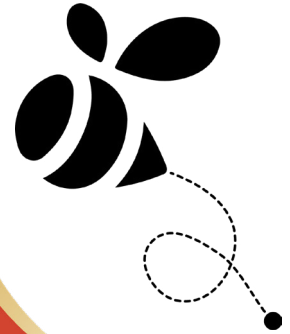


research snapshot

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Boredom and Attention: How Are They Related?

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

Boredom and the ability to pay attention and remain focused are related. For example, people don't do well on lab-based attention tasks when bored. Also, people who have a tendency to feel bored make more attention errors, such as misplacing keys or getting easily distracted. However, the precise nature of the link between boredom and attention is unclear. The first goal of this research was to determine if in-the-moment feelings of boredom actually **cause** attentional failures. The second goal was to determine why people who have a tendency to feel bored make attention-related errors. Is it because they are prone to boredom or because of other aspects of their personality like symptoms of depression and poor attention ability?

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:

The tendency to feel bored and in-the-moment feelings of boredom had different relationships with the ability to sustain attention. The tendency to feel bored may reflect a motivation or ability to sustain attention over time. In contrast, in-the-moment boredom may be the result of difficulties sustaining attention. Finally, experimental tasks used to measure attention may unintentionally invoke negative emotions and this may complicate the interpretation of results from those tasks.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

Researchers asked undergraduate students to complete questionnaires measuring the tendency to feel bored, symptoms of depression, and attention ability. Then researchers made half of the participants bored by asking them to watch a boring video clip. The other half of the participants watched an interesting video. Finally, all participants completed a sustained attention task. They were instructed to press the space bar every time a number appeared on a computer screen. However, they were told not to press the space bar when the number 3 appeared. Researchers measured participants' errors on the sustained attention task. They also measured their in-the-moment feelings of boredom before and after watching the videos and during the sustained attention task.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

People who had a greater tendency to feel bored made more errors on the sustained attention task even after ruling out the impact of depression symptoms and poor attention ability. The relationship between in-the-moment feelings of boredom and errors on the sustained attention task suggested that attention failures cause boredom. Finally, the sustained attention task itself was found to be boring.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research may explain why people who often feel bored also make risky decisions. Perhaps they are not able or motivated to pay attention to all of the relevant information needed to make good decisions. This research also suggests that the link between in-the-moment boredom and various psychosocial problems such as poor job engagement might have its roots in attention problems. That is, attention failures may cause boredom, which in turn results in poor engagement in the workplace. This research also suggests ways forward in the fight against boredom. If in-the-moment feelings of boredom are primarily a problem of attention, then boredom interventions should focus on helping people successfully sustain attention. Finally, this study found that sustained attention tasks are boring. Given the impact that emotion has on attention performance, researchers are encouraged to consider the potential impact of using measurement tools that have unintended emotional effects.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

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KEYWORDS

State boredom, Trait boredom, Attention, Cognition, Attentional failure

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