The five types of boredom at work

By Sophie Deutsch

8 October, 2021

It’s time we thought about boredom at work in a more nuanced way. Knowing the five different types can help to create a more engaged workforce.

When it comes to studying emotional states, feelings such as happiness, joy, anger and sadness tend to take the spotlight.

The signs of each of them are usually fairly obvious, so we can identify them with relative ease.

But where does that leave a more understated emotion like boredom?

According to Dr Thomas Goetz of the University of Konstanz and the Thurgau University of Teacher Education, boredom rarely gets the attention it deserves because it manifests in more subtle ways.

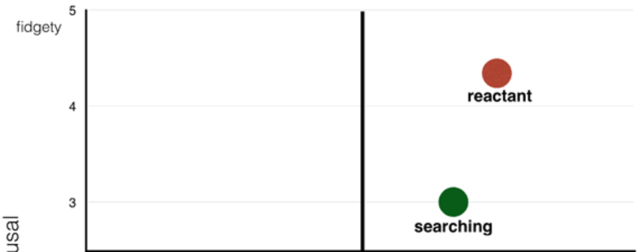
Boredom is inconspicuous and quiet, and doesn’t display as yelling fits or beaming grins, Goetz told *LiveScience.*

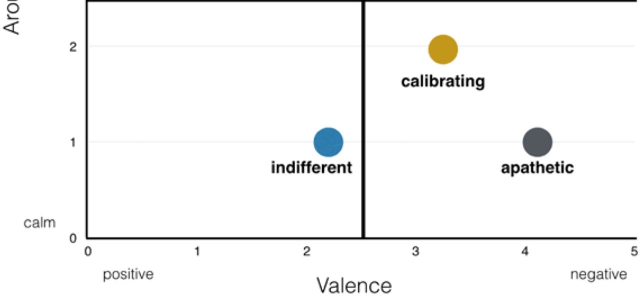
The notion of there being different types of boredom was first raised by psychologists in the 1930s. But in keeping with boredom’s more subtle state, the topic largely flew under the radar until relatively recently.

In 2006, Goetz and Professor Anne Frenzel of the University of Munich conducted an in-depth study in which they asked people to recall recent experiences of boredom.

Discovering that participants categorised boredom in specific and distinct ways, they identified four subtypes: indifferent, calibrating, searching and reactant boredom. These labels differ according to the levels of arousal (calm and idle to fidgety and restless) and the positive or negative emotional state felt in conjunction with boredom.

In 2013, Goetz and his colleagues added a fifth type: apathetic boredom.





Source: Goetz et al's five types of boredom, according to level of arousal and emotional state.

Tammy Tansley, Leadership and Workplace Culture Expert, sheds light on how boredom at work might manifest, and ways that HR can address the different types before it starts causing issues in your workplace, such as boreout.

1. Indifferent boredom

If you're feeling detached from your surroundings but not particularly phased by the experience (i.e. in a low state of arousal but feeling relatively positive), you might be in a state of indifferent boredom.

Withdrawn but relaxed is the prevailing state of mind for people who are experiencing indifferent boredom. There's little motivation to shake the bored feeling. That's probably because indifferent boredom can be a positive experience. Who doesn't like feeling relaxed and experiencing 'cheerful fatigue', as Goetz described it in his research?

While it might not cause great distress for the individual, indifferent boredom has detrimental ripple effects for a workplace.

"An employee may just be 'going through the motions'. They're there but their heart isn't really in it," says Tansley.

In a customer facing role, indifferent boredom at work is likely to lead to dissatisfaction among customers.

"Think about when you've been in a shop or a cafe, and the retail assistant or waitperson is indifferent to whether you are there or not, and certainly doesn't seem to go out of their way to help you. This leaves a bit of a sour taste in the mouth of the consumer," says Tansley.

"It is also an issue where an organisation needs the employee to 'lift' because of organisational pressures and the employee just doesn't do their part."

This can have flow-on effects to the rest of the team, who need to help pick up the slack caused by the employee's underperformance. It could also lower morale, breed distrust and deplete a team's energy.

2. Calibrating boredom

Feeling uninterested, but unsure how to break out of the boredom cycle?

You might be in the thick of calibrating boredom.

This isn't a pleasant sensation – calibrating boredom tends to be associated with more negative emotions compared to indifferent boredom, but it's not so uncomfortable that you feel motivated to actively search for a more stimulating experience.

A person's thoughts may wander, and they might desire a way out of their boredom at work, but their motivation isn't strong enough to do anything proactive about it.

From a workplace perspective, this type of boredom can be harnessed as fuel for creativity.

"Calibrating boredom, when combined with the conditions for creativity, can absolutely generate creative processes and thoughts," says Tansley.

"A number of organisations have structured their working environments to allow for a day every so often specifically set aside for thought wandering and project generation."

She points to Atlassian as an example of a forward-thinking company that grants employees time for their minds to wander freely, with the aim of surfacing more creative ideas.

"There might also be exercises built into longer meetings where employees are encouraged to capture their wandering thoughts as part of the meeting," says Tansley. "So it's encouraged as a source of creativity and ideation rather than frowned upon."

3. **Searching boredom**

This type of boredom is associated with more negative emotions than the calibrating or indifferent types, but it's also more action-oriented.

As people grapple with feelings of boredom, they channel that restlessness into motivation, and often seek out ways to alleviate their boredom.

Someone in this category might pursue an opportunity to upskill, dream up an idea for a new project, or devise an innovative solution to resolve a pressing business problem.

"COVID has really brought this one home," says Tansley. "Employees are looking for more than just a paycheck, and savvy organisations are looking for how they can enable that sense of purpose and make the relationship less transactional and more relational.

"Development, good culture, leadership, having a clear vision and strategy are all things that are going to make a difference in this space."

Helping employees to create the role that gives them meaning and satisfaction through the process of job crafting is an often utilised as a way of retaining top talent.

4. **Reactant boredom**

If you're quick to snap at others or become increasingly frustrated with the task at hand, you might be experiencing reactant boredom at work.

People in this state feel motivated to escape the situation that's fuelling their boredom, as well as the people or context associated with it, and seek fulfilment in an alternative task.

It comes as little surprise that Tansley believes organisations will see the impact of reactant boredom when the 'great resignation' arrives.

Recent data from Employment Hero revealed that 40 per cent of Australian employees are planning on searching for new work within the next six months, and fifteen per cent said they are already doing so.

Although pay considerations and lack of recognition were identified as primary factors driving employees to search for work elsewhere, feeling unchallenged or unstimulated by their current role is probably going to have employees heading for the door as well.

5. Apathetic boredom

Boredom that's characterised by a lack of enjoyment, helplessness and disinterest can easily slip into a prevailing mood of negativity and helplessness.

"Apathetic boredom might be a real issue given COVID lockdowns," says Tansley. "There's lots of talk about languishing – not flourishing and not quite depressed and how that can lead to depression and mental illnesses if not addressed. I see apathetic boredom in the same category."

This type of boredom should ring alarm bells for HR.

It highlights the need to check in with employees on a regular basis, especially those working remotely, and reiterate the importance and accessibility of psychological support.

"Acknowledge that many employees are in a very different mental space, particularly those who have been subjected to lockdowns for a long time," says Tansley.

Referring to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, if apathetic boredom is surfacing, Tansley says that organisations "need to go back to basics and make sure that peoples' fundamental needs are being met before adding on projects or team-based work to create belonging and community. That is, make sure people are okay first and then get to working on what makes for a purposeful, engaging workplace."

Alleviating boredom at work

When feelings of boredom go into overdrive, it might be time to put strategies in place. Here are a few ideas you could implement:

- Disperse mundane and process-oriented tasks into smaller chunks to help break up the monotony. Unstimulating day-to-day tasks should be interspersed with work that stimulates an employee or pushes them outside their comfort zone.

- Harness boredom to boost creativity. In 2013, Dr Sandi Mann and Rebekah Cadman, from the University of Central Lancashire, challenged the categorisation of boredom as an entirely negative state.

  In their research, participants who completed a dull task (sorting a bowl of beans by colour) outperformed those who engaged in an interesting task (coming up with excuses for being late that would keep the person's reputation in tact) on a creativity and ideas-generating task.

As reported in *Time*, to reap the benefits of boredom, Dr Mann suggests allowing space for the mind to wander, and disconnecting from our devices. Organisations can implement these strategies by introducing screen-free time and encouraging regular breaks.

- Keep up regular 1:1 discussions so you're in tune with how an employee is feeling, and can better understand how the organisation can meet an employee's needs, says Tansley.
- Create project-based teams of employees with diverse but complementary skill sets who haven't previously worked together. This exposure to diversity of thought will grant employees the opportunity to learn from one other and gain new perspectives they might otherwise have missed.
- Encourage employees to set goals that feel meaningful to them, rather than imposing them from above. In addition to giving employees control of their own career development, it will enable them to create goals that they find stimulating and which interest them.

These tips won't eliminate boredom at work altogether. Unless you've somehow managed to craft the perfect job that's free from all menial tasks, most of us have at least a handful of work-related jobs that are fairly repetitive and process-based.

Having to complete some dull and repetitive tasks is an inevitable part of working life for most employees. But taking the time to understand boredom at work in all its forms can help to keep boredom at bay, and maximise engagement and performance.

Your employees will perform better if they're motivated, engaged and challenged. Book in for AHRI's short course on Creating High Performance Teams on 4 November.

TAGS : boredom, boreout, job crafting

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