

THE MENTAL MUSINGS

The Psychological Research Newsletter

“New year, new me!” but I’m still engaging in the same old work routine. We all have moments of boredom at work, whether it be because of lull periods with fewer traffic of travellers, repetition of a necessary task we don’t find stimulating, or even long turnover time between that initial email to stakeholders who take a long time to reply. In this month’s issue, we explore boredom and how we can keep vigilant in spite of it. Follow along to find out more!

WHAT IS BOREDOM?

Boredom - we have all experienced it at some point of our lives. Be it being stuck alone in a terrible traffic jam, in school in a class you hate, or being left in a place that seems to have absolutely nothing to do.

Despite all of us having thought or remarked “I’m bored!” at least once in our lives, many definitions appear to exist for the word. To better understand boredom, let’s explore some of its core attributes!

BOREDOM AS...

Feeling

Subjective, psychological state that passes after some time.

“I feel bored”

Aversion

Things that are perceived in a negative manner.

“This is so boring; I don’t like it”

Attention Disengagement

Withdrawing focus from the activity.

“I’m bored, I don’t care anymore”

Listlessness and Restlessness

Wanting to be stimulated and thus wanting to leave the current unstimulating activity.

“I’m so bored, I want something more”

Meaninglessness

Personally perceived lack of purpose in activity.

“This is boring, there’s no point in it”

Liminality, Transitionality

The idea of being stuck in an in-between.

“I’m bored, I can’t wait to start my next big thing”

Put together, boredom happens when someone finds no meaning in the things they dislike but are stuck with. This results in them wanting to change or leave the situation.

Let’s take Officer Ra for example. She loves her job. Assessing people crossing the border keeps her country safe and gives her purpose. When lull periods come in, she may feel her attention starting to fade. In this moment, she’s feeling disinterested in just standing on guard. Her mind wanders and she hopes for something interesting to do or think about.



BOREDOM AT WORK

Boredom is not necessarily a bad thing. It can highlight our personal preferences, our values, and even motivate us to change our behaviour. However, boredom in the workplace can make way for some serious consequences, especially when our attention is lost. As we've just learnt, boredom results in reduced engagement and attention. When attention is reduced, this can affect how alert we are, increasing errors and mistakes.

Signal Detection Theory

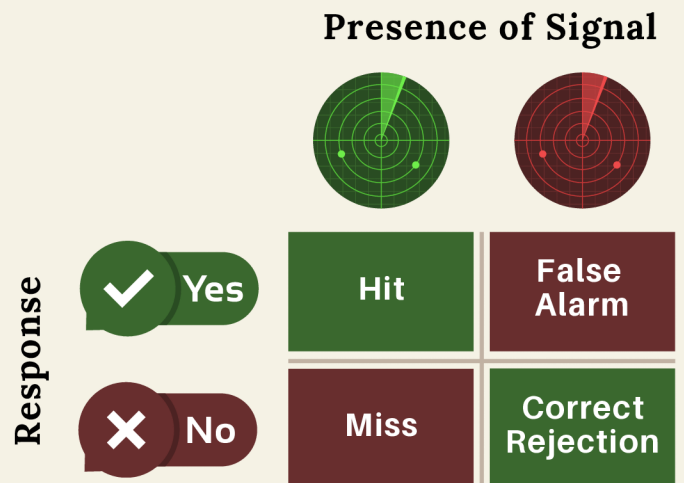
Tells us that decisions are controlled by:

- 1 One's sensitivity /ability to detect a signal
- 2 One's bias regarding the costs *and* benefits of making one choice over another

Let's look at signal detection theory in the context of the work of our ground officers:

For many of our ground officers, their work revolves around detecting threats such as smuggling of prohibited items, fake travel documents, and undesirable persons. With every person or item that they assess, they have to decide if it poses a threat. When this happens, there are four possible outcomes.

What signal detection theory tells us is how important attention is in the work that we do. For our ground officers, we should avoid a "Miss" - to let a present threat pass us by without appropriately identifying it. On the other hand, "False Alarm", while an incorrect decision, does not result in as serious a consequence in our line of work. This further emphasises the importance of attention in the things that we do!



Hit: threat is present and identified. When attention to the task is high, it is more likely for a correct decision to be made.

Miss: threat is present but was not identified. When attention is low, individuals are more likely to be distracted and thus miss threats. This can result in negative consequences.

False Alarm: threat is not present but was identified. Over attending, or hypervigilance, can lead to false alarms as individuals misinterpret stimuli as a signal.

Correct Rejection: threat is not present and was not identified. Here, attention is allocated appropriately and effectively.

LEARNING POINT!



Whether you're a ground officer or in a staff division, think of how boredom can affect your attention and thus your work.

Applying signal detection theory, what kind of situations may result in a 'Hit' or a 'Miss'? What situations must you absolutely avoid?

REDUCING BOREDOM, INCREASING VIGILANCE

Now that we've explored the negative consequences of boredom at work, how do we prevent these potential consequences from becoming our reality? Is there a way that we can reduce our boredom and increase our vigilance at work? Let's continue to explore!

THINGS THE INDIVIDUAL CAN DO

Goal Oriented Engagements

Reframing a fixed task as an opportunity to learn or skill build is one effective way to remain vigilant. Through the setting of specific goals (e.g., to do tasks more accurately, or with greater efficiency), the repetitive task is reframed into a challenge that can increase focus.

Cognitive Checkpoints

Our attention fluctuates throughout the day. A typical attention cycle, inclusive of warm up, peak, and tapering, lasts 90 to 120 minutes. To ensure that we stay focused, set cognitive checkpoints throughout your day to assess your attention. Has it drifted? Or are you being alert?

"Every day it's the same tasks over and over again... I'm struggling to see the meaning in all of this."

"When I work the night shift, I tend to start feeling bored and daydream a little after 2 hours of work..."

"The workday just feels like a never-ending task that I need to accomplish."



"I didn't sleep well last night, I feel so sluggish and bored. I just want to take a nap."

"I'm bored of being in this space, everything feels dull."

Task Chunking

Chunking, or grouping your tasks together, can help to increase task variety within your work. This contributes to maintaining interest and attention, as it feels as though something new is about to take place, reducing the monotony of repetitive tasks.

Take Time to Move

Taking the time for a stretch break or to move around the things in your surroundings can help to increase your alertness due to the increase in blood flow to your brain induced through moving around.

Maintain Good Health

Attention is a finite resource. When our mind and bodies are in good health, we have increased energy, motivation, and cognitive functioning. This improves our resilience to negative emotions (boredom included) and helps us to remain alert at our task.

THINGS THE ORGANISATION CAN DO

Assess Performance “Sweet Spot”

When studying performance, it was found that a *moderate amount* of arousal or stress related to the highest level of performance. What this means is that there is a ‘sweet spot’ of the amount of stress engaged in that results in good performance. By *assessing individuals’ stress levels and task demands*, organizations can identify when employees are in this optimal zone. Tailoring workloads and offering support can help employees maintain their engagement and focus, ensuring they stay within this “sweet spot” for sustained productivity and well-being.

Regular, Unpredictable Checks

At some airports, the **Intended Error Method** is used where foreign or forbidden objects are placed in a bag to see if the item is identified. While officers are informed that this would be happening, they do not know when and with what frequency these exercises would occur. This in turn helps to increase vigilance especially for rare case events.



Boredom can strike at any time and with anyone. However, we must remember that even in tasks that may appear boring, meaning can be found and we have the ability to take charge of our situation. If you’ve often been feeling bored at work, take some time to reflect and identify the source of your boredom. From there, try applying the solutions above to your situation and see if it helps! Let’s stay vigilant as we work together!

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