking a break and allowing my mind to roam, it returns refreshed and revitalised, with a fresh take on the challenges that I face during the day. When my daughter gets to an age when she's ready to whine 'I'm bored', I'll know exactly what to say.

LIVEWORKSHEETS