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Men Would Rather Shock Themselves Than Be Alone With Their Thoughts

A study finds that pain is preferable to boredom for most men. What gives?

By [Keith Gillogly](#) Jul 20 2021, 4:05 PM

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We all get bored. This is not a bad thing. In fact, experts think that we could use more boredom in order to spark creativity and productivity. As parents, we need to teach kids to be bored. But it seems we might also need to teach men the same lesson. It turns out that men are terrible at making it through uninterrupted thinking time. So much so that, one study shows, they'd rather shock themselves than stare boredom in the face.

Several years ago, participants in a study on boredom found themselves seated alone in a bare room containing no clocks, no posters, no distractions at all. Cell phones were prohibited. So were books, writing implements, and most everything else — thoughts alone would have to entertain. “There are only two rules,” recalls [Erin Westgate](#), a social psychologist at the University of Florida and a co-author on the study. “Don’t get up out of your chair, and don’t fall asleep. But otherwise you’re free to think about anything you want.”

Unsurprisingly, most participants quickly grew bored. More surprisingly, the [2014 study](#) indicated that some people, especially men, would rather hurt themselves than be stuck in their own heads for a mere quarter of an hour.

The researchers offered only one activity to the 42 college student participants: They could freely press a button to receive a mild electric shock via a device attached at the ankle. Many went right ahead and shocked themselves during their 15-minute “thinking” period. “If you shocked yourself at least once, you tended to do it at least twice,” Westgate says. One man did so 190 times. (As a severe outlier, and as someone who may want to look into [BDSM](#), the researchers excluded him from the analysis.)

Significantly more men than women opted to shock themselves. Sixty-seven percent of men in the study gave themselves at least one electric shock throughout the thinking period, but only 25 percent of women chose to do so. The shock was designed to be unpleasant but not too painful, similar to a static shock. The participants had all gotten to experience it earlier, and they reported that they would pay an average of about [two hypothetical dollars](#) to not have to go through it again, despite many then freely choosing to press the button when left alone.

Men pressed the button more often, probably not because they're more easily bored than women or because they're somehow worse thinkers, Westgate says. "It seems to be more about men's and women's reaction to boredom." It may be that the electric buzz piqued men's sensation-seeking tendencies and affinity for more intense activities. In other words, men may be more likely to shock themselves when alone with their thoughts for the same reason that they're more likely to try extreme sports like BASE jumping.

However, there are better ways to react to boredom than self-harm — particularly when you're not trapped in a lab with nothing to do. No single activity will solve boredom for everyone, but finding activities that are both meaningful and optimally challenging is best. Look for something that does more than just make you feel better in the moment, and be wary of harmful activities like unhealthy snacking or drinking that provide only temporary relief.

Our own minds are notoriously difficult to control. Steering thoughts in a pleasant direction, and keeping them there, isn't easy. Meditation or other techniques to control thinking can help quiet the bored mind. But in the life of a busy dad, having nothing to do might sound like a luxury. Perhaps boredom, at least occasionally, can even be embraced.