You Probably Don't Have a Long Enough Attention Span to Read This

Korin Miller May 14, 2015

You'd like to think that you have a longer attention span than a goldfish but new research says that's just not the case.

1 A study of more than 2,000 people by Microsoft found that our average attention span is eight seconds, down significantly from previous research conducted in 2000 that found we have an attention span of 12 seconds. (For the record, the average goldfish is believed to have a nine-second attention span.)

2 Study researchers found their data through surveys of participants as well as electroencephalograms (EEGs), which detect electrical activity in the brain.

3 The study also looked at how we use smartphones and found that 77 percent of 18 to 24-year-olds reach for their phone when they're bored, 52 percent check their phone every 30 minutes or less, and 79 percent use their phone while they're watching TV.

4 David Greenfield, PhD, an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry claims that "It's not a far stretch to see that digital technology, particularly the Internet and any portal that gives you instant information, can decrease your brain's need to expend effort to get information quickly." Over time, he says, we reprogram our brains to work this way, and can decrease our attention spans in the process.

5 As a result, real, non-digital life becomes a little duller, making us more inclined to flit from one thing to another to be stimulated.

6 According to a Pew Internet survey, people are mixed on what shorter attention spans mean for our future. In a 2012 study, 55 percent of participants said that they think it will help us multi-task and learn better, while 42 percent think it will keep up from retaining information. Another Pew Internet survey found that 87 percent of teachers believe new technologies are creating an "easily distracted generation with short attention spans" and 64 percent say digital technology does more to distract students than help them learn.

7 "We found that this is just what people are comfortable with," he tells Yahoo Health. "It's much easier to build with the flow of existing behavior than to try to create new behaviors."

8 While people like Haynes are trying to work within our existing limitations, Greenfield says the jury is still out on whether our shorter attention spans are a bad thing. "Neurobiologically, we're not designed to do this," he says. Having regular access to technology is making us hyper-vigilant all the time, he says, which increases levels of the stress hormone cortisol in our bodies, reducing our ability to focus. And when you can't focus as well, you can't retain as much information.

9 It *is* possible to increase our attention spans, says Greenfield — we just need to be aware of how we're using technology and then scale back on the forms that are most distracting.

10 So, next time you're waiting in line at the grocery store, coffee shop, or anywhere, challenge yourself to stay off your phone. Your attention span will thank you.