

Suppressing boredom at work hurts future productivity, study shows

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Boredom is more common at work than in any other setting, studies show, and employees are bored at work for more than 10 hours per week on average.

Even astronauts and [police officers](#) get bored on the job. No occupation is immune.

Boredom serves an important purpose—it signals the need to stop an action and find an alternative project. But boredom becomes problematic when it's ignored.

New research from the University of Notre Dame shows that trying to stifle boredom prolongs its effects and that alternating boring and meaningful tasks helps to prevent the effects of one boring task from spilling over to reduce [productivity](#) on others.

["Breaking Boredom: Interrupting the Residual Effect of State Boredom on Future Productivity"](#) is forthcoming in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* from lead author Casher Belinda, assistant professor of management at Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business, along with Shimul Melwani from the University of North Carolina and Chaitali Kapadia from Florida International University.

The team sought to understand if, when, and why experiencing boredom now might lead to attention and productivity deficits later. They tested these possibilities in three studies that examined the consequences of boredom on a task-to-task basis.

The first study drew on data from dual-career families working in a variety of industries. Participants responded to multiple surveys per day at different intervals, enabling the team to examine the relationships between boredom, attention, and productivity over time. Follow-up studies used alternative methods to reach a broader audience and focused on how meaningful work tasks help mitigate boredom's prolonged effects.

Belinda, who specializes in emotions, [interpersonal communication](#), and

[close relationships](#) within organizations, noted that boredom is viewed as a nuisance emotion that any strong-willed employee should subdue for the sake of productivity.

He found that experiencing boredom at any one point in time leads to delayed or residual bouts of mind-wandering. Employees often try to "power through" boring tasks to make progress on their work goals, but he said that not only does this fail to prevent boredom's negative effects, but it's also one of the most dysfunctional responses to boredom.

"Like whack-a-mole, downplaying boredom on one task results in attention and productivity deficits that bubble up during subsequent tasks," he said. "Paradoxically, then, trying to suppress boredom gives its [harmful effects](#) a longer shelf life."

Part of the solution lies in how work tasks are organized throughout the day. Although boring tasks can't be avoided, effectively combating the negative effects of boredom requires careful consideration of the nature of different work tasks and how they are sequenced. Casher said it helps to work strategically, looking beyond a single boring task.

"'Playing the long game' will help minimize the cumulative effects of boredom over the course of the day," Belinda explained. "Following an initial boring task, employees should turn to other meaningful tasks to help restore lost energy."

More information: Casher Belinda et al, Breaking boredom: Interrupting the residual effect of state boredom on future productivity., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0001161](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001161)

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