It turns out boredom isn’t boring after all. There’s a lot more to it than scientists had thought.

A new study of students in Germany reveals that there are five distinct types of boredom. That’s one more than researchers had expected.

The newly discovered type is called “apathetic boredom.” As it turns out, this is quite common among high school students, according to the study.

And boredom isn’t just boring. It can be dangerous, either for the person who is bored or for the people around him or her. For instance, people who are bored are more likely to smoke, drink or use drugs. Kids who are bored are more likely to drop out of school and get into trouble with the law. Studies have also linked boredom with stress and other health problems.

**Students Tested For Boredom**

Given how common boredom is, and the problems it can cause, “it is rather surprising that to date there has been little research conducted on this specific emotion,” the researchers noted.
To correct this, a team led by education researcher Thomas Goetz recruited two sets of test subjects: 63 college students and 80 high school students.

The researchers gave the students personal digital assistant (PDA) devices that beeped six times throughout the day. When the PDAs beeped, students were asked to complete a questionnaire about what they were doing and how they felt about it.

By gathering information about real-life situations, Goetz’s team hoped to confirm psychological outlines of four distinct types of boredom:—Indifferent boredom, a relaxing and slightly positive type of boredom that reflects “a general indifference to, and withdrawal from, the external world”;— Calibrating boredom, the slightly unpleasant state of having wandering thoughts and “a general openness to behaviors aimed at changing the situation”;—Searching boredom, the kind that makes you feel restless and leaves you “actively seeking out specific ways of minimizing feelings of boredom”; and—Reactant boredom, which is so bad that it prompts sufferers “to leave the boredom-inducing situation and avoid those responsible for this situation (for example, teachers).”

A Very Boring Life

The short PDA surveys first asked student volunteers what they were doing. Were they in the middle of an “achievement activity,” such as attending a lecture or studying for a test? Or were they doing something else, like eating, napping or having fun?

Students were then asked how they felt about what they were doing. If they felt bored, they were asked to rate their feelings of boredom, using a five-point scale that ranged from “calm” to “fidgety.”

What researchers found is that the life of a German student can be very boring indeed.

During the two-week period of the study, the college students were bored 28 percent of the time. Life was even more dull for the high school students—they were bored 39 percent of the time.

Slightly more than half—53 percent—of the boring experiences had by college students occurred during an achievement activity, compared with 66 percent for the high school students. This difference can perhaps be explained by the fact that college students have more freedom to walk away from a boring situation.

A Troubling Discovery

The big surprise for researchers was the discovery of a fifth type of boredom. Apathetic boredom accounted for 10 percent of all boredom among the college students, and 36 percent of all boredom
among the high-schoolers.

This was a troubling discovery. Students found apathetic boredom even more unpleasant than reactant boredom, but they were far less likely to do anything about it. Apathetic boredom, the researchers concluded, shares some features with learned helplessness and depression.

“Apathetic boredom seems to be as bad as reactant boredom,” Goetz explained in an email. “Reactant boredom seems to be related to aggression, apathetic boredom more to depression. From this perspective, reactant boredom might be dangerous’ (for other people) while apathetic boredom might be” dangerous for the people experiencing it.

The researchers hope to extend their studies of boredom to younger students, as well as to adults in the workplace. But Goetz said he didn’t expect any more boring surprises.

“I don’t think that there are more than the five types of boredom,” he said.
Quiz

1. How does the author make a distinction between the four original types of boredom?
   (a) notes them separately
   (b) provides an illustrative anecdote for each type
   (c) illustrates how each boredom type relates to each other
   (d) notes them separately in bullet format and provides a basic explanation of each

2. How does the author explain the data collection method the researchers used?
   (a) in chronological order
   (b) via each category of boredom
   (c) data collection method is not explained
   (d) through comparisons with other studies’ data collection

3. How does the author show the connection between reactant boredom and apathetic boredom?
   (a) both are dangerous
   (b) the discoveries are troubling
   (c) one is more unpleasant than the other
   (d) one is related to aggression, and one is related to depression

4. Select the paragraph that explains the distinction between the percentage of time high school students are bored and the percentage of time college students are bored.
Answer Key

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