

LETTERS FROM MAINE

Boredom's Not All Bad

That's so borrrring!" How many times have you heard those words roll off the tongue of a teenager or preteen? For a decade or two, "boring" has been the description du jour for any activity that a young person doesn't want to or can't perform. Adolescents seem to be particularly vulnerable to this misuse of language. In part, it is the result of their position on the learning curve. But, just as often, teenagers are mirrors for adult behavior they see around them.

For example, I can recall seeing a 14-year-old boy whose office encounter sheet listed his chief complaint as "anxiety." His mother began the visit by telling me that her son was doing poorly in school because school made him "anxious" and that he was having trouble paying attention.

I struggled for 20 minutes trying to discover what was creating this young man's anxiety. He denied fears about bullying, or using the toilet, or getting ill. He interacted easily with his peers and some teachers.

The only clue he gave me was that he became more anxious as the school day wore on and culminated in the last class of the day in which he was doing relatively well academically. Finally, I asked him the question I should have started with, "So, tell me what it feels like when you're anxious?" "Well," he replied, "as it gets closer to the end of the day, I am just very anxious to get out of that place. It's so bad by the last period that I have trouble paying attention."

So without pulling out my prescription pad, I was able to cure him of his anxiety disorder by pointing out that "anxious" can have a variety of meanings. I can't recall whether we eventually unearthed any learning disabilities. But I'm pretty sure we decided that he was simply suffering from garden-variety boredom, aggravated by the school system's recent conversion to 80-minute class-

es—a format that would have challenged my adolescent mind and still often tests my adult attention span.

As in this young man's case, boredom can be difficult to diagnose. Many parents attribute their child's misbehavior in school and poor academic performance to their belief that the school is failing to present material that is sufficiently challenging. Often the bigger problem is not boredom, but that the child's social skills aren't up to the challenge of a classroom setting.

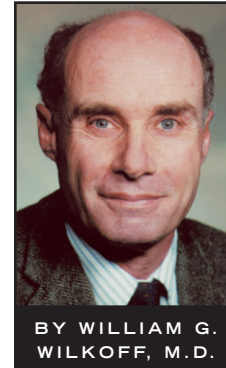
But maybe we should not always consider boredom a challenge to be mastered. To my surprise, boredom has recently become the target of psychological and neuropsychological research. In a New York Times book review by Jennifer Schuessler entitled, "Our Boredom, Ourselves" (Jan. 24, 2010), the re-

viewer refers to a study in which healthy subjects were placed in a functional MRI scanner with nothing to do except lie there. The researchers discovered that the portion of the subject's brain that is believed to participate in thinking about what other people are feeling, thinking, and hypothesizing was firing actively. Their brains were consuming only slightly less energy than when they had been asked to perform basic tasks.

Parents who are allowing their children's brains to be continually bombarded by video displays are depriving them of something we all should value more—a little more time alone with our thoughts.

On the other hand, in a study of civil servants in England who reported being very bored at work, they were 2½ times more likely to die of cardiac causes, suggesting the old adage holds: You *can* have too much of a good thing.

DR. WILKOFF practices general pediatrics in a multispecialty group practice in Brunswick, Maine. E-mail him at pdnews@elsevier.com.



BY WILLIAM G. WILKOFF, M.D.

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