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# BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

## 6 Minute English

### Goldfish, brains and phones



*This is not a word-for-word transcript*

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#### Neil

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English – the programme where we bring you an interesting topic and six items of vocabulary. I'm Neil.

#### Catherine

And I'm Catherine. Now, this programme is six minutes long.

#### Neil

Yes. It's 6 Minute English!

#### Catherine

And we have a challenge for everyone – can you stay focused for the full six minutes?

#### Neil

Sounds easy? Maybe not, because today we're talking about our **attention spans**: are they shrinking?

#### Catherine

That's right, so we're asking today: is the length of time we can focus on something – that's our **attention span** – actually getting shorter? Now, one study says that – in fact, it claims the human **attention span** is now shorter than that of a goldfish.

#### Neil

Can that be true? Smartphones, the internet, social media – these all certainly do take up a lot of our attention. But how much? How long do we look at our mobile phones for in a day, on average? Is it...

- a) around 30 minutes,
- b) around two and a half hours, or
- c) over three hours?

#### Catherine

I tend to be quite busy, but I know some people are really addicted to their mobile phones so I'm going to say around two and a half hours - that's answer 'b'.

**Neil**

OK, so, a report released by Microsoft said the average human attention span in 2000 was 12 seconds. Since then it's fallen to just eight seconds.

**Catherine**

Right, and that's a massive change in a very short time. Now, the year 2000 was just before the boom in digital media and smartphones, so many think they're to blame for all these **distractions** – now, distractions are things which take away our focus or attention.

**Neil**

Yes. And we mentioned goldfish earlier – goldfish reportedly have an **attention span** of nine seconds. That's one more than phone-obsessed humans with a mere eight seconds!

**Catherine**

And there's a phrase in English – we say 'to have the **attention span** of a goldfish'. Or 'the memory of a goldfish'. So these poor... poor gold fish, Neil.

**Neil**

Yes, they get a **bad press**, don't they? That's a phrase which means 'criticism' – especially criticism in the media and especially in newspapers – or the 'press', as we call it.

**Catherine**

So – is it really true than humans are now even more easily **distracted** than fish?

**Neil**

Well, BBC radio programme More or Less recently investigated this claim.

**Catherine**

That's right. And they found out a couple of things. Firstly – they couldn't find evidence of the research that Microsoft quoted in their report. In other words, the programme couldn't find scientific evidence that our **attention spans** are in fact shrinking.

**Neil**

And secondly – the psychologist they spoke to said there are problems with the idea of measuring **attention spans** in the first place. It's a term that's widely used, but it's not very scientific.

**Catherine**

Sounds **fishy**.

**Neil**

Yes. **Fishy** means 'suspicious', by the way. Sorry, goldfish. Again.

### **Catherine**

So, are we humans in fact more easily **distracted** than before? More or Less asked Dr Gemma Briggs, a psychologist at the Open University, if human beings are less able to focus these days.

### **INSERT**

#### **Dr Gemma Briggs, Psychology lecturer, Open University**

It's all **down to** the individual; it's all **down to** how you choose to apply your attention. So attention-switching ability may well have developed in recent years, in the age of the smartphone and the internet. But because someone's **distracted** by their smartphone or wanting to quickly Google something, it doesn't mean that they then don't have the ability to control and sustain their attention when they carry out another task.

### **Neil**

So she says we're not necessarily more easily **distracted**. Instead, we may actually be better at switching our attention quickly between different tasks.

### **Catherine**

That's right. She's really saying we can **multitask** better than before. And that means we can focus on many different tasks, each for a shorter period of time.

### **Neil**

She said: "It's all **down to** how you choose to apply your attention." Let's just highlight that phrase **down to**. Here, it means 'depends on'. It all depends on how you choose to apply your attention.

### **Catherine**

So – maybe our **attention spans** aren't getting shorter, we just choose to look at our phones a lot more.

### **Neil**

Which reminds me today's question. I asked you how long on average we spend looking at our phones, and you said?

### **Catherine**

Well, my **attention span** is not that short that I can't remember that I said two and a half hours.

### **Neil**

And the answer – if you believe the research – is 2.42 hours per day so, pretty good guess there, Catherine.

### **Catherine**

Thank you.

**Neil**

That comes from Chicago-based research firm Dscout. And what about this: the group they surveyed touched their mobiles over 2,600 times a day. Do you touch your phone 2,600 times a day, Catherine?

**Catherine**

I try not to, what about you?

**Neil**

It's probably more than that to be honest. Now, I'm sure everyone wants to get back to touching their phones – or maybe they're even touching them now as they listen – but either way, let's have a review of today's phrases.

**Catherine**

OK, so first we had **attention span** – that's the length of time we can focus on something. And mine is definitely shorter than it used to be... Neil? Neil?

**Neil**

Sorry – I just got **distracted** there by a message on my phone. Apologies.

**Catherine**

That's alright. So, next up we had **a bad press**. Goldfish get **a bad press**. Social media gets **a bad press**. And this means they all get criticism in the media.

**Neil**

And we had **fishy**. If something's fishy, it's suspicious.

**Catherine**

And we had **multitask**. To **multitask** is to do several things at once.

**Neil**

Then we had **down to**. Here it means 'depends on', though it can mean other things in other contexts. You could say, it's all **down** to the context!

**Catherine**

And that's our quick review, and our programme for today. So, did you stay focused all the way through? Or were you **distracted**?

**Neil**

If you're looking for **distractions** – may I recommend our Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube pages?

**Both**

Goodbye.