

FEELING BORED

and why it isn't necessarily a bad thing

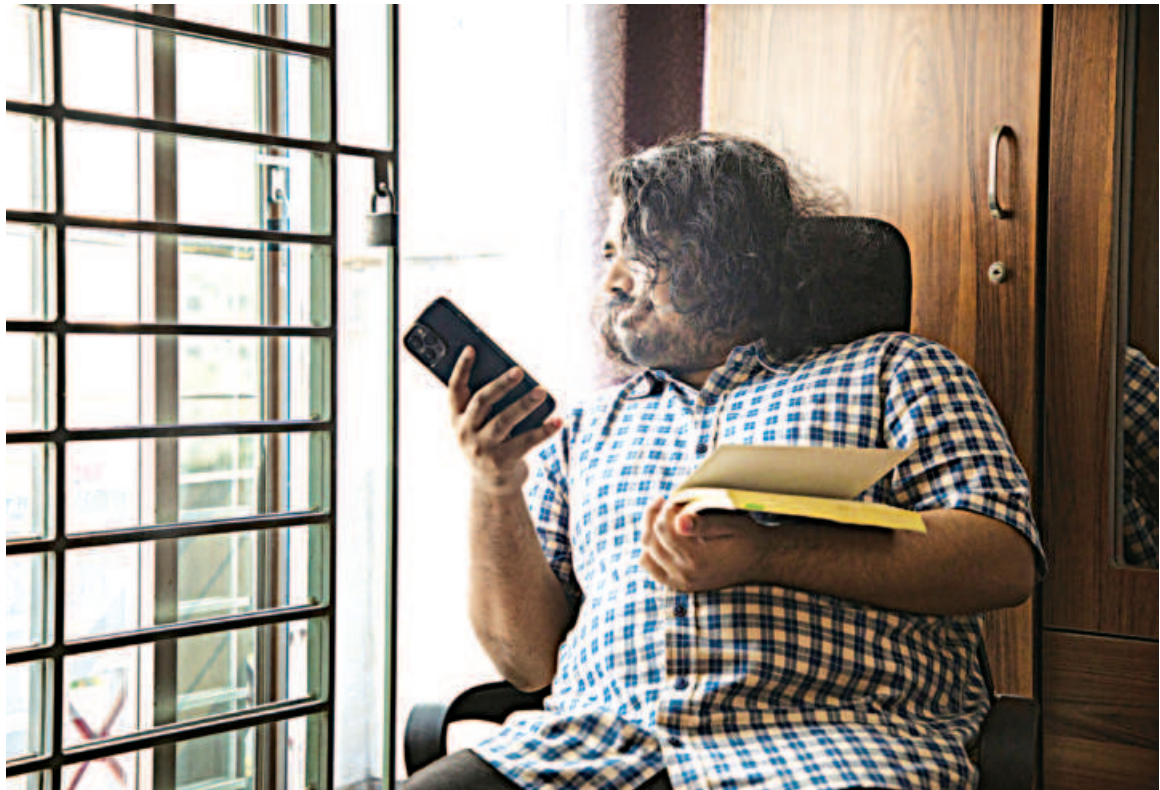


PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

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When was the last time you felt bored? Chances are, not that long ago. We're all bored sometimes, be it in class, meetings, or social events. And what's the universal sign of a bored person at present? They're scrolling through social media, looking for something to distract themselves from the discomfort of being bored.

"Discomfort" doesn't quite capture the visceral pain we feel when we're bored. In an experiment conducted at the University of Virginia in 2014, participants were asked to sit alone in a room for fifteen minutes doing absolutely nothing. They were also given a button that, if pressed, would zap them with an electric shock. 67 percent of men and 25 percent of women chose to shock themselves rather than sit

quietly. One guy disliked being bored so much that he zapped himself 190 times (or maybe he liked being shocked?).

We, as a society, have long understood the cruelty of boredom and have weaponised it accordingly. From parents giving their kids a "time out" to detention at school, boredom has been used and framed as punishment. But biologically, what's the point of this painful emotion?

As kids, we learn that when something hurts, we should probably avoid it. Pain is a mental failsafe. So, what is this unsettling feeling of boredom trying to tell us?

Tolstoy once described boredom as "the desire for desires", which perfectly encapsulates the experience. I feel the need to do something, but lack the conviction to do anything. Biologically speaking, it's my body's way of saying, "This thing you're doing is unsatisfactory; it isn't stimulating or fulfilling enough. Maybe you need to re-evaluate the situation you're in." After a short evaluation, most of us conclude that we're not productive enough. Yet compared to our ancestors, we are.

A multicohort study of 400 US schools found that feelings of boredom increased by 1.14 percent each year from 2008 to 2017. Another meta-analysis of 64 studies in China found that among college students, chronic boredom jumped from 50 percent in 2009 to 94 percent in 2020. And these weren't studies about classroom boredom. Participants expressed a broader feeling of exasperation and a lack of meaning or purpose in life itself.

There isn't one neat explanation for

why we feel more bored. But the easy answer is that there's simply too much to do.

I remember when we first got broadband internet at home in 2016. Finally, I could watch everything I loved on YouTube. I told myself, "Sure, it's social media, but I'll learn stuff too." And there is truth in that. There are incredible creators producing quality content, and social media has democratised access to knowledge.

But platforms are businesses, and businesses aim to maximise profit. The algorithm shows me video after video it thinks I will like, pleading with me to stay a little longer. I still feel like I am learning something, so I keep watching while eating, in the shower, even while falling asleep. But eventually, the facts start to blur into white noise. I am half-listening, half-scrolling, far from truly learning anything.

A study in *Communications Psychology* sums it up: digital media contributed to the increase in boredom through dividing attention, elevating desired levels of engagement, reducing sense of meaning, and serving as an ineffective boredom coping strategy.

Endless, incoherent consumption of content, even good content, erodes meaning. Watching what the algorithm suggests instead of what we truly want lulls the mind into autopilot.

At this point, we crave stimulation, not substance. Because of this, silence, even for a little while, starts to feel unbearable.

The pings of your notification bar aren't there to make you feel more connected; they're there to keep

you hooked. Their advertised aim to simulate the social experience is a spectacular lie, because people don't interact this way in real life. In an attempt to simulate a connection, we have mechanised it. And somewhere between the pings and the scrolls, the quiet conversations where meaning used to be cultivated have vanished.

Thus comes the need to be more mindful of the content we consume and remain vigilant, whether we are actually enjoying it or just scrolling mindlessly. We should catch up with friends more because a group chat can never really replace a hangout. We should value deep dives and embrace the messy feeling that comes with them. It may not be as polished as a lecture on YouTube, but it will leave you more satisfied.

Journaling, sports, meditation, craft projects—these and so much more can be tangible things to pursue alongside mindful content. The next time you feel bored, don't reach for your phone; maybe sit with that uncomfortable feeling for a while. Because when I did so, it helped me understand a very simple truth: we as human beings crave intimate connections and creative outlets. And endeavours to achieve these things in real life, albeit messy and non-linear, leave you filled with far more meaning and purpose, something even the best of digital content can only hope to imitate.

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Two of your friends have started dating, now what?

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You know that moment when two friends from the group start acting a little too friendly? It's when they start sharing inside jokes that the rest of the group aren't in on, sit suspiciously close together, and laugh at each other's not-so-funny jokes. The rest of the group sees it coming before the two friends involved even admit to it. And when they finally do — the group collectively experience catharsis. After all, everyone else, except the couple, knew.

It's cute, at first. You feel like you're a part of the history. There is a new kind of energy in the group. Everyone's a little cheerful, the jokes become funnier, and everything seems to be falling into place. Suddenly, you find yourself rooting for them. There's a comfort in knowing that love found its way into your circle. Watching them hold hands, plan surprises for each other, or quietly take care of one another is genuinely heartwarming.

There is, however, always a delicate balance you must follow. As a friend, it is your responsibility to make sure that the jokes don't go too far. And when they fight, you pretend to not know what's going on, so you don't have to choose one over another.

Overtime, hanging out starts feeling a little different. You find yourself third wheeling more often than you'd like. Then comes picking up phone calls late at night because they've had a massive fight, which later devolves into you being appointed the unofficial peacekeeper. You get calls from both sides and hear entirely different stories of the same argument. You simply nod, sympathise, and maybe try to be diplomatic so that both

parties can stay calm. But secretly, you wish to go back to the life where the biggest drama involved canceling trips.

But along with the fights, comes a fear: What if they break up? What will happen to us?

It probably sounds a little selfish but we have all thought about it. And when it happens, it's awkward, painfully awkward. The group chat goes silent for days. You start having separate meetups without even realising it. The balance is gone, and everything feels off for a while.

Over time, things start to settle. Time does its thing. We grow up, become more mature. Maybe they start talking again, or they don't. The group finds a new rhythm. It's definitely not the same as it was before but it still remains something to cherish. Even after the chaos unravels in the group, there's something kind of sweet about it. You get to see the friendship and love evolve, where both learn to navigate the awkward tension and eventually continue to remain friends (if they do).

I still think about those moments — the inside jokes, the heated arguments, and the awkward silence after the breakup. But now I realise, it's all part of the story that we will laugh about years later.

"Remember when they dated?"

We might pretend that we weren't mildly traumatised. On the off chance that they do end up together, the friend will get to experience something of a fairy tale. No one knows what the odds are, but it is a gamble worth taking.

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The weight of toxic positivity



ILLUSTRATION: AZRA HUMAYRA

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You can make as many plans as you want in life, but life might have different ones in store for you. And when that happens, what we need is our parents, family, and friends to be there for us, to help us navigate all the lows and highs we experience along the way.

And it's during one of these lows you might have been told to "stay positive". It's often said with warmth, sometimes even urgency, like a life raft tossed to someone who's clearly sinking. You might be struggling with a difficult semester, recovering from heartbreak, or simply feeling exhausted by the weight of everyday life, and someone says it: "At least you have..." This familiar phrase is often said without much thought behind it.

Yet instead of comfort, what you feel is pressure. Instead of understanding, you're met with a polite kind of dismissal, an invisible suggestion that your feelings are too much to be heard fully. It wraps itself in warmth but leaves little room for honesty.

And most of the time, it's not meant to hurt. It comes from people who care, who want to see us smile again. Our support systems offer what they can, which is often just a well-worn phrase. "Don't worry, things will get better"; "Think positive thoughts"; "Everything happens for a reason"; and so on. They're trying to help.

Sometimes, what we really need is someone to just be there, listen and maybe even tell us how bad it is.

Part of the reason this mindset is omnipresent is because of the self-help culture. Entire sections of bookshops and TikTok are dedicated to reframing your thoughts, visualising success, and practising gratitude. There's nothing wrong with optimism; it can give us strength and perspective — but the problem comes when positivity is treated like a cure-all. If you're unhappy, the message seems to be that you're not "positive enough". So now

not only are you hurting, but you're also guilty for hurting. Self-help turns into self-blame.

Our generation is caught between two extremes. On one side, we've inherited deep cultural values of resilience and stoicism. On the other hand, we live in a hyperconnected world where positivity is constantly packaged, sold, and reposted. Your feed might be filled with motivational quotes, productivity hacks, and reels of people seemingly thriving. And when you're not thriving, it feels like not feeling okay is a flaw that needs to be corrected.

This creates a strange inner conflict. You're sad, but you feel guilty about it. You're burnt out, but you remind yourself that others have it worse. You want to talk but worry that you'll

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come across as dramatic. So, you stay quiet. You nod when someone tells you to "look on the bright side", even if all you really want is an ear to listen or sympathise with you.

The problem with this kind of relentless positivity is that it leaves no space for the bittersweet complexity of human emotion. It reduces everything into digestible advice — be grateful, be strong, be happy. But life isn't always neat. Grief doesn't follow a schedule. Anxiety doesn't disappear with a positive mindset. And pretending to be okay isn't the same as healing.

Experiencing difficult emotions is a part of

being human. Sadness slows us down, forces reflection. Anger can point us toward injustice. Loneliness makes us crave connection. When we suppress these feelings in the name of "positivity", we don't erase them — we bury them. And buried emotions don't disappear; they quietly shape how we see ourselves and others. Over time, we may start believing that struggling is something to be ashamed of.

Another strange conundrum is the typical phrases that are supposed to provide comfort but really do the opposite. "Everything happens for a reason" might be true, but it's also the wrong thing to say to someone grieving, because no reason at that time is good enough to lose a person you love. Comparing others' struggles invalidates theirs; sure, their struggle might be small comparatively, but for them, it's hard. If you think about it, you might realise you have been conditioned to say these words automatically to your loved ones because they're the only ones that come to mind.

Maybe it's possible to redefine what it means to be "positive". Instead of forcing ourselves to be cheerful all the time, we can practise honesty. We can allow ourselves to feel deeply without apology. We can make space for real conversations if they want to talk or simply be present.

Real support doesn't always sound like a pep talk. Sometimes it's saying, "That sounds really hard," and meaning it. There's something powerful in being seen fully in joy and in pain. That's the true connection. It's not that optimism is bad. Hope matters. Gratitude matters. But so does truth. So does complexity. There will be days that feel heavy, and that doesn't make you broken. It is simply life, and we all must live.

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