



— PRESSING
ISSUE

More than a little distracted lately...?

Feel like you've got ADHD sometimes? *WH* investigates why so many of us have lost our focus – and reveals how we can get our minds back on track

BY ALICE ELLIS



You sit down at your desk to achieve something. Emails start flowing in. A text message pings. Facebook tells you it's your primary school mate's birthday. When you google something, ASOS ads pop up to tempt you to buy a new pair of Nikes. Taste.com.au reminds you how hungry you are. BuzzFeed suggests hundreds of must-read lists – as if you don't already have enough lists of your own to work your way through.

Add all that to the IRL distractions around you – chatty colleagues, the radio, the chores you left at home, endless life admin – and it's no wonder you've started exhibiting the symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Think restlessness. Trouble relaxing. Being easily sidetracked. Poor listening skills. Inattentive driving. Trouble starting tasks. Lateness. Angry outbursts. Inability to prioritise tasks. Sounding familiar?

Our shrinking attention spans

Here's a sad fact: we now have shorter attention spans than goldfish. A Canadian study released by Microsoft in 2015 found our average attention span is a measly eight seconds. Goldfish can manage nine. Bah-bow. Experts blame digital technologies. We take in five times as much information every day as we did just 25 years ago – the equivalent of reading 175 newspapers from cover to cover, says neuroscientist Dr Daniel Levitin, author of *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload*.

And that information shoots at us from every angle, points out Dr Stuart Johnstone from the University of Wollongong's School of Psychology. "Our day-to-day lives now typically involve a lot of switching of attention from one thing to the next, whether in the workplace or in your personal life, including engagement with electronic devices, social [media], etcetera."

Digital technology has led to rapid shifts in our attention – and lots of multitasking. And by now we all know that multitasking isn't the way to get shit done. "It feels productive, but actually, switching from one task to another is an effort for our brain, resulting in less available energy for each job and a poorer result overall," says Brisbane-based clinical psychologist Lana Hall. Enter cloudy thinking.

Tech regret

We know that listening to our mate about her PCOS diagnosis is more important than finding out what Lola Berry had for lunch, so why are we sidetracked as easily as a hyperactive six-year-old? "Our minds notice new and different events – they require attention in case they pose a threat," says



THAT'S FOWL

Hall. Then there's the fact that social media draws us in because we're hardwired to respond to connecting with others. "To ignore it may mean being ostracised from the group – which used to mean certain death. Now we're accessible, socially, 24/7." Unnecessary much?

Hall adds that we no longer have to wait like once upon a time (remember those days, pre-ATMs and net banking, having to line up to deposit and withdraw cash?). "Nowadays we don't exercise our patience and concentration muscles very regularly," says Hall. "Want to know how to make a [moss garden]? No need to trek to the library, find the right book, take it home and read it until you find the right information. Just google it. And if the video still hasn't loaded after 30 seconds, we've already clicked away to look up something else." This info overload is making us tired. "And being tired

makes it much more difficult for us to concentrate," adds Hall. Vicious. Cycle. So, does this goldfish evolution mean technology has *changed* our brains? "In basic terms, every experience we have is rewiring our brains," says *WH* emotions expert Dr Alice Boyes.

What's the prob?

OK, so our attention spans have shrunk, but does that *really* matter? "Distracted behaviour can impact negatively on all areas of a person's life: relationships, work, study, health," says psychologist Dr Yuliya Richard from Blue Horizon Counselling in Sydney. "At work, unfocused or easily distracted people working



CUTTING
EDGE

COULD YOU HAVE ACTUAL ADHD?

By Sushma Subramanian

on several projects can find it difficult to meet deadlines or persevere through difficult or tedious tasks.” Richard points out this inattentiveness can lead to feelings of frustration and negative self-evaluation. “People who find it difficult to concentrate on a task might feel discouraged and less motivated to persevere with the task.” So that’s a yes.

Distraction prevents us from shooting goals or making positive changes, says Hall, which is why so many people with *actual* ADHD struggle to do so. “With almost all my clients, no matter their personal goal, a big obstacle to change is how to stay focused on their goal without being distracted all the time.” Another problem: we never have time to get bored these days. And yes, that’s a *problem*, says Hall. “Having time to be bored and daydream leads us to find creative solutions to our problems. If that time’s filled by easily available distractions like checking Facebook, you don’t give yourself a chance to come up with novel solutions to your problems.”

Mobile devices make us feel as if we’re connected and not missing out on anything, says Richard, but they’re actually making us miss out on important stuff, like the people sitting right in front of us. Isn’t *that* ironic, Alanis? Two studies, one in *Environment and Behavior* and the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, found that the mere presence of a mobile phone, even when not in use, lessens the quality of your face-to-face interactions. “In [the presence of mobiles], people have the constant urge to seek out information, check for communication and direct their thoughts to other people and worlds,” writes the research team from the *Environment and Behavior* study. “Even without active use, the presence [...] has the potential to divert



The condition has become a punchline associated with hyper boys, but ADHD – marked by distraction, daydreaming, forgetfulness, procrastination – has been largely overlooked in adults. Let us explain something: there’s no such thing as adult-onset ADHD. People who have it were likely born with it, says Dr David Goodman, author of *The Black Book of ADHD*, and probably developed symptoms by age 12. What’s now coming to light though, is that a huge number of women have somehow made it from then to adulthood sans diagnosis. One theory: while ADHD affects up to 10 per cent of all kids, it’s ID’d twice as often in boys than girls, who are more likely to doodle or stare out the window during class than cause a scene, says Dr Patricia Quinn, co-author of *Understanding Women With AD/HD*. “Girls manifest their ADHD symptoms differently because they learn to be people pleasers. They learn

not to show others they’re not paying attention.” And they may subconsciously develop coping mechanisms... for a while, at least. That becomes harder with the distractions of modern life: in the 1970s, a woman with ADHD might have been able to hide her symptoms, while modern-day ladies’ symptoms may appear magnified. Undiagnosed ADHD has been linked to low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, relationship problems, low incomes and weight issues. Think your inability to focus might be impairing your life? Ask yourself two questions, says Dr Craig Surman, co-author of *Fast Minds: How To Thrive If You Have ADHD (Or Think You Might)*: “Am I frustrated by a constant struggle to perform the way I know I should be able to?” And second: “Would my life be very different if I could pay better attention and stick with tasks?” Yes to both? Talk to a GP, who might refer you to an ADHD specialist.

individuals from face-to-face exchanges. Individuals are more likely to miss subtle cues, facial expressions and changes in the tone of their conversation partner's voice, and have less eye contact." Time to keep it in your bag over brunch.

This focus away from real life also makes us anxious. "We often check our phones in the hope there will be some piece of positive information – a message, something funny to watch," says Hall. "But before we check, we don't know what will be there and that actually makes us stressed. The time between deciding to check and actually checking raises our stress levels just a little bit. It can make you depressed, too – if you get distracted by what other people are doing, it's easy to compare their life to yours, and you start to feel worse than if you'd stayed in the present moment, which you were enjoying until you saw your friend's pics of Tuscany!"

Get your focuS back

So what to do? Hall suggests considering what you really value, then committing to focus on those things. "If you ask people what really matters to them most, the majority will say their family and friends, their health, career advancement, hobbies or some form of community service. But these activities so often get neglected while we quickly check our phones, etcetera." Her solution: "Keep a log of what you do with your time each day for a few weeks. Then add up how much time goes on things that don't really matter to you, but that took your attention. When you objectively look at what you're doing, it can be a real motivation to make changes to stay more focused."

As with most modern-day plagues, one of the main ways to tackle it is through – yep, you probably guessed it – mindfulness (stay with us, even if you can't bear to hear that term again). "Technology has increased our accessibility and our reactivity, leading to the loss of 'present moment awareness'," says psychologist Sue Pratt from LifeWorks Relationship Counselling and Education Services (lifeworks.com.au).

In case the "washing the dishes"-style mindfulness techniques bore the hell out of you and you'd rather your mind drift off, Hall gives us another mindfulness drill: "Just go for a walk without your phone and wallet, with no destination in mind, and the intention of just noticing the things around you as you walk," says Hall. Boyes points out that walking meditations are particularly good for people who have trouble concentrating, since you don't have to sit still.

So... congratulations for making it all the way to the end of this story – all isn't lost in the concentration stakes. Want to reclaim your full focus? Try our "Bite-sized tips for beating distraction" to power through your day. **WH**

BITE-SIZED TIPS FOR BEATING DISTRACTION

Short enough for you to read through without getting sidetracked

DO KEY STUFF IN THE AM. "Figure out what matters to you most at the moment – exercise, a chat with your partner, learning something new – and do that as soon as you wake up, rather than checking your emails," says Hall. "That way the best, most focused part of you will go to the thing that matters to you most, before distractions creep in."

KEEP YOUR EYES FIXED. Adult ADHD coach Terry Matlen tells ADHD sufferers to keep their eyes trained on whoever's speaking to them to remain focused. "You'll reduce your distractibility by engaging two senses: looking and listening."

EAT PLENTY OF PROTEIN. Dr Ron Hoffman, author of *The Natural Approach to Attention Deficit Disorder*, says protein-rich foods provide essential building blocks for alertness-inducing brain chemicals.

START TRADITIONS. "Develop rituals in your significant relationships and family time that have a focus or framework," says Pratt. Taco Tuesdays, for the win.

COMPLETE JUST ONE TASK. Finishing one thing is way more satisfying than half-finished two things – or quarter-finished four, says Hall. "The satisfaction you get from completing a task will boost your mood and motivation and encourage you to keep up the habit of the singular focus, which over time will train your brain to concentrate."

FIND YOUR TASK INTERESTING. If you tell yourself, "I'd rather eat dirt than do this task," you make it harder for yourself to stay focused on it. Before starting, find *something* interesting about the task.

MODERATE WEB TIME. "Turn off notifications on your phone and commit to only checking a site once a day at a certain time," says Hall. We're looking at you, Facebook. "Use a specially designed blocking tool on your device to force you to do this. Delete apps from your phone so you're forced to log in through the website to make checking harder."