

Don't Worry, Be Bored

By Melissa Rooney
Published: January, 2012
My View, The Durham News

Like most, I've been very interested in the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement. My husband and I even took our kids to Zuccotti Park while visiting family in NY in October. I waited for a directive to 'Take the Capitalism out of Christmas' and boycott all but local, independent (non-traded) stores during the holidays. The resulting decline in stock prices would have gotten the attention of the 1% and the legislators who vote on their behalf. If even a large minority of Americans participated in earnest, virtually every economy in the world would have felt reverberations.

Is it that OWS was simply too big, involved too many diverse groups, to organize a cohesive action agenda? Or is it that we Americans are simply unwilling to sacrifice our habitual annual splurge on gluttony, even when we can't afford it?

Perhaps we're addicted to the neuronal dopamine rush that comes from buying new stuff, a chemical effect that, like nicotine, has been exploited to make millions of dollars for the 1%. Perhaps the average brain is simply too weak to withstand the bombardment of audiovisual temptations at this time of year and to distinguish between the selfish high we get from buying something for someone and the truly selfless gift of giving.

Then again, perhaps our busy American lifestyle over-stimulates and exhausts us to the point where we can't even see the true value and repercussions of our actions. At the end of the day, we have only enough energy to collapse into our couches and mindlessly absorb whatever eye-candy is on the television, including heaps of advertisements enticing us to purchase things we don't need.

When my daughter was about 3 months old, one of the moms in my Australian mother's group (I was living in Melbourne at the time) commented that all American babies are over-stimulated. I was somewhat insulted at the time, but since returning to the states, the sentiment often comes to mind. In trying to identify warning signs of over-stimulation in my kids (especially to pin-point naptime for the babies), I recognized that I (and all adults) become unhealthily over-stimulated more regularly than we realize or admit. The busy lifestyles we must espouse in order to live the American dream (that is, to get/do everything we want) leave us little time to reflect on ourselves, our loved ones, our world, or just to 'let things marinate', as a good friend once advised me.

As author Richard Carlson has underscored ([Don't Sweat the Small Stuff](#), 1997), we have become human-doings rather than human beings. It's become nearly impossible for us to sit still, much less relax.

Much of our anxiety 'stems from our busy, overactive minds always needing entertainment, something to focus on, and always wondering 'What's next?' While we're eating dinner, we wonder what's for dessert. While eating dessert...it's 'What should we do this weekend?' After we've been out, we walk into the house and immediately turn on the television [or computer], pick up the phone, open a book, or start cleaning.'

This preponderance of American over-stimulation (a.k.a. anxiety) has even been confirmed scientifically. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, anxiety disorders are the number 1 mental health problem in America. Forty million US adults (20% of the US population) suffer from anxiety disorders, and 28.8 percent of adult Americans will have some form of anxiety disorder in their lifetime – the highest level in the world. In March 2008, the *Solutions Research Group* reported that 68 percent of all Americans feel anxious when not connected in one way or another and found that feelings of "disconnect anxiety" affected people of all

ages, triggering sentiments like "dazed," "disoriented," "tense," "inadequate" and even "panic." The underlying reasons were age-dependent, with teens and young adults fretting about social communications, and older adults worrying about work and safety issues.

Although, anxiety disorders cost the U.S. workplace **\$46.6 billion** annually (88% resulting from lost productivity according to the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry), US businesses are clearly not interested in reducing workloads by hiring more personnel and/or permitting more personal time to alleviate the problem. So it's up to us.

Carlson recommends that we allow ourselves -- if need be, schedule time for ourselves -- to be bored, to learn 'the art of relaxing, of just being rather than doing, for a few minutes each day.' By doing so, we take enormous pressure off ourselves to perform and give ourselves the freedom to 'not know' for a period of time, enabling our minds to be stronger, more focused and more creative.

So my New Year's Resolution is to 'be bored' for a short time each day. I challenge all readers to do the same. Barring that, you may want to look into investing in pharmaceutical companies that concentrate on anti-anxiety medications.