Are you bored? The benefit of boredom for the teenage brain...

Revised from Rita Hitching’s article posted on Neuroscience for Life.

Are you bored the moment you put your phone away or turn off your computer? Do you hate being bored? Does it feel like you are wasting your time when you are not ‘doing something’?

During this time of COVID and physical distancing you might have noticed increased feelings of boredom. As mentioned, these feelings can often become particularly intense in the moments right after we stop messaging a friend or shut off our screens. While not always pleasant, boredom serves an important purpose in our brains and in our lives...

Boredom is actually a precursor for brilliance. When your brain is bored the ‘default mode’ network kicks in. This network is involved in a multitude of complex tasks — such as merging and consolidating knowledge and memories or daydreaming. Time spent in this brain mode — enables you to connect previously unconnected thoughts and ideas, threading together the multitude of knowledge and experiences that you’ve had in your life. Boredom causes your brain to review your life, known as ‘autobiographical planning’ and encourages you to set goals, and devise steps to reach them.

Boredom can also help you to come up with creative solutions to problems. Studies have shown that the most creative teenagers are those that have learned to tolerate and live with some boredom. In this resting-state, connections are made between areas of the brain associated with divergent or different ways of thinking. To put it simply, when you are bored, the brain stimulates the creative part of your brain ‘*for something to do’*! Giving your mind this opportunity to ‘wander’ and not be driven by a particular brain pathway to find a solution to a problem or to respond to a stimulus, your brain gets a chance to ‘explore’— as a result you may discover or learn something about yourself or the world you had previously not considered.

In your attempt to find ‘relief’ from this uncomfortable state, boredom will encourage you to try activities that you have not tried before. You might learn a new skill! Boredom is also a way to encourage self-motivation — the brain will push you to ‘do something’ as it does not like being inactive.

Down time or boredom — is wonderful for the brain, allowing it to process and consolidate information and reinforce learning. Next time you have an assignment to do, and you aren’t sure how to get started — read over the criteria and then go and sit outside quietly for 5 minutes and just look at the trees. It will give your brain a chance to ‘create’ a plan to tackle the assignment. Remember, that Newton was allegedly sitting under a tree when an apple fell on his head and he ‘discovered’ gravity. So, next time you are feeling bored, enjoy it! Your brain will thank you for it! You’ll become smarter, more creative and you might even come up with an innovative solution to a really tricky problem!