

DIVERSION

Bored to death?

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Have you ever felt bored (Fig 1)? Ever found yourself with nothing engaging to do? Experienced a lack of interest in everything and everyone around you? Although not a pleasant state in which to find oneself, is boredom bad for health? In a rare moment of idleness one day, we pondered whether the expression 'bored to death' has any basis. Are people who are bored more likely to die earlier than those who are not?

Boredom levels were reported in the later versions of the baseline questionnaire (1985–88) of the Whitehall II cohort study. Participants were civil servants, based in London, aged 35–55 years. They were asked in a self-completed questionnaire about boredom during the past 4 weeks (response options were 'not at all', 'a little', 'quite a lot', 'all the time'). At the risk of participants becoming bored of answering this question, it was repeated at Phase 2 some 3 years later, but not since. Information on mortality was ascertained through the NHS Central Registry, by using their unique NHS identification number. Follow-up for total mortality was available up to the end of April 2009. Excluding those with prevalent cardiovascular disease (CVD) at baseline, gave a sample size of 7524 men and women.

We found that those who report quite a lot or a great deal of boredom are more likely to be younger, to be women, to rate their health worse, to be in low employment grades and to report lower physical activity levels (Table 1). We also found that those with a great deal of boredom were more likely to die during follow-up than those not bored at all (Table 2). In particular, they were more likely to die from a CVD fatal event [hazard ratio (HR) 2.53; confidence interval (CI) 1.23–5.21]. Furthermore, we found some suggestive evidence of cumulative effects in the mortality after Phase 2, as those still reporting boredom at Phase 2 had slightly higher risks than those reporting it once or never. With further adjustments for employment grade, physical activity levels and poor self-rated health, the hazard ratios for CVD for those with a great deal of boredom were reduced

**Figure 1** Ennui in the office

and did not reach statistical significance (1.96; CI 0.94–4.05).

We conclude that those who report being bored are more likely to die younger than those who are not bored. However, the state of boredom is almost certainly a proxy for other risk factors. Whilst some aspects of life may not be so easily modified (e.g. disease status or position in society), proneness to boredom, particularly in younger populations, could be indicative of harmful behaviours such as excessive drinking, smoking, taking drugs and low psychological profiles.¹ Finding renewed interest in social and physical activities may alleviate boredom and improve health, thus reducing the risk of being 'bored to death'.

Reference

- ¹ Sommers J, Vodanovich SJ. Boredom proneness: its relationship to psychological- and physical-health symptoms. *J Clin Psychol* 2000;**56**:149–55.

Table 1 Prevalence of self-reported boredom at Phase 1 by baseline characteristics

Baseline characteristics	In the past 4 weeks have you felt bored?				P-value for heterogeneity
	Not at all (N = 3882)	A little (N = 3040)	Quite a lot (N = 541)	A great deal (N = 152)	
Age group					
35–39 (N = 1980)	44.7	44.2	9.4	1.7	<0.001
40–44 (N = 2023)	49.1	41.3	7.2	2.4	
45–49 (N = 1609)	53.5	38.4	6.1	2.0	
50–55 (N = 2003)	57.1	35.5	5.5	1.9	
Sex					
Men (N = 5147)	51.6	39.8	7.0	1.5	<0.001
Women (N = 2468)	49.7	40.1	7.3	3.0	
Self-rated health					
Average or better (N = 5620)	54.1	39.1	5.4	1.3	<0.001
Worse than average (N = 1982)	42.1	42.2	11.8	3.9	
Employment grade					
High (N = 2069)	57.5	36.1	5.6	0.9	<0.001
Medium (N = 3756)	48.9	42.1	7.4	1.5	
Low (N = 1790)	47.8	39.8	8.2	4.2	
Physical activity					
None/mild (N = 1305)	47.9	40.0	8.6	3.5	<0.001
Moderate (N = 3142)	50.3	40.2	7.5	2.1	
Vigorous (N = 3133)	53.1	39.6	6.1	1.2	

Table 2 Boredom and risk of mortality

	All-cause mortality			CVD mortality		
	No. of deaths	HR ^a	(95% CI)	No. of deaths	HR ^a	(95% CI)
Boredom at Phase 1						
Not at all	356	1		101	1	
A little	237	0.94	(0.80–1.12)	59	0.86	(0.62–1.18)
Quite a lot	40	0.94	(0.68–1.31)	12	1.06	(0.58–1.92)
A great deal	17	1.37	(0.84–2.23)	8	2.53	(1.23–5.21)
Times reported boredom ^b						
0	385	1		94	1	
1	48	1.12	(0.83–1.52)	14	1.40	(0.80–2.46)
2	16	1.33	(0.80–2.19)	4	1.42	(0.52–3.87)
P-value for trend		0.20		0.21		

^aHRs adjusted for age and sex.

^bBoredom = 'quite a lot/a great deal' (Reported at Phases 1 and 2).