

White Polar Bear problem Community Comment June 19, 2014, Mike Goldsby

How often do you think about sex? What do you mean, not that often? You are thinking about sex right now, aren't you? See?

Freudian psychology would have us believe that everybody is thinking about sex all of the time. And then there was that common folklore that men think about sex every seven seconds.

British psychologist Tom Stafford writes for the BBC. He challenged that assumption recently and he did the math. That would be thinking about sex 514 times an hour, which adds up to 7,200 times per day that you are awake. I don't think anyone has calculated how much people dream about sex.

Stafford pointed out that we probably don't think about any one single thing 7,000 times per day. And how would you ever count it anyway?

A researcher at Ohio State, Terri Fisher, gave clickers to several hundred students. One group was instructed to click every time they thought about sex. Another group clicked for thinking about food and the third group when they thought about sleep.

In this study, men thought about sex more than women. But men also thought about food and sleep more often than women did. Or at least, men clicked their clickers more often, when they had an impulse. The study concluded the male students thought about sex 19 times a day and the female students 10 times a day.

But those averages are just averages. Your mileage may vary. Many respondents thought of sex once a day, while one had a thought every two minutes, for a total of 388 thoughts about sex.

The researchers knew the study was probably influenced by "ironic processes", where your deliberate attempt to suppress or avoid a thought actually makes that thought more persistent.

Stafford calls it the white bear problem. Raise your hand and think about a white bear. Lower your hand when you stop thinking about a white bear. Are you still thinking about a white bear? Trying to not think about it makes you think about it. At least you're not still thinking about sex.

The researchers think carrying a clicker could make people think more about sex or food or sleep. Or perhaps they were embarrassed by how much they thought about sex. Hard to know.

Stafford cites a study by the German researcher Wilhelm Hoffman trying a different approach. He gave German adults smartphones that went off randomly seven times a day. When the phone went off, the subject would record what they were thinking about right before the alarm went off.

This men in this study thought about sex an average of once per day. Men and women thought a lot more often about food, sleep, coffee, social contact, even checking e-mails ~~more often than sex.~~ *than they thought about sex.*

So Stafford seemed to put the old "every seven seconds" theory to rest. And he shows that it probably varies a lot between people or in the same person day to day. You can stop thinking about sex now.

This is Mike Goldsby for Community Comment