

Bored vs. Engaged individuals during COVID-19 lockdown period

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ABSTRACT

The present study was designed to compare individuals who were high on boredom proneness with those who were engaged on variables, such as, flow, mindfulness and loneliness during the COVID-19 lockdown period. In addition, correlates and predictors of boredom proneness were also found out using stepwise multiple regression analysis. The results revealed a significant positive relationship between boredom proneness and loneliness and a significant negative relationship between boredom proneness, flow and mindfulness which implies that boredom experience reduces the state of flow and mindfulness and increases the state of loneliness. The results have implications for mental health counselors. Mindfulness and time management interventions, activities to optimize flow experiences must be incorporated into the treatment plans to help the unemployed, the depressed and other vulnerable sections of society deal with this pandemic adaptively. Lockdown period can come again in the near future and has even been continuing in some parts of the world. Knowing how boredom proneness can significantly impact our mental health has implications for counselors and psychologists. Temporal perception and engagement with some productive activity could play a big role in optimizing well-being during the lockdown period.

Keywords

boredom, flow, loneliness, lockdown, covid-19

Introduction

The ubiquitous nature of novel corona virus (COVID-19) has been proved as a great conundrum for the entire world. Over 91% of the world faced movement related restrictions to curb the spread of this virus (Connor, 2020). Rapid proliferation of the virus called for modifications in people's daily schedule as everyone had to follow social distancing in order to break the contagious chain of COVID-19 (Anderson, Heesterbeek, Klinkenberg, & Hollingsworth, 2020).

In today's restricted scenario amid COVID-19, it is essential to understand how self-isolating can impact one's psychological health and related constructs. The effects of quarantine may differ from one set of individuals to another. Few people consider quarantine to be benefic and gain the most out of their available time by indulging into activities that promote

flow, mindfulness and self-awareness. Simultaneously, other kinds of people might go through boredom and experience loneliness. As per a few studies, longer periods of quarantine are perceived as a major stressor (Brooks et. al., 2020). Similarly, other studies have reported that longer quarantine periods are related to symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Hawryluck et al., 2004; Reynolds et al., 2008), anger and avoidance behaviors (Marjanovic, Greenglass & Coffey, 2007) and heightened boredom (Barbisch, Koenig, & Shih, 2015).

Boredom proneness is one of the consequences of quarantine, which has been studied to a lesser extent so far. It signifies the inability of an individual to sustain his/her attention on a particular activity or an object (Carriere, Cheyne & Smilek, 2008). Boredom is not uncommon as it is encountered by majority

of people on a frequent basis (Harris, 2000). During the SARS outbreak in 2003, boredom was found to be the biggest disincentive for maintaining quarantine guidelines (DiGiovanni, Conley, Chiu & Zaborski, 2004). Similarly, some researchers speculated that generalized propensity to experience boredom is a relatively stable trait. Individuals who are high on boredom proneness might experience adhering to quarantine guidelines as demanding and distressing (Wolff, Martarelli, Schuler & Bieleke, 2020).

The manner in which quarantine can impact people may differ among various population parameters, such as young people reported feelings of increased boredom and inter-family conflict whereas other sensitive population such as the elderly and physically disadvantaged cited loneliness as the major outcome of quarantine (Barari et al., 2020). Danvers (2020), suggested that one in every three individuals undergoes loneliness to some extent and one in every 12 people face it severely. He also asserted that individuals' who are lonely are more likely to be annoyed, self-focused and depressed. Research by Harris (2000) on college students speculated that boredom was a consequence of too many classes and fewer activities, followed by repetition, loneliness, waiting hours and lack of demanding opportunities. Prolonged quarantine period leads to loneliness, which also poses negative health related threats. Quarantine has significantly added to the stress and anxiety of individuals due to financial burden, boredom proneness, lack of sleep, annoyance, mood and emotional disorders, and lack of contact with significant others which eventually leads to loneliness (Bai et al., 2004; Brooks et al., 2020; Cava, Fay,

Beanlands, McCay, & Wignall, 2005; Desclaux, Badji, Ndione, & Sow, 2017; Hawryluck et al., 2004).

Watt and Blanchard (1994) posited the view that individuals who are prone to boredom are less likely engage in mental activities. According to the *Meaning and Attentional Components* (MAC) model, boredom results from two components, 1) Attentional component which indicates a discrepancy between demands and available mental assets, and 2) Meaning component which signifies lack of meaning/interest for the activity (Westgate & Wilson, 2018). Studies have linked higher scores on boredom proneness with less self-control and relative disengagement with the environment (Eastwood, Frischen, Fenske, & Smilek, 2012; Isacescu, Struk, & Danckert, 2017).

Today, there's a high availability of external stimulation in the form of short videos, imagery and auditory stimuli aided through internet and other media sources. Consequently, the excitatory stimuli have led to reduced attention span and a continuous prolonging for stimulation.

Boredom proneness and loneliness stays on the negative side of self-isolation, whereas flow and mindfulness reflect the positive benefits of isolation.

Flow has been disguised as an "optimal experience" in which an individual "is in control of his actions and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, between past, present, and future" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 34). Harris (2000) suggested a negative correlation between flow and boredom; he found that people who are frequently prone to

boredom are least likely to experience flow. Mindfulness on the other hand can be defined as a property of the mind involving two related constructs: self-monitoring of thoughts and quality of responsiveness as opposed to reactivity (Bishop et al., 2006). It has been articulated that there's a positive link between learning to be mindful and ability to concentrate, which helps individuals to gain more pleasure from ongoing activities (Martin, 2005). Furthermore, people with a higher ability to concentrate have an increased likelihood to involve themselves in flow, and on the contrary, it leads to boredom proneness (Martin, Sadlo & Stew, 2012). A study supported a view that those individuals who were bored perceived life as having little meaning and viewed surroundings as boring while people who experienced low boredom were more involved and perceived life as fulfilling (Martin, Sadlo & Stew, 2006). Supporting the literature, Lapera (2011) speculated that there exists a negative relationship between boredom proneness and mindfulness.

The havoc created by COVID-19 necessitates the researchers to fill in the dearth of literature about its impact on multiple human constructs. Thus, the present paper aims at analyzing the relationship between boredom proneness, mindfulness and flow during the period of quarantine.

Hypotheses

1. There will be a positive correlation between boredom proneness and loneliness.
2. There will be a negative correlation of boredom proneness with mindfulness, flow and perceived happiness.
3. Engaged individuals will score lower on loneliness as compared to bored individuals.

4. Engaged individuals will score higher on mindfulness, flow and perceived happiness as compared to bored individuals.

Method

The sample of the present study comprised of 149 participants (49 males and 104 females) in the age range of 17-46 years. The minimum educational qualification of the participants was 12th grade. The sample was taken from college students and people who are employed in different work sectors. The mean age of males and females was 22.5 and 24.4 years respectively. Urban and literate participants belonging to middle socio-economic strata were selected. The data was collected using Google forms, as it was the only aid available to reach out to people during quarantine period. The advantage of Google forms was that large geographical regions could be covered. Participants from various Indian states, such as, Punjab, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Karnataka were included in the study.

Measures

Boredom Proneness Scale-Short Form (BPS-SR)

The present study has employed a shorter version of boredom proneness scale (Struk, Carriere, Cheyne & Danckert, 2015). Items, such as, 'I find it hard to entertain myself', and 'Much of the time, I just sit around doing nothing' are included in the scale.

It has eight items, which are based on a 5-point Likert format with 1-being never to 5-being most of the time. BPS-SR has shown high correlations with the *external dimension* of Boredom Proneness Scale (BPS), which indicates an individual's need for high

environmental stimulation (i.e. 0.85) and with other relevant measures, such as, depression (Carriere, Cheyne, & Smilek, 2008; Goldberg, Eastwood, LaGuardia, & Danckert, 2011), anxiety (Sommers & Vodanovich, 2000; Vodanovich, Verner, & Gilbride, 1991), and anger (Dahlen, Martin, Ragan, & Kuhlman, 2004; Rupp & Vodanovich, 1997). The Cronbach's alpha has been reported 0.88, suggesting good internal consistency.

UCLA Loneliness Scale

Version three of the UCLA loneliness scale with a pool of 20 items was developed by Russell (1996). It was designed to assess participant's feelings of loneliness and isolation. Items, such as, 'How often do you feel done?' and 'How often do you feel left out?' are used to assess loneliness among individuals.

It follows a 4-point likert format ranging from 1-never to 4-always. The coefficient alpha ranged within 0.89 to 0.94. The scale has high convergent validity as indicated through significant correlations with scales such as NYU Loneliness Scale and Differential Loneliness Scale (Russell, Kao, et al.1987). The scale has also exhibited high test-retest reliability (0.73) over a one year period.

Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS)
MAAS is a 15-item questionnaire with a 7-point likert scale ranging from 1 (almost always) to 7

Happiness

All the participants were also asked to rate their levels of happiness on a continuum ranging from 'very unhappy' to 'very happy'.

The participants were sent the questionnaire through direct messaging. They were assured

(almost never)- It was developed by Brown and Ryan (2003) who explained mindfulness in terms of conscious awareness and open approach towards the present environment and experiences. The scale indicates sound psychometric properties with responses attained from a wide range of cancer patients, university students and community sample. It has high internal consistency (0.82), test-retest reliability (0.82) and has also shown positive correlation with similar constructs such as, well being and negative correlation with constructs of emotional disturbance which indicates convergent validity (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Flow Short Scale

Rheinberg, Vollmeyer and Engeser (2003) developed a 13 items questionnaire measuring flow. Individuals' completed the likert scale which ranged from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Very much). It incorporates items such as, 'I have no difficulty concentrating' and 'The right/movements occur of their own accord'. It has an excellent internal consistency of $\alpha=0.92$ (Engeser & Rheinberg, 2008).

Time Spent in Quarantine

A question addressing the manner in which individuals spent their time in quarantine was also added in the questionnaire. It was an open-ended question and relied completely on individual's preferences.

that the data will stay confidential and will be used for research purposes only. It took maximum 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. At the beginning, participants were informed that there is no right or wrong answer and that they can stay completely

anonymous (as revealing their identity was optional), so the answers that best describe them should be favored.

The study explored how bored individuals differ from their engaged counterparts with respect to loneliness, mindfulness, flow and perceived happiness. Correlation and stepwise multiple regression analysis were carried out to ascertain the differences among the groups.

Results and Discussion

This study has particular significance as it was done during the COVID-19 lockdown period, a time, which resulted in varied experiences across individuals and might reappear in the near future if active measures are not abided by the society as a whole. When asked as to how was one's time spent during the lockdown period, two themes of responses were more likely to emerge:— one that reflected **boredom** and the other that showed active **engagement**. Therefore, the present study was set to explore engaged vs. bored individuals on flow, loneliness and mindfulness.

As hypothesized, intercorrelation analyses revealed a significant positive correlation of boredom proneness with loneliness, and significant negative correlations of boredom proneness with mindfulness and perceived happiness (Table 1).

Stepwise regression analysis showed loneliness to be a significant positive predictor of boredom proneness followed by mindfulness as a significant and negative predictor of boredom proneness (Table 2). These findings are congruent with prior studies that have found a positive correlation between boredom proneness and negative affect, depression, hostility and anxiety – emotional states that signify loneliness

(Vaodanovich, Verner, Gilbride, 1991). Even while examining a bored individuals' language, common descriptors used to describe the feeling of boredom are loneliness, restlessness, and tiredness (Skues et al., 2016). Across several studies boredom has been recognized as a general predictor of withdrawal, feelings of disempowerment and confinement (Putwain et al., 2018).

It has also been found that loneliness and boredom proneness make an individual prone to problematic internet usage and mobile phone addiction which in turn interferes with a cognitively engaging lifestyle (Skues et al., 2016). Similarly, it has been found that loneliness and boredom proneness collectively also impact cognitive functioning. For instance, loneliness and boredom do not let the individual select and maintain attention on the particular features of the task at hand thereby reducing flow experience with tasks at hand (Conroy, Golden, Jeffares, O'Neill & McGee, 2010). This can lead one to draw an inference that boredom proneness is high when flow is low.

Mindfulness was also found to be a significant predictor of boredom proneness in the present study. Lee and Zelman (2019) showed that individuals who are low on dispositional mindfulness would more likely experience negative affect when bored. While those who are aware of their emotions, thoughts and boredom are less likely to get bogged down by the negative emotional states that boredom proneness bring and accept their boredom as a passive observer. Le Pera (2011) had also attributed the negative association between mindfulness and boredom proneness to the inattention problem of bored individuals. In other words, bored individuals are not capable

of stimulating themselves, are higher on inattention deficit and unable to concentrate. On the other hand, mindfulness increases attention to both internal and external stimulation and would help bored individuals in decreasing their inattention deficits (Anderson, Lau, Segal & Bishop, 2007).

t-table shows comparisons of highly bored individuals with engaged individuals during the lockdown period. Results revealed a significant difference between bored and engaged individuals on loneliness, mindfulness and flow. Bored individuals scored significantly higher than engaged individuals on loneliness while engaged individuals scored higher than bored individuals on mindfulness and flow. This finding was consistent with the hypotheses proposed.

A recent investigation by Droit-Volet and colleagues (2020) showed that time slowed down for individuals who experienced boredom during the lockdown period. Therefore, slowing down of time was found to be correlated with decrease in happiness levels. Such findings indicate that it was the temporal judgment of The problem also does not lie in being bored. There are numerous researchers who have talked about the benefits of boredom and how important it is to allow oneself to be bored once in a while, also known as ‘dopamine detox.’ Bench, Bera and Cox (2020) speculated that individuals who were bored were more likely to take risks and perceived risk more positively. Furthermore, boredom has also been predicted as a motivating factor to seek novelty and uniqueness with regard to experiences (Bench & Lench, 2019). Therefore, the problem does not lie in boredom proneness but the problem lies in

time that influenced emotional well being of people during lockdown. The link for boredom proneness with loneliness is such that bored people become sad and this sadness further induces depression, which leads to slowing down of time and lack of energy/vitality or flow experiences (Thones & Oberfeld, 2015).

Conclusion and Implications of the Study:

These findings lead one to this conclusion that time management or usage of time must be incorporated into the treatment plan for depression and loneliness. It can be implied that the way individuals manage their free time can really determine whether their mental health would deteriorate or improve. Results from a study conducted by Wang (2018) supported the observation that wise use of time decreases boredom while allowing oneself to get bored constantly during free time (such as, the lockdown period) increases unhealthy ways of coping with loneliness, such as internet addiction, drug addiction and engaging in risky activities (Wang, 2018).

the frequency of this experience and the ability to cope with it.

Most people when bored resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms such as, procrastination, sensation seeking, crime, substance abuse, eating disorders, impulsive behaviors (Ramon, 2017). Mindfulness and flow engagement certainly have been found to counteract the negative effects of boredom proneness across literature and also from the empirical results of the present investigation. Mindfulness allows the individuals to disengage from automatic negative thoughts, ingrained brain states, emotional filters, cognitive schemas that are

maladaptive and other habitual thoughts (Ramon, 2017). This practice would also improve individuals' ability to perceive events objectively and not to indulge in rumination. Csikszentmihalyi (1988) postulated that an individual must be intrinsically motivated to experience the state of flow. He also suggested three conditions that are required for a person to experience flow; firstly, an individual must have a defined set of goals and progress. Secondly, the task in which an individual is engaged should have a clear feedback, and lastly, there should be a balance between an individual's

ability and the task at hand (Csikszentmihályi, Abuhamdeh, & Nakamura, 2005). Keeping this in mind, mental health counselors and psychologists can actively work with bored individuals during the lockdown period and help them find life interesting.

Table 1 showing Mean, Standard Deviations and Intercorrelations among boredom proneness, loneliness, mindfulness, flow and perceived happiness (n=149)

S.No	Variables	Mean	S.D	1	2	3	4	5
1	Boredom proneness	21.67	6.60	–				
2	Loneliness	49.56	6.79	.475**	–			
3	Mindfulness	63.40	16.36	-.205*	-.030	–		
4	Flow	55.45	9.95	-.06	.124	.214**	–	
5	Perceived happiness	3.61	.92	-.482**	-.241**	.044	.286**	–

p<.05* ; p<.01**

Table 2 Stepwise multiple regression analysis predicting Boredom Proneness

Predictors	b	Beta	R square	t	p
Loneliness	.457	.475	.226	6.60**	.001
Mindfulness	-.077	-.191	.262	2.68**	.01

Table 3 Comparing engaged vs bored individuals on all study variables

S.No	Variables	Engaged individuals/ top scorers (n=32)	S.D	Bored individuals/ bottom scorers (n=36)	S.D	t-ratio
1	Loneliness	47.22	7.63	54.78	7.23	4.17**
2	Mindfulness	76.11	17.22	57.93	17.58	4.30**
3	Flow	76	17	52.18	13.47	6.32**

*p<.05; **p<.01

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