

Have we lost the ability to focus on a single task?

Daniel Goleman thinks so. Here, the bestselling science writer argues that we have become a species distracted by modern technology.

The little girl's head only came up to her mother's waist as she hugged her mum, and held on fiercely as they rode a ferry to a holiday island. The mother, though, didn't respond to her, or even seem to notice: she was absorbed in her tablet computer all the while.

Something similar happened a few minutes later, as I was getting into a shared taxi van with nine students who that night were journeying to a weekend getaway. Within a minute of taking their seats in the dark van, dim lights came on as every one of them checked a phone or tablet. (1)..... But mostly there was silence. The indifference of that mother, and the silence among the students, are symptoms of how technology captures our attention and disrupts our connections. Teenagers, the future of humanity, are at the centre. In the early years of this decade their text message monthly count rose to 3,417, double the number just a few years earlier. (2)..... The average American teen now gets and sends more than a hundred texts a day, about 10 every waking hour. I've seen a kid texting while he rode his bike.

Digital interaction comes at a cost in face time with real people, through which we learn to understand non-verbal communication such as body language. The new generation of natives in this digital world may be skilful on the keyboard, but they can be hopeless when it comes to reading behaviour face-to-face, in real time. (3)..... Today's children are growing up in a new reality, one where they are connecting more with machines and less with people than has ever been true in human history.

Then there are the costs of attention decline among adults. In Mexico, an advertising representative for a large radio network complains, 'A few years ago you could make a five-minute video for your presentation at an advertising agency.

Today you have to keep it to a minute and a half. (4)..... ' Faced with problems like this, some workplaces have banned laptops, mobile phones, and other digital tools during meetings.

A college professor who teaches film tells me he's reading a biography of one of his heroes, the legendary French director François Truffaut. But, he finds, 'I can't read more than two pages at a time. (5)..... I think I'm losing my ability to maintain concentration on anything serious.'

After not checking her mobile for a while, a publishing executive confesses she gets 'a nervous feeling. You miss that moment of excitement you get when there's a text. You know it's not right to check your phone when you're with someone, but it's an addiction.' So she and her husband have an agreement: 'When we get home from work we put our phones in a drawer. (6)..... But now we try to get closer to each other instead. We talk.'

- A** This is why they are unaware they upset others by stopping to read a text in the middle of a conversation.
- B** If you don't, everyone starts checking for messages.
- C** After that the temptation to go online and see if I have any new email becomes impossible to resist.
- D** A few words were occasionally muttered while they texted or looked through social media pages.
- E** If it's in front of me I get anxious; I've just got to check it.
- F** In extreme cases, some sleep all day and play these games all night, rarely stopping even to eat.
- G** Meanwhile, studies show, the average time they spent talking on the phone dropped significantly.