

7 Tips to Fight the Deadly Feeling of Boredom by Gretchen Rubin

□ One of the patron saints of my Happier at Home project, Samuel Johnson, wrote, “It is by studying little things that we attain the great art of having as little misery and as much happiness as possible.”

□ One “little thing” that can be a source of unhappiness is boredom. Waiting in traffic. Waiting for the subway. Doing the dishes. Waiting in a doctor’s office. Listening to your thirteen year old talk through her different clothing options for the day.

□ Here are seven tips to re-frame the moment. Even if you can’t escape a situation, by re-framing your emotions about it, you can transform it.

□ 1. Put the word “meditation” after the activity that’s boring you. (This is my invention.) If you’re impatient while waiting for the bus, tell yourself you’re doing “bus waiting meditation.” If you’re standing in a slow line at the drugstore, you’re doing “waiting in line meditation.” Just saying these words makes me feel very spiritual and high-minded and wise.

□ 2. Dig in. As they say, if you can’t get out of it, get into it. Diane Arbus wrote, “The Chinese have a theory that you pass through boredom into fascination, and I think it’s true.” If something is boring for two minutes, do it for four minutes. If it’s still boring, do it for eight minutes, then sixteen, and so on. Eventually, you discover that it’s not boring at all. If part of my research isn’t interesting to me—like the Dardanelles campaign for Forty Ways to Look at Winston Churchill—I read a whole book about it, and then it becomes absorbing. The same principle holds when doing boring or irritating tasks, like laundry.

□ 3. Take the perspective of a journalist or scientist. Really study what’s around you. What are people wearing, what do the interiors of buildings look like, what noises do you hear, what do the ads show? If you bring your analytical powers to bear, you can make almost anything interesting. Paradoxically, I found that understanding the theory of why waiting in line makes me crazy made me much more tolerant of waiting in line.

□ 4. Find an area of refuge. Have a mental escape route planned. Think about something delightful or uplifting (not your to-do list!). Review photos of your kids on your phone (studies show that looking at photos of loved ones provides a big mood boost). Listen to an audiobook.

□ 5. Look for a way to feel grateful. It’s a lot better to be bored while waiting in a doctor’s office than to be in agony of suspense about your test results. It’s more fun to sit around the breakfast table talking about clothes than to be away from home on a business trip. Maybe the other line at the drugstore is moving even more slowly. Etc.

□6. Consider: “Am I the boring one?” La Rochefoucauld observed, “We always get bored with those whom we bore.” I remind myself of this when I’m having a boring conversation with someone!

□7. And of course, always bring a book (in physical or virtual form).

□What strategies do you use to combat boredom?