**GP 2016 – Comprehension – Lesson 1 (Boredom)**

*David Robson examines the issue of boredom and its effects.*

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| 1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10  11  12 | Sandi Mann is one of the few psychologists to have forayed into the mind-numbing territory—of boredom. Mann wants to understand the profound effect that boredom may have on our lives. “It’s the Cinderella of psychology,” she says. After all, admitting that you study boredom might itself sound a bit, well, boring – but that is far from the truth. Boredom, it turns out, can be a dangerous and disruptive state of mind that damages your health – and even cuts years off your lifespan. If that sounds negative, Mann’s research would also suggest that without boredom we couldn’t achieve our creative feats.  Boredom is such a large part of day-to-day existence that it is somewhat surprising the word only entered the language with Charles Dickens’s Bleak House in 1852. Dickens’s study of Lady Deadlock’s suffering – she is “bored to death” by her marriage – would end up pre-empting many of the latest findings. Perhaps because of its prevalence in our lives, scientists had been slow to explore the sensation. “When you are swimming in something, maybe you don’t think of it as being noteworthy,” says John Eastwood at York University in Canada, who was one of the first scholars to take an interest.  One of the most common misconceptions is that “only boring people get bored”. Yet as Eastwood set about exploring the reasons for boredom, he found that there are two distinct types of personality that tend to suffer from ennui, and neither are particularly dull themselves. Boredom often goes with a naturally impulsive mindset among people who are constantly looking for new experiences. For these people, the steady path of life just isn’t enough of a rollercoaster to hold their attention. “The world is chronically under-stimulating,” says Eastwood. The second kind of bored people have almost exactly the opposite problem; the world is a fearful place, and so they shut themselves away and try not to step outside their comfort zone. “Out of their high-sensitivity to pain, they withdraw.” While this retreat might offer some comfort, they are not always satisfied with the safety it offers – and chronic boredom results.  Almost from the very beginning, it became clear that either of these states could push people to harm themselves; a proneness to boredom was linked to a tendency to smoke, drink too much, and take drugs. Indeed, in one study boredom was the single biggest predictor of alcohol, cigarette and cannabis use among a group of South African teenagers.  Boredom is also linked to more mundane but equally unhealthy behaviours, such as comfort-eating your way through tedium. “Boredom at work is propping up the confectionary industry,” says Mann, who is based at the University of Central Lancashire, UK. The overall effect of boredom on your life expectancy could be drastic, too. When researchers in the famous Whitehall study followed the lives of middle-aged civil servants in the UK, they found that the people who are most likely to get bored were 30% more likely to have died over the next three years.  That is something of a puzzle for evolutionary psychologists. Emotions should evolve for our benefit – not to push us to self-destruction. “The very fact that boredom is a daily experience suggests it should be doing something useful,” says Heather Lench at Texas A&M University. Feelings like fear help us avoid danger, after all, while sadness might help prevent future mistakes. So, if true, what does boredom achieve?  Reviewing the evidence so far, Lench suspects that it lies behind one of our most important traits – curiosity. Boredom, she says, stops us ploughing the same old furrow, and pushes us to try to seek new goals or explore new territories or ideas. That search for an escape could sometimes push us to take risks that eventually hurt us. One research team simply left subjects by themselves in a room for 15 minutes with a button that allowed them to give themselves an electric shock on the ankle; many did indeed elect to give themselves the brief buzz of pain, seemingly because it was the only way to break up the tedium. Perhaps the same search for an escape explains why bored people turn to unhealthy behaviours – but the upside is that it can also increase innovation.  Mann has found that the ennui people feel when performing mindless tasks boosts their creativity – such as finding innovative uses for everyday objects. She suspects the tedium encouraged their minds to wander, which leads to more associative and creative ways of thinking. “If we don’t find stimulation externally, we look internally – going to different places in our minds,” she says. “It allows us to make leaps of imagination. We can get out of the box and think in different ways.” Without the capacity for boredom, then, we humans may have never achieved our artistic and technological heights.  Given this benefit, Mann thinks we should try not to fear boredom when it hits us. “We should embrace it,” she says – a philosophy that she has now taken into her own life. “Instead of saying I’m bored when I’m stuck in traffic, I’ll put music on and allow my mind to wander – knowing that it’s good for me. And I let my kids be bored too – because it’s good for their creativity.”  Eastwood is less enthusiastic about boredom’s benefits, but admits we should be cautious about looking for an immediate escape. “The feeling is so aversive that people rush to eliminate it,” he says. “I’m not going to join that war on boredom and come up with a cure, because we need to listen to the emotion and ask what it is trying to tell us to do.” For instance, simply looking for instant gratification on a smartphone or tablet may be counter-productive, he thinks. “We live in a tech-driven society where we are overly stimulated – we are constantly yanked around by interruptions,” says Eastwood. That puts us on a kind of treadmill, he says – we keep on expecting quicker and easier ways to revive our curiosity. “One possibility is that this actually makes people more bored.”  Instead, he suggests that it would be wiser to question whether there are more serious, long-term issues that are causing us to feel disengaged. His work, for instance, has shown that priming people to feel their lives have a greater purpose and meaning tends to make them less bored during subsequent tests. Although our feelings of tedium during a work meeting or family gathering might seem like superficial annoyances, they could be a symptom of a deeper existential crisis and need for fulfilment that extends far beyond immediate circumstances.  “To feel you can have an effect on the world and that things in life make sense, these are inherently important things for human beings – just like sunlight, fresh air and food,” says Eastwood. As we enter the New Year, that could be as good a reason as any to re-evaluate your life, what you are trying to achieve with it, and to rethink what you actually mean when you say you are bored.  **Suggested Answers**  **1. What does the “forayed” (line 1) imply about the research on boredom? Use your own words as far as possible. [1]**  From the passage  Sandi Mann is **one of the few** psychologists to have **forayed** into the mind-numbing territory—of boredom. (lines 1-2)  Approach:  Answer  The word suggests that the few psychologists have only started to explore into this topic of boredom which has been relatively new.  **2. Why does Sandi Mann call boredom “the Cinderella of psychology” in line 3? [2]**  From the passage  “It’s the **Cinderella of psychology**,” she says. After all, admitting that you study boredom might itself sound a bit, well, boring – **but that is far from the truth**. (lines 3-4)  Metaphoric requirement – Cinderella  Approach:  Answer  Just like Cinderella who was neglected at the beginning and given the due recognition, the topic of boredom which has been considered insignificant has now been gaining interest of researchers for its influence in our lives.  **3. Explain what the author means by ‘Dickens’s study of Lady Deadlock’s suffering – she is “bored to death” by her marriage – would end up pre-empting many of the latest findings’ (lines 9-11). Use your own words as far as possible. [2]**  From the passage  Dickens’s study of Lady Deadlock’s suffering – she is “bored to death” by her marriage –  would **end up pre-empting many of the latest findings**.(lines 9-11)  Approach:  Answer  The author means that Dickson’s description on how his fictitious character’s boring life can be life threatening have accurately reflected the negative impact identified by researchers in reality.  **4. According to Eastwood, why had scientists “been slow to explore the sensation” (line 12)? Use your own words as far as possible. [2]**  From the passage  But perhaps because of its **prevalence** in our lives, scientists had been slow to explore the sensation.  “When you are swimming in something, maybe you **don’t think of it as being noteworthy,”** says John Eastwood at York University in Canada, who was one of the first scholars to take an interest. (lines 11-14)  *Note – “swimming in something” refers to a situation where people are so immersed in the issue/ something is so much a part of us*  Approach:  Answer  Eastwood has depicted that scientists had not seen the value of researching on boredom as they found it to be insignificant as it was considered to be a very natural emotion experienced commonly by people. This leads to their slow response to study on this area of emotion.  **5. How do the two types of personality in paragraph 3 illustrate the misconception that “only boring people get bored” (line 15)? Use your own words as far as possible. [3]**  From the passage  One of the most common misconceptions is that “only boring people get bored”. Yet as Eastwood set about exploring the reasons for boredom, he found that there are two distinct types of personality that tend to suffer from ennui, and **neither are particularly dull themselves**. (lines 15-18)  Boredom often goes with a naturally impulsive mindset among people who are **constantly looking for new experiences**. For these people, the steady path of life just isn’t enough of a rollercoaster to hold their attention. “**The world is chronically under-stimulating**,” says Eastwood. (lines 18-21)  The second kind of bored people have almost exactly the opposite problem; the world is a fearful place, and **so they shut themselves away and try not to step outside their comfort zone**. “Out of their high-sensitivity to pain, they withdraw.” While this retreat might offer some comfort, they are **not always satisfied with the safety it offers – and chronic boredom results**. (lines 21-25)  Approach: Comparison description  Answer  The two types of people, as identified by the author, experience boredom although they are not boring. However, they differ in the way they experience boredom. For those with the first personality type who are adventure seeking individuals, they will experience boredom when they are unable to get sufficient exposure to excitement. As for the second type of personality who are averse to risky experiences, they experience boredom when they withdraw themselves from the risk and put themselves into safety and dislike the normalcy that the comfort of safety offers.  **6. What does Mann think about how we should respond to boredom when it hits us (line 58)? [1]**  From the passage  Given this benefit, Mann thinks **we should try not to fear boredom** when it hits us. “**We should embrace it**,” she says – a philosophy that she has now taken into her own life. “Instead of saying I’m bored when I’m stuck in traffic, I’ll put music on and allow my mind to wander – knowing that it’s good for me. And I let my kids be bored too – because it’s good for their creativity.”  Approach:  Answer  Mann think that we should welcome it and believe that we can benefit from it and need not react negatively to it as they can use the moment of boredom by creating an interesting activity.  **7. In paragraph 10, Eastwood claims that “we should be cautious about looking for an immediate escape”. How does the remainder of the paragraph illustrate his concern? [2]**  From the passage  For instance, **simply looking for instant gratification on a smartphone or tablet may be counter-productive**, he thinks. “We live in tech-driven society where we are overly stimulated – we are **constantly yanked around by interruptions**,” says Eastwood.  That puts us on **a kind of treadmill**, he says – we keep on **expecting quicker and easier ways** to revive our curiosity. “One possibility is that **this** **actually makes people more bored**.” (lines 66-71)  Approach:  Answer  He illustrates his concern by depicting that seeking immediate satisfaction via electronic gadgets could distract us and work against our original intention. We will be relying on getting faster and convenient way to get our fixes against boredom that will lead us to aimless and meaningless way of life that will worsen our boring life.  **8. Explain the author’s use of ‘superficial’ (line 76) and ‘deeper’ (line 77) in paragraph 11. Use your own words as far as possible. [2]**  From the passage  Although our feelings of tedium during a work meeting or family gathering might seem **superficial annoyances**, they could therefore be a symptom of a **deeper existential crisis** and need for fulfilment that extends far beyond immediate circumstances. (line 75-78)  Approach: inference of the words for implication  Answer  The author is trying to show that our feeling of boredom during some social and work activities may be seen as insignificant disturbances but they will actually reveal that we are facing some fundamental problems in our lives which need our attention to rectify them.  **9. What, according to the author, is “as good a reason as any to re-evaluate your life” (lines 81-82)? [2]**  From the passage  “To feel you can have an effect on the world and that things in life make sense, these are inherently important things for human beings – just like sunlight, fresh air and food,” says Eastwood.  As we enter the New Year, **that** could be as good a reason as any to re-evaluate your life. (life 79-82)  Answer  The author feels that this thinking is good as he feels that believing you can have a reason for life and you can affect the world will give you a more reflective and purposeful life.  **10. Using material from paragraphs 4-8 only (lines 26-57), summarise the drawbacks and benefits of boredom. [8] Write your summary in no more than 120 words not counting the opening words which are printed below. Use your own words as far as possible.**  *Boredom is harmful when …*   | **S/No** | **Points/Ideas from the passage (Essence of the point/idea in bold)** | **Paraphrased equivalent** | | --- | --- | --- | | **DRAWBACKS** | | | | 1 | **push people to harm themselves**; proneness to boredom was linked to a tendency to smoke, drink too much, and take drugs. (lines 27-28) |  | | 2 | ...linked to more mundane but equally **unhealthy behaviours**, such as comfort- eating your way through tedium. (lines 30-31) |  | | 3 | Boredom at work is propping up the confectionary industry. (lines 31-32) |  | | 4 | The overall effect of boredom on your **life expectancy could be drastic**, too. (lines 32-33) |  | | **BENEFITS** | | | | 5 | Lench suspects that it **lies behind one of our most important traits** – **curiosity**. (lines 42-43) |  | | 6 | Boredom, she says**, stops us ploughing the same old furrow**, (lines 41-42) |  | | 7 | **pushes us to try to seek new goals or explore new territories or ideas.** (lines 43-44) |  | | 8 | That search for an escape [from boredom] could **sometimes** **push us to take risks** that **eventually hurt us**. (lines 44-45) |  | | 9 | ...bored people **turn to unhealthy behaviours** – but the upside is that it can also **increase innovation**. (lines 49-50) |  | | 10 | ...when performing mindless tasks boost their creativity – such as finding **innovative uses** for **everyday** objects. (lines 51-52) |  | | 11 | ...tedium **encouraged their minds to wander**, which leads to **more associative and creative ways of thinking.** (lines 52-54) |  | | 12 | - going to different places in our minds,” she says. “It allows us to **make leaps of imagination**. We can get out of the box and think in different ways.” (lines 54-56) |  | | 13 | Without the capacity for boredom, then, we humans **may have never** **achieved** our artistic and technological **heights**.(lines 56-57) |  |   **10. Using material from paragraphs 4-8 only (lines 26-57), summarise the drawbacks and benefits of boredom. [8]**  **Write your summary in no more than 120 words not counting the opening words which are printed below. Use your own words as far as possible.**  *Boredom is harmful when …*   | **S/No** | **Points/Ideas from the passage (Essence of the point/idea in bold)** | **Paraphrased equivalent** | | --- | --- | --- | | **DRAWBACKS** | | | | 1 | **push people to harm themselves**; proneness to boredom was linked to a tendency to smoke, drink too much, and take drugs. (lines 27-28) | a. **driven to self-destructive behaviours** | | 2 | ...linked to more mundane but equally **unhealthy behaviours**, such as comfort- eating your way through tedium. (lines 30-31) | b. and **commonplace/ routine/ everyday actions** that are just as **damaging to their health**  *(Do not accept ‘binge-eating’)* | | 3 | Boredom at work is propping up the confectionary industry. (lines 31-32) | *Boredom leads to*  c. (inferred) ... **unhealthy consumption habits** | | 4 | The overall effect of boredom on your **life expectancy could be drastic**, too. (lines 32-33) | d. ...and **a much shorter** **/ substantial/ severe reduction in life span** , | | **BENEFITS** | | | | 5 | Lench suspects that it **lies behind one of our most important traits** – **curiosity**. (lines 42-43) | e. Boredom **spurs/ underpins/ drives/ propels** an **essential/ a vital inquisitiveness/ need to discover** | | 6 | Boredom, she says**, stops us ploughing the same old furrow**, (lines 41-42) | *However, boredom*  f. **overcomes/ puts an end** to **routine/repetitiveness**, | | 7 | **pushes us to try to seek new goals or explore new territories or ideas.** (lines 43-44) | g. and **challenges us to look for the novel in things** or **discover/** **venture into unknown places and question views and understandings / beliefs.** | | 8 | That search for an escape [from boredom] could **sometimes** **push us to take risks** that **eventually hurt us**. (lines 44-45) | *Our attempt to overcome boredom could occasionally*   1. **drive us to take chances** **that are ultimately harmful** (drawback) | | 9 | ...bored people **turn to unhealthy behaviours** – but the upside is that it can also **increase innovation**. (lines 49-50) | *Even though boredom can lead individuals to*  i. **make injurious choices**, (drawback)  j. it can also develop novel applications | | 10 | ...when performing mindless tasks boost their creativity – such as finding **innovative uses** for **everyday** objects. (lines 51-52) | k. …and promotes/ enhances/ **encourages new applications for commonly used items.** | | 11 | ...tedium **encouraged their minds to wander**, which leads to **more associative and creative ways of thinking.** (lines 52-54) | *Boredom actually*  l. **invigorates/ stimulates the brain to explore** which further develops **deeper connections and inventive methods of the thought processes / inventiveness in thoughts.** | | 12 | - going to different places in our minds,” she says. “It allows us to **make leaps of imagination**. We can get out of the box and think in different ways.” (lines 54-56) | m. to **think in unconventional ways**/ to **make previously unknown connections**/ to **unbridle the mind**/ to **pull out all stops**/ to **not limit**/ **constrain our thinking/creativity** | | 13 | Without the capacity for boredom, then, we humans **may have never** **achieved** our artistic and technological **heights**.(lines 56-57) | n. accomplishing **aesthetic beauty** and **scientific breakthroughs/ pinnacles/ peaks of excellence/ would be greatly limited in our results / has helped/ enabled us to reach our current level of aesthetic and innovative accomplishments**  *(accept lift for ‘artistic’ and ‘technological’)* |   **Boredom is harmful when** it encourages self-destructive behaviours and everyday actions that are just as damaging to one’s health. Boredom leads to unhealthy consumption habits and a much shorter life span,driving us to take chances that are ultimately harmful or injurious. However, it underpins a vital inquisitiveness to discover. Boredom puts an end to routine andchallenges us to look for novel in things or venture into unknown places and question views and beliefs. Our attempt to overcome boredom could occasionally help develop novel applications and encourage new applications for commonly used items. Boredom actually invigorates the brain to explore deeper connections and inventiveness in thoughts; and to unbridle the mind to accomplish aesthetic beauty and scientific breakthroughs.  (115 words)  **11. David Robson highlights a number of research findings on the effects of boredom and responses to it. How far would you agree with the findings, relating your arguments to your own society?**  Nature of discussion of the question   1. **Requirement of the question**  * To assess the extent of agreement to the research findings * To relate whether the research findings are relevant or related to Singapore  1. **Structure of discussion** 2. Identify the effects and response of the findings 3. Explanation of the findings 4. Assess the relevancy of the findings to Singapore 5. Why it is agreeable? 6. When it is not agreeable? Extent of Agreement   Introduction  **State the requirement of the question**   * There are research findings on the effects of boredom which are reflective of what are seen in Singapore. It is quite difficult to disagree with the writer but there are still certain areas which I do not agree too.   Main Body   1. **Identify the effects and response of the findings**   One response is that boredom ‘stops us ploughing the same old furrow, and pushes us to try to seek new goals or explore new territories or ideas. That search for an escape could sometimes push us to take risks that hurt us’ (Para 7, line 43)  Explanation of the findings  By this, he meant that it prevents us from remaining in the rut or simply put, always sticking to old set ways of thinking and refusing to change. Instead boredom pushes us to try new things and seek new pastures which might give us new goals in life but might also harm us.   1. **Assess the relevancy of the findings to Singapore**   **Why is it agreeable with given evidence:**  This evidently seen in Singapore where many who are bored with doing the same job year in and year out, will pick up their courage to leave their first jobs in search of ‘new territories or ideas’ and the more fortunate ones do find a second career for themselves, especially if they also end up in jobs for which they have a passion. Examples of mid-life career transitions include switch from desk jobs to housing agent jobs or becoming entrepreneurs. However, not all these mid-life career switches end up happily but they do open up a new experience and new world to the people who make the switch. In that sense it can be regarded as a benefit.  **Evaluation (the extent of agreement)**  Singaporeans are quite averse to risks because we leave in a highly competitive society with many foreign workers queueing to snap up our jobs and there is also the fear of not being able to adapt to the new job and having to start all over again at a lower income. This is a risk that not all Singaporeans are prepared to take, however bored they are, either because they are afraid to move or because of objections from their spouses or responsibilities to their families. Hence, though some dream of getting out of the rut, many would be hesitant to do so, unless the pull factors are strong enough to push them to take the risk. However, it could be considered as a bane too because in trying to escape boredom and seeking a new job, some end up disillusioned. In a career website, a mid-thirties man who made a switch to a banking job because he was bored with the routine of his first job, confessed that the change went ‘horribly wrong’ as he recounted how he could not catch up with his much younger colleagues in the field. This could hardly be regarded as a benefit. If he had stuck to his routine job, all he had to face was boredom. Now in a new territory, he faces threats from his younger colleagues and feels insecure, even though he might be picking up new ideas.  <http://news.efinancialcareers.com/sg-en/122411/my-mid-career-change-into-banking-went-horribly-wrong-dont-make-the-same-mistakes/>  **Point 2**  **Identify the effects and response of the findings**  The findings have also revealed that ‘We should be cautious about looking for an immediate escape’ and ‘we need to listen to the emotion and ask what it is trying to tell us to do’ (paragraph 10, line 63) as “looking for instant gratification” “may be counter-productive”   1. **Explanation of the findings**   What is meant here is that we should be careful when we are bored and thinking of doing something to relieve the boredom. We need to ask ourselves if the action we are about to take will compromise our security and result in harm to ourselves. This is source of negative impact that boredom will affect us if we do not know how to manage it.   1. **Assess the relevancy of the findings to Singapore**   Evidence  Boredom causes some people to turn to drugs according to the findings by Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association. (<http://www.healthxchange.com.sg/News/Pages/young-educated-drug-takers-sana.aspx>) Boredom was also one of the reasons why people start smoking in their adolescent years, according to Dr Kenneth Chan, a consultant at the department of respiratory and critical care medicine at Singapore General Hospital. (<http://www.healthxchange.com.sg/News/Pages/SGH-doctor-on-smoking-addiction.aspx>)   1. **Why it is agreeable**   This is evidently true when people do not understand the reasons for their boredom and just think of all ways to escape this feeling, they could only end up hurting themselves as seen in the case of people who choose to experiment with drugs and smoke since they are risking their health. The rise of number of youth and female smokers is an alarming concern to the society and the health authority is quick to identify boredom as one of the main cause of this proliferation undesirable behaviour. What these examples prove is exactly what Robinson also tries to highlight that people need to know the reason for their boredom and ‘be cautious about looking for an immediate escape’.   1. **When it is not agreeable? Extent of Agreement**   Fortunately, most Singaporean youths are well-educated and correctly guided with many healthy activities through school core-curriculum activities to ease their boredom. These activities will help them interests in activities and hobbies they like and thus, this will better develop their mind-sets to have a better approach in occupying their spare time.  Conclusion  We cannot deny that the effects of boredom and the inappropriate response identified by the finding are relevant to Singapore. The fortunate thing is that our government and society understand how such psychological development will affect us. With the appropriate guidance from the government and a pro=family environment, it will be able to contain the problems of the research findings identified in the passage, | 5  10  15  20  25  30  35  40  45  50  55  60  65  70  75  80 |