

The Surprisingly Serious Impact of Boredom

We have hundred-channel cable TV, the Internet, mega-screen movie theaters, 24/7 news channels. Who would imagine that boredom would be a pervasive condition that threatens the health and well-being of a large portion of the population?

Yet boredom has been linked to everything from heart attacks to drug abuse. It's a serious—and often unnoticed—form of stress that can also lead to depression. And surveys show that many people ease their boredom with over-eating, drinking, and infidelity.

But boredom isn't always easy to detect because, as studies have discovered, it's less a *feeling* than an *absence of feeling*. When you're bored you may sense that there's "something wrong," but you can't put your finger on it. There may be a predictable sameness to every day and a feeling that there's nothing to look forward to.

The good news is that boredom is remarkably easy—even fun—to cure. If you're stuck in a rut, try some of these yawn chasers.

Start your day on a different track.

Get up an hour earlier and use the time to take a walk, or go to the Y for an early-morning swim. Take a different route to work, go for scenic instead of speed.

Trade chores with your spouse or family members.

She mows the lawn while he does the grocery shopping. She vacuums the car; he vacuums the house.

Play hooky. Leave work early and take in an afternoon movie. Or go for a bike ride. Meet your partner at some out of the way place for a romantic interlude.

Turn off the television. In fact, pull the plug. Spend television-watching

time taking classes, or singing in a chorus. Audition for a play or read your poetry at an open mike.

Play. Play. Play. Break out the old board games, or challenge the neighborhood to a volleyball match in the park. Play hide-and-seek with the kids. Have a slumber party with your girlfriends.

Try a new food. Cook it yourself or go to a new restaurant. Taste-test some curry or barbecued tofu. Light the candles. Pack a picnic. Brown bag your lunch and eat in the park. Use the good china for breakfast.

Redecorate. Try painting one wall burnished gold or tangerine. Shop at flea markets and buy that Japanese screen you want; put it in the bathroom. Rearrange your furniture.

Do what you've never done. Go to the opera, a drumming ceremony, a blue-grass festival, a blues bar, a farmer's market, a walking tour of historic buildings.

Take a hint from Julia Cameron, author of *The Artist's Way* and go on an "artist's date" every week, by yourself.

Surprise yourself. Open the "events page" of your local newspaper, close your eyes and point. Whatever your finger lands on is your outing for the day or evening.

Next time you feel a yawn coming on, grab a piece of paper and start your own list of boredom busters. Warning: Once you start, it may be habit-forming.

However, if boredom is a painful and constant companion that you've been experiencing for several weeks or more, you may be suffering from depression and may need to seek professional help. ✧

10 Ways to Deal with Difficulty

We've all experienced difficult times—often through events and circumstances that are outside our control. Here are 10 suggestions for dealing with adversity.

1. Take responsibility. Assume an "I can do something" attitude rather than pointing fingers. If nothing else, you can control your own response to the situation.

2. Limit the focus. Don't let the problem become all-encompassing. Focus on a specific solution.

3. Be optimistic. Believing in life as positive, even with hard times and troubles, results in positive behaviors and positive actions.

4. Think creatively. Approach the problem from new and different directions. Trust your creativity.

5. Have courage. Being courageous doesn't mean you're not afraid. It means you don't let fear stop you from doing what you need to do.

6. Take action. Rather than rolling over in the midst of tough times, determine what day-to-day actions you can take and do them.

7. Take the long-range view. Remember that "this too shall pass." Recount other times when you have overcome challenges.

8. Maintain a sense of humor. Even in the darkest times, laughter can help ease the pain.

9. Get support. No need to do it alone. Ask for help.

10. Don't quit. Among all the human qualities that allow us to overcome adversity, persistence may be the greatest. ✧

A Letter From *Margaret Hood Black*



This newsletter issue begins by taking a look at an unexpected source of stress: boredom. It's surprising how much this state of mind can affect our well-being. Suggestions for getting out of a rut are included, but it might be a lot more fun to come up with your own ideas.

On the other end of the spectrum from boredom, but equally as stressful (if not more so), is overwhelm, a seemingly chronic experience these days. Our page 3 feature on overwhelm helps us understand the connection between drowning in "to-dos" and the loss of meaning in our lives.

This issue's quiz helps shed some light on how present (or not) we are being in our day-to-day life. When we tend to detach from the here and now, living in the future or past, we're often not even aware of doing that.

The Top 10 feature offers tips on dealing with adversity. And the back-page article examines the impact of broken agreements on relationships.

As always, the content of this newsletter is intended to provide food for thought along with some tools to help you build your sense of personal empowerment.

Please don't hesitate to call if you'd like more information about any of these articles, or if you have any questions.

Do You Live in the Here and Now or...?

The way to live a full and rich life, to deepen our connections with others and experience true intimacy is by staying in the present moment. Yet much of what we do takes us out of the present and into some unknown future or drags us back into the mire of the past. Other times, we simply "space out," disconnect from where we are, who we're with, and what we're doing.

Take the following quiz to discover how much, and in what ways you detach from the present moment.



True False

- 1. I have a tendency to live in the future, projecting into tomorrow, or next week or even years from now.
- 2. I spend much of my time thinking about the past, replaying conversations or reliving incidents, or I play "what if" in my mind.
- 3. Sometimes when I'm in conversation with someone, I can't remember what was just said.
- 4. When eating a meal, my family often watches TV or reads.
- 5. In talking with someone, I think of how I'm going to respond rather than listening to what the other person is saying.
- 6. I tend to worry.
- 7. I try to figure out how things will work out or what someone else will do.
- 8. I often/frequently hope for something better or different.
- 9. I often/frequently dread something worse will happen.
- 10. I find myself always busy, with never a spare moment.
- 11. When I am feeling uncomfortable in a situation, I change the subject or get something to eat/drink/do.
- 12. I find it difficult to maintain eye contact when I'm talking with someone.
- 13. Sometimes I can't remember what I just read or I don't know what just took place in the movie or video I'm watching.
- 14. I take my cell phone everywhere and it's always on.
- 15. My conversations with others tend to be about superficial subjects.
- 16. Rather than staying with my emotions and naming them ("I am feeling ..."), I attempt to alter the feelings.
- 17. In my family or with my partner, we watch TV programs that we don't really care about rather than interact with each other.

Many of us may feel a push-pull when it comes to intimacy. We want to be closer to others, but the vulnerability that it demands is too frightening. Or we may feel restless or distracted or just plain uncomfortable when we attempt to stay in the present. If you have any questions or you'd like to talk about your response to this quiz, please don't hesitate to call. ✱

Overwhelmed? Time to Recognize, Realign & Reconnect

To anyone who's experienced overwhelm—and that's plenty of us—the synonyms for overwhelm may be all too familiar: overpower, subdue, oppress, quash, engulf, swallow, submerge, bury, suffocate.

Whether the overwhelm is sudden or cumulative, chronic or acute, the feeling is one of drowning, immobility and powerlessness.

During those times, everything feels too big. It's not just everyday busyness and packed schedules. When we're overwhelmed, making dinner becomes a monumental effort. Better eat out. Bills, housework? Forget it. Tasks that used to take only 10 or 15 minutes now seem utterly impossible. There seems to be no time for anything. So we do nothing.

Worse, we have no faith that this, too, shall pass. We seem hopelessly mired in the quicksand of "too much." We keep trying to will our way out of the quicksand with a will that just wants to lie down.

Overwhelm and Achievement

We live in a very overwhelming time—much more so than in decades past. Things seem to have sped up. Technology's well-touted time saving seems to have yielded less leisure time, not more. Companies are demanding longer work hours. Many adults are sandwiched between the needs of older and younger generations.

And then there's the Internet, social media, overloaded email inboxes—all the conveniences and opportunities of the "Information Age." It can all feel, well, overwhelming.

It seems like our lives are in such a state of "fast forward" that we don't even recognize we might need help until we feel like we're drowning.

Part of the problem is the cultural belief system in place, one that overrates doing and achievement and underrates quality of experience and connection with values.

In that cultural mindset, it's not uncommon for a friend or a magazine article, with all good intention, to suggest the "Nike solution": Just do it.



Make priorities. Choose three things and accomplish them quickly. Go through the mail as soon as it arrives. Do a "brain dump" and create a huge to-do list with everything that you can think of on it. Now get started!

Not bad suggestions necessarily, but this kind of "doing-ness" often just exacerbates the overwhelm.

Align with What's Meaningful

Rather than measure accomplishment, we need to connect with what has meaning for us, with what feeds and enlivens us. Feeling connected then connects us to the natural fuel for getting things done.

When we come into alignment with our values and needs, we find the inner resources and spaciousness needed to get on with life.

Recognize Your Triggers

First, however, we need to identify our individual symptoms and triggers for overwhelm. Our symptoms can be physical (e.g., nail biting, clumsiness, neck ache); psychological (forgetful, rude, defensive); social (poor hygiene, inadequate boundaries); or spiritual (loss of sense of purpose, unsure of what's important).

Triggers are just as individual: a deadline, a certain tone of voice, change.



Noticing these symptoms and triggers is like setting off the two-minute warning buzzer: time for intervention techniques. And after we've come back to ourselves, it's time for prevention techniques, such as adequate rest, nutrition, exercise and, as always, connection to purpose.

The focus that matters is in your heart. Connect with yourself and then *that* self can do the tasks *and* live a life of meaning and fulfillment. *

Broken Agreements, Broken Relationships

Canceling dates at the last minute. "Forgetting" to do something we said we'd do. Spilling a secret. Going back on a promise.

They're all broken agreements, and broken relationships are filled with them because they cause an erosion of trust, the basic foundation of any relationship.

Giving our word, standing by it, and being steadfast and reliable in our affairs are measures by which we judge commitment and integrity. For this reason, agreements—both spoken and implied—should be given thoughtful and careful attention.

Consider Marshall. Again and again he promised to come home early enough to share dinner with his family. And night after night, he called to say he couldn't make dinner after all, or he simply didn't show until long after the meal was ruined and the family disappointed.

Or Deirdre. She and her husband had an agreement that she wouldn't make any additional charges on their

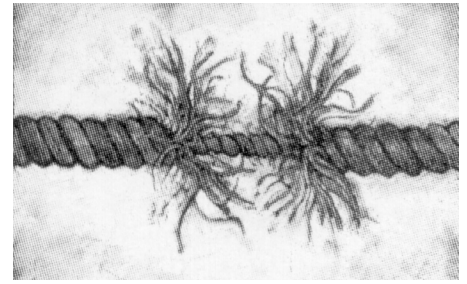
over-burdened credit cards. But every month, the bills arrived, fat with new charges, higher-than-ever balances and a rash of reasons.

Or Margaret. In confidence, Sophia had told her about a problem. What an awkward surprise when a mutual friend asked Sophia how she was coping with her difficulty.

In each of these instances, an agreement was broken and a trust betrayed. Everyone involved was tarnished by the experience—those to whom agreements were made and those who gave (and broke) their word.

Making and keeping agreements asks that we are honest and that we intend to carry through. Thoughtful and careful agreements require that we listen to our inner voices and pay attention to our bodies for clues to our feelings.

Whenever we make an agreement we need to ask ourselves, *Is this a pledge that I really want to make? Is it realistic for me at this time? What will*



take or what will I have to do to keep the agreement?

Sometimes, no matter how careful we are, we make an agreement we regret. Our schedules are dangerously over-booked or something that sounded good at first, in retrospect, doesn't feel right. Better to call up and make changes as soon as possible.

The art of thoughtful and careful agreement-making is a learned skill. Broken promises and unfulfilled commitments may be as ubiquitous as the shards of ceramic that surround an apprentice potter. Still, we turn back to the wheel of our intentions, and begin again. Making and keeping agreements is a way of maintaining balance and showing our love and respect for others as well as for ourselves. *

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Margaret is a Licensed Professional Counselor and psychotherapist. Margaret provides couple, individual and group therapy. In addition to working with adolescents and young adults, Margaret has a special interest in marriages, families and women's issues. Margaret has two offices conveniently located at: 1960 & SH 249 (NW Houston) and in Bellaire (Galleria Area).
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