Episode Book

EPISODE #5682

Boredom, the DMN, and the Shower Thought

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SYNOPSIS

We treat boredom as a bug and busyness as a virtue, but the research points somewhere stranger. A listener's question about a life with no empty mornings sends us through the contested science of boredom and creativity — including a phone book, a polystyrene cup, and the study that broke the folk theory. Along the way: what the default mode network actually does, why stimulating it makes people less original, and why the shower thought was never about boredom at all. We also test the hardest claim in the whole conversation — that constant busyness breeds a subtle, hard-to-name depression — and find the evidence isn't as clean as anyone would like.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Three hundred and twenty-two boxes. That's what a move actually is, once you count them. And somewhere around box two hundred, I noticed something had gone quiet in my head, and it took me another week to figure out what.



Herman

You mean beyond the obvious, which is that you were carrying your own weight in cardboard for a month.



Corn

Beyond that. Daniel wrote in, and he's been living this exact thing. He says he'd heard boredom is a necessary precursor to creativity, and the last few months he's had moving, setting up a new place with a toddler, and not one morning where there wasn't a task list running in the background. He used to think never having nothing to do sounded like the ideal. Living it, he says, got old fast, and he came out with three observations.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

First, it's a deeply unsatisfying way to live. He thinks the brain needs some portion of time where nothing has to be done. Second, as a creative, it breeds a robotic pattern. When downtime is scarce, you get formulaic about how you spend it, because the formula is a predictable way to get relaxation when the boundaries are tight. Wine, ice cream, a movie. Whatever does it for you.



Herman

That one I want to dig into.



Corn

Third, and this is the one he circles twice, constant busyness breeds a kind of depression that's hard to articulate. Not clinical, necessarily. But go a long stretch without doing things just because they're fun, and life loses its spark. He also pointed at the Sabbath as the counterexample, a forced disconnection that leaves space to be bored, and says that's when the good ideas show up. Same shape as the shower thought.



Herman

Where people think best precisely when they're not trying to think.



Corn

Which is what he's asking us. Is boredom and emptiness as necessary an ingredient to action as he's coming to believe, and can we use that to get both happier and better at what we do?



Herman

Right, so let's take his three observations at face value, because each one is a testable claim about how the mind works, and the interesting thing is that the research agrees with about two and a half of them, and the half where it disagrees is the most useful part.



Corn

Two and a half is a very specific number.



Herman

I'll cash it out. The central paradox is this. We treat boredom as a bug to fix and busyness as a virtue, and the evidence points the other way, at least partially. Idle time really does seem to be a precondition for some of our best thinking, and chronic busyness really does seem to degrade it. But the popular version of the claim, "boredom makes you creative," is close to a misreading of the research. What actually seems to help is something more specific, and that specificity is where Daniel's intuition gets vindicated and refined at the same time.



Corn

So the arc is, first, does boredom actually cause creativity, where the honest answer is that the evidence is split.



Herman

Split. Not "mixed but leaning one way." Split.



Corn

Then what's happening in the brain during rest, which takes us to the default mode network.



Herman

And to why the shower effect isn't about boredom at all.



Corn

Then the Sabbath as a structure somebody built on purpose for this exact state.



Herman

And then the hardest one, which is Daniel's third observation, because I went looking and I have to tell you honestly, there isn't a clean study that says constant busyness causes a subtle non-clinical depression. There's something adjacent, and we'll get to what's wrong with the adjacent version.



Corn

Start with the pro-boredom evidence, then, because it's the strongest.



Herman

The strongest single result comes from Mann and Cadman at the University of Central Lancashire. Two studies. Eighty participants in the first, ninety in the second. The boredom induction was almost insultingly simple. You sit there and copy numbers out of a phone book, or read them, for fifteen minutes. Then you get handed the classic divergent thinking task. Come up with uses for a polystyrene cup.



Corn

How many uses for a polystyrene cup does a person have in them?



Herman

More than you'd think, and the bored group produced significantly more of them than the control group. That's Study One. Study Two replicated it and added something better. They had raters score the answers for creativity, and the bored group's answers were rated more creative, not just more numerous. The effect sizes were large. On the second task, an eta-squared of forty-five hundredths, which for a psychology experiment is enormous.



Corn

A phone book and a polystyrene cup. That's the entire apparatus.



Herman

That's it. And one detail I love, because it's the kind of thing that makes you trust a study. Boring reading beat boring writing on some of the tasks. The authors' explanation was that writing keeps you engaged enough to block daydreaming, so you never drift, so you never make the loose association. The daydreaming is the mediator. Their conclusion was that it might be worthwhile to allow or even embrace boredom in work, education and leisure.



Corn

So far, so pro-boredom. Where does it fall apart?



Herman

It doesn't fall apart so much as it gets contradicted by other labs. There's a study in the Journal of Boredom Studies, which is a real journal, where state boredom was associated with poorer performance on divergent thinking, and trait boredom-proneness with lower creativity across the board. A systematic review in Review of Education screened two thousand eight hundred and forty-nine publications, kept nineteen studies, twenty-seven experiments, and lands on boredom as a negative predictor of creativity. A thesis on the subject concluded the relationship was complex, potentially null.



Corn

So one of the most repeated claims in productivity writing rests on a contested literature.



Herman

Which is not the same as saying it's wrong. It's saying the effect is real in some setups and absent or reversed in others, and the people quoting it never mention the second half.



Corn

Then the useful question is what distinguishes the setups where it works.



Herman

And this is where Zac Irving's work comes in, out of the University of Virginia, and it's the sharpest thing in the whole literature. He was bothered by exactly that question. His argument is that the previous studies were not measuring mind-wandering at all. They were measuring how distracted the participants were. Boredom and mind-wandering got treated as the same phenomenon, and they are not the same phenomenon.



Corn

Say the distinction plainly, because I think most people have never heard it separated.



Herman

Boredom is an aversive state. It's the feeling of wanting to be doing something else and not being able to. Mind-wandering is what your attention does when it isn't pinned to a task. You can be bored and not mind-wandering, because you're grinding on the same unsatisfying thought. You can be mildly occupied and mind-wandering beautifully. They overlap, but they're different variables, and if you conflate them you get a literature that contradicts itself.



Corn

Which is what we have.



Herman

Which is exactly what we have. So Irving ran his own experiments. Two hundred and twenty-two participants in the first, a hundred and eighteen in the second. The setup, participants brainstorm uses for a brick or a paperclip. Then they watch one of two videos. Either a deliberately boring one, two men folding laundry, or a moderately engaging one, the deli scene from When Harry Met Sally. Then they go back to the brainstorming task.



Corn

And the result is the part that breaks the folk theory.



Herman

The result is that mind-wandering predicted more creative ideas, but only during the moderately engaging video. The boring video produced fewer unusual ideas. Watching laundry folding didn't help. Watching two people argue about sandwiches helped.



Corn

So the shower thought isn't a boredom phenomenon.



Herman

It's a moderate engagement phenomenon. The shower is not boring. The shower is warm, it's sensory, it requires a little bit of low-stakes attention, and it leaves the rest of your mind free. Gardening, same thing. A walk, same thing. Irving's own framing was that you probably don't want something mind-numbingly boring like watching paint dry, you want something to occupy yourself, a walk, gardening, a shower, all of which are moderately engaging.



Corn

Then pure boredom does nothing? Or does it do something different?



Herman

Something different, and the second experiment isolates it. When participants knew they were going to return to the task, they generated more ideas during the boring video, but with lower creativity. They weren't making novel connections. They were still chewing on the original problem. Boredom kept them on the problem. Moderate engagement let them leave it and come back with something new.



Corn

That's the cleanest version of the whole thing. Boredom rumination versus idle association.



Herman

The authors put it as different kinds of thinking driving creative incubation. Engaging tasks lead to productive mind-wandering. Boring tasks may help by letting you oscillate between focused and unbounded thought. So there's a role for boredom, it's just not the role the productivity blogs gave it.



Corn

And it retroactively explains the contradiction in the first place. Mann and Cadman's phone book copying is boring, but you can drift while copying. Utterly passive boredom just pins you to the problem.



Herman

That's my read, and I'd flag it as a read. The conflation is well established as a methodological problem. How much of the older contradictory literature it explains is my synthesis, not something anybody published.



Corn

Fair. Take the brain side now, because I want to know whether this is metaphor or machinery.



Herman

It's machinery. The network you're looking for is the default mode network. It's the set of regions that come online when you're not doing anything externally demanding. Rest, mind-wandering, remembering, imagining, projecting yourself into a future scenario. It goes quiet when you're focused on a task outside your head.



Corn

And it's been linked to creativity for a while, which by itself proves nothing, because everything correlates with everything.



Herman

Correct, and that's why the Baylor study matters. They had thirteen epilepsy patients who already had electrodes implanted in their brains for clinical reasons, which is the only way you get this data ethically. Nine of them received direct electrical stimulation, and they tested alternate uses while stimulating regions of the default mode network.



Corn

And stimulating it made people more creative?



Herman

The opposite. Stimulation preferentially decreased the originality of responses, without affecting fluency and without affecting mind-wandering. Fluency held. Originality dropped. So the network isn't generating quantity, it's generating the unusual connection, the remote association, the thing that makes an answer strange and good.



Corn

You can still produce answers. They're just ordinary answers.



Herman

You can still produce answers, they're just the answers you'd have gotten anyway. There's a separate paper in Molecular Psychiatry making the same causal case from a different angle, and there are electrophysiological signatures attached to this. Gamma band activity in the thirty to seventy hertz range, theta in the four to eight range, distinguish internally directed from externally directed thought. That's not a metaphor about the mind wandering. That's a measurable oscillation pattern that differs depending on whether your attention is pointed inward or outward.



Corn

So Daniel's hunch that the brain needs a portion of time where nothing is demanded is not folk wisdom. There's a system for exactly that, and it does real work.



Herman

And it has a metabolic cost, which is the part I find striking. Idle is not off. The brain is doing expensive internal work during that time. You are not resting the machine. You're running a different program.



Corn

Then take his first observation, the robotic relaxation pattern, and connect it to Irving's data, because I think there's a straight line here.



Herman

There is, and this is where his intuition is better than he knows. Think about what happens to your downtime when you have a toddler and a move and a full work week. The downtime shrinks, and because it shrinks, it becomes precious, and because it's precious, you optimize it for reliability. You don't have three hours to try something ambiguous. You have forty minutes and you need to feel better at the end of it.



Corn

So you reach for the thing that reliably delivers.



Herman

Wine, ice cream, a movie. And notice what all three of those have in common. They're passive. They're high-reliability in the sense that they will produce a mood change, and they're low in the moderate-engagement range. You are consuming, not half-doing. There's no walk, no gardening, no shower, nothing where your hands are lightly occupied and your mind is free, because those feel like a waste of scarce time. They don't reliably deliver the relief you're paying for.



Corn

So the formula is rational, and that's what makes it a trap. You optimize for the constraint you're under, and the optimization is exactly what starves the mechanism.



Herman

It's not a discipline failure. It's a rational response to a real constraint, and the cost is invisible, because you're getting what you asked for. You asked for relief and you got relief. You just didn't get the mind-wandering that the relief was supposed to make room for.



Corn

So the move isn't more downtime. It's a different texture of the downtime you already have.



Herman

Which, and I want to be careful here, is still a hypothesis. Irving's lab manipulated a fifteen-minute video in a psychology experiment. The translation to a person's Tuesday evening is an inference, a reasonable one, but an inference.



Corn

Take the Sabbath, then, because Daniel raised it and it's the closest thing to a worked example.



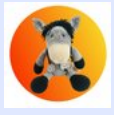
Herman

It's the best example I know of a cultural technology built for exactly this. There's a 2013 study by Dein and Loewenthal on the mental health benefits and costs of Sabbath observance among Orthodox Jews, and I want to flag the costs, because that paper is unusual in that it documents both and the popular coverage only ever quotes the benefits.



Corn

What are the costs?



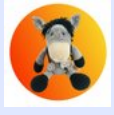
Herman

The restrictions bite in ways outsiders don't see. You can't drive, can't cook, can't use a phone. If your family doesn't observe, it creates friction. If your work doesn't accommodate it, it costs you. There's a whole category of people for whom the structure is experienced as constraint rather than release. That's a real finding and it's underreported.



Corn

Noted. Benefits?



Herman

And then there's a 2025 study in BMC Public Health, which found that people who observe a regular weekly rest, religious or self-imposed, sleep better, feel less fatigued during the week, and report better mental well-being. And the striking part is that it held regardless



Herman (continued)

of religiosity. The rest itself was doing the work.



Corn

Not the theology. The structure.



Herman

And here's why it maps onto Irving so neatly. The Sabbath removes the task list entirely, which is the laundry-video condition, no problem to chew on. But it doesn't leave you staring at a wall. It fills the space with ritual, meals, walking, conversation, study, time with people. Which is to say it's a moderate-engagement environment for twenty-five hours. It's engineered.



Corn

It's the deli scene, at scale, once a week.



Herman

That's the frame, and the people writing about it reach for similar language. The description that gets quoted is that Shabbat creates a space detached from utility, competition and achievement, and that it's within that unproductive time that reflection and renewal happen. Unproductive in quotes. The whole point is that the non-productivity is load-bearing.



Corn

And the secular versions are the same shape. Tiffany Shlain's Technology Shabbat, twenty-four hours offline every week.



Herman

Twenty-four hours unplugged, intentional timeouts. They're all trying to reproduce the structure without the ritual. And I'd like to know whether they get the same effect, because my suspicion is that a self-imposed phone ban is much easier to break than a religious



Herman (continued)

obligation, and the enforcement is most of the value.



Corn

That's an honest question rather than a finding.



Herman

It's an honest question. I don't have the study.



Corn

Now the hard one. The subtle depression.



Herman

This is where I have to be straight with him, because I went looking for the clean version of this claim and it doesn't exist. There is no study that says constant busyness causes a subtle non-clinical depression. That's his framing, and it's a real thing to experience, but nobody has operationalized it as a construct and measured it.



Corn

What does exist?



Herman

The adjacent thing, and the adjacent thing has a catch in it. Boredom-proneness, which is a trait, a stable disposition to experience boredom across situations, correlates with what the literature calls cognitive and affective dysregulation. Poor self-control, excessive mind-wandering, depression, aggression. That's from a study of nearly two thousand undergraduates. But read the variable carefully. It's boredom-proneness, the trait, not the state of having idle time.



Corn

So it's people who are bored easily and often, not people who currently have a free afternoon.



Herman

Which is close to the opposite of what Daniel's describing. He's not boredom-prone. He's boredom-deprived. The trait finding can't be used to say that a person with too little idle time gets depressed, because it's measuring something else entirely. This is exactly the conflation problem we started with, in a different costume.



Corn

And the other adjacent thing?



Herman

A 2022 paper in Behavioral Sciences on creativity and well-being during the pandemic. People who increased their creative pursuits reported higher self-esteem, higher optimism, lower depression. Which is suggestive, but it's an observational study during a weird period, and it can't tell you which direction the arrow points. Maybe creativity improves mood. Maybe people who are already doing well take up more creative hobbies.



Corn

So what do we tell him?



Herman

We tell him what he's describing is real and under-measured. The mechanism is plausible, and it's consistent with what we know about the default mode network and the reward system, but the specific claim, constant busyness causes a subtle depression, is a hypothesis that doesn't have a study behind it yet. That's a legitimate place for research to go, and it hasn't gone there.



Corn

There's a counter-argument I want on the table, because it's the one that gets left out of these conversations.



Herman

The routine-enables-creativity case.



Corn

The version I've seen argued is that routine creates a structure or foundation on which to be creative, and that it's hard to be creative in a productive way when you're given total freedom. The opposite claim is that routine creates boredom and boredom constricts creativity, so you get a genuine tension, not a settled question.



Herman

And the tension is real, and I think the resolution is in the distinction we've been drawing all episode. Routine and constraint are good at removing decision fatigue. They automate the low-level choices and free up the executive budget. What they don't do is put you into the moderate-engagement state where mind-wandering happens. You can have a perfectly routinized life where every gap gets filled with something, and the structure is excellent and the incubation never occurs.



Corn

The scaffolding and the space are two different things.



Herman

They're two different things, and the failure mode of the productivity world is that it's extremely good at building the scaffolding, and then it fills every gap the scaffolding creates with more scaffolding.



Corn

Reframe Daniel's question. It isn't boredom versus action.



Herman

It's which kind of rest enables which kind of action. The paradox dissolves once you stop treating rest as a single substance. There's the rest that recovers you, sleep, which is a different system entirely. There's the rest that releases you, the wine and the movie, which is real and sometimes exactly right. And there's the rest that incubates, the walk, the shower, the garden, the twenty-five hours with no list. They're not interchangeable, and the one that gets squeezed out first is always the third.



Corn

Which is the one nobody schedules, because it looks like nothing.



Herman

It has no output. You can't put it on a calendar without feeling faintly ridiculous. And it's exactly the one with the causal evidence behind it.



Corn

Herman, before we close, there's someone at the desk who's been waiting on this one.



Hilbert

You've got the video wrong. It's one man folding laundry. Not two. One man, one basket, and he does it the same way every time, and that's the whole point of the tape. Two men would have been a conversation. A conversation is engaging.



Corn

Huh. He's right, actually. Two men folding laundry is a scene.



Hilbert

One man is a procedure. I know that tape. I worked a job in the late eighties where the thing you did was watch a procedure for four hours a night.



Herman

Doing what?



Hilbert

Nothing. That's the job. There was a room with a machine in it and the machine ran by itself and my job was to be in the room in case it stopped. Four hours of that. No radio, because the supervisor said the radio made people stop paying attention.



Corn

Four hours a night of nothing.



Hilbert

You learn to bring something. The first month I read the signs on the wall. Then I did the wiring diagram from memory. Then I started planning the shed, and I planned that shed down to the hinges. Every night, the same shed, better hinges.



Herman

That's the rumination we were talking about. You were still on the problem.



Hilbert

For a while, yes. The shed did not change. And then one night I got bored of my own shed and started thinking about a completely different shed, and that one had no floor, and I couldn't figure out why a shed would have no floor.



Corn

Why would a shed have no floor?



Hilbert

It wouldn't. But the no-floor shed made me think about the foundation, and the foundation made me think about drainage, and drainage was the actual problem, because the yard flooded every spring and the real answer was a French drain, and I had been planning a shed for six weeks when I needed to be planning a ditch.



Herman

That's the oscillation. You went from focused on the problem to unbounded and back, and the unbounded pass is the one that found the ditch.



Hilbert

The ditch took a weekend and the shed never got built. But here's what I'd tell your man with the boxes. It wasn't the boredom that did it. On the boring nights I got nothing. It was the nights where I had just enough to do. I started bringing a knife and a piece of softwood and I'd whittle, and the whittling kept my hands busy and the ditch showed up on the third night of whittling and never on a night when I was just sitting.



Corn

The hands.



Hilbert

You say shower and walk and garden. All of those are things you do with your hands. Nobody says sitting in a chair is good for thinking, and they say it for a reason.



Herman

The claw thing is real, too. That's presumably why it was a knife and a piece of wood and not, I don't know, knitting.



Hilbert

Fine motor has never been the strong suit of the species. You work with what you've got.



Corn

Daniel's formula of wine and ice cream is what happens when the whittling gets squeezed out.



Hilbert

It's what happens when you have forty minutes and you're tired. The wine is fine. The wine isn't the problem. The problem is when the wine is the only tool in the kit and you've forgotten what the other tools did.



Herman

Because the other tool is the one with the floorless shed in it.



Hilbert

The ditch. Nobody remembers the ditch. They only remember the shed they didn't build and assume the whole thing was wasted.



Corn

Thank you, Hilbert.



Herman

Okay, so here's the thing his story makes concrete. The mechanism we've been describing in the abstract has a cheap, unglamorous, hand-involving version, and it's the version nobody schedules, because it doesn't look like work and it doesn't look like rest. It looks like whittling.



Corn

It's the version that produced the ditch. Which was the actual answer.



Herman

If you take one thing from the research, it's this, and it's Irving's framing rather than the internet's. What helps is moderately engaging activity plus mind-wandering. Not pure boredom, and not the total absence of busyness. The pure boredom condition just pins you to the problem. This isn't a case for quitting things or doing less. It's a case for protecting the middle band, the walk and the shower and the whittling, because that's the band that chronic busyness eats first.



Corn

The thing Daniel named that research can't help him with is the joy part. Nobody has a clean study that says the spark goes out when the idle time goes. That's a real gap and he's describing a real loss, and the honest answer is that he's ahead of the literature on that one.



Herman

He is. And I don't love saying that, because usually I can point to something. But I'd rather say it than pretend a study exists.



Corn

That's a better place to leave it. So the open question for anyone listening is not whether you need more rest. It's whether the rest you already have is the right kind, and whether you'd notice the floorless shed if it showed up. Because the research says it only shows up if you leave the gap open.



Herman

Hilbert Flumingtop keeps the lights on and the levels right.



Corn

If you found this useful, a review helps other listeners find the show, and if you've got your own experience with boredom, busyness and creativity, we'd love to hear it. Email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts, the human-AI collaboration podcast.



Corn

We'll be back soon.