

# FLOW: The Psychology of Optimal Experience

by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Harper and Row, 1990.

More than anything else, men and women seek happiness.  
Aristotle

Each year hundreds of books are published with advice on how to stay trim, how to grow rich, or how to develop self-confidence. While these self-help books may help a reader in the short term, they are likely to be unsatisfying, for they do little to enhance the *quality* of the experience. But what really does make people glad to be alive. What are the inner experiences that make life worthwhile?

The author has been studying for over 20 years the states of optimal experience--those times when people report feelings of concentration and deep enjoyment. These investigations have revealed that what makes experience genuinely satisfying is a state of consciousness called *flow*--a state of concentration so focused that it amounts to absolute absorption in an activity. Everyone experiences flow from time to time and will recognize its characteristics: people typically feel strong, alert, in effortless control, unselfconscious, and at the peak of their abilities. Both a sense of time and emotional problems seem to disappear, and there is an exhilarating feeling of transcendence. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* describes how this pleasurable state can be controlled, and not just left to chance, by setting ourselves challenges--tasks that are neither too difficult nor too simple for our abilities. With such goals, we learn to order the information that enters consciousness and thereby improve the quality of our lives.

It is by being fully involved with every detail of our lives,  
good and bad, that we find happiness, not by trying to look  
for it directly. J.S. Mill

Happiness does not depend on outside events, but rather on how we interpret them. Happiness, in fact, is a condition that must be

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prepared for, cultivated, and defended privately by each person. People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can come to being happy. Therefore, happiness depends on inner harmony. The individuals who have inner harmony lead vigorous lives, are open to a variety of experiences, keep on learning until the day they die, and have strong ties and commitments to other people and to the environment in which they live. They enjoy whatever they do, even if tedious or difficult; they are hardly ever bored, and they can take in stride anything that comes their way.

Optimal experience, where we feel a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished, does not come through passive, receptive, relaxing times. The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Such experiences are not necessarily pleasant at the time they occur. Yet, in the long-run, optimal experiences add up to a sense of mastery, or perhaps, better, a sense of *participation* in determining the content of life. Because optimal experience depends on the ability to control what happens in consciousness moment by moment, each person has to achieve it on the basis of his own individual efforts and creativity. This happens when psychic energy--or attention--is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action. The pursuit of a goal brings order in awareness because a person must concentrate attention on the task at hand and momentarily forget everything else.

A person can make himself happy, or miserable, regardless of what is actually happening "outside", just by changing the contents of consciousness. We all know individuals who can transform hopeless situations into challenges to be overcome, just through the force of their personalities. This ability to persevere despite obstacles and setbacks is the quality people most admire in others, and justly so; it is probably the most important trait not only for succeeding in life, but for enjoying it as well. These periods of struggling to overcome challenges are what people find to be the most enjoyable times of their lives.

The author interviewed people from USA, Korea, Japan, Thailand, Australia, various European cultures and a Navajo reservation and from his data, he has been able to describe what makes an experience enjoyable and optimal for people. The first finding of

the study was how similarly very different activities were described when they were going especially well. The way a long-distance swimmer felt when crossing the English channel was almost identical to the way a chess player felt during a tournament or a musician composing a new quartet. The second finding was that, regardless of culture, stage of modernization, social class, age, or gender, the respondents described enjoyment in very much the same way.

The studies have suggested that the phenomenology of enjoyment has eight major components. When people reflect on how it feels when their experience is most positive, they mention at least one, and often all, of the following:

1. We confront tasks we have a chance of completing;
2. We must be able to concentrate on what we are doing;
3. The task has clear goals;
4. The task provides immediate feedback;
5. One acts with deep, but effortless involvement, that removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life;
6. One exercises a sense of control over their actions;
7. Concern for the self disappears, yet, paradoxically the sense of self emerges stronger after the flow experience is over; and
8. The sense of duration of time is altered.

The combination of all these elements causes a sense of deep enjoyment that is so rewarding people feel that expending a great deal of energy is worthwhile simply to be able to feel it.

### **A Challenging Activity that Requires Skills**

Optimal experiences are reported to occur within sequences of activities that are goal-directed and bounded by rules--activities that require the investment of psychic energy (attention) and that could not be done without skills. Please note that activities do not need to be physical and skills also need not be physical skills. For instance, the most frequently mentioned enjoyable activity the world over was reading, followed closely by being with other people. For those who do not have the right skills, an activity is not challenging; it is simply meaningless. Challenges of competition were found to be stimulating and enjoyable. But when beating the opponent takes precedence in the mind over performing as well as possible, enjoyment tends to disappear. Competition is enjoyable only when it is a means to perfect one's skills; when it becomes an end in itself, it ceases to be fun.

### **The Merging of Action and Awareness**

One of the most universal and distinctive features of optimal experience is the people become so involved in what they are doing that the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; they stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing. It often requires strenuous physical exertion, or highly disciplined mental activity to enter a continuous flow.

### **Clear Goals and Feedback**

Unless a person learns to set goals and to recognize and gauge feedback in their activities, she will not enjoy them. For activities that are creative or open-ended in nature, a person must develop a strong sense of what she intends to do or negotiate goals and rules during the activity. These goals and rules provide benchmarks for feedback. The *kind* of feedback we work toward is in, and of itself, often unimportant. What makes feedback valuable is the symbolic message it contains: that I have succeeded in my goal.

### **Concentration on the Task at Hand**

One of the most frequently mentioned dimensions of the flow experience is that, while it lasts, one is able to forget all the unpleasant aspects of life. The task requires such concentration that only a very select range of information can be allowed into awareness.

### **The Paradox of Control**

The flow experience is typically described as involving a sense of control--or more precisely, as lacking the sense of worry about losing control that is typical in many situations of normal life. What people enjoy is not the sense of *being* in control, but the sense of *exercising* control in difficult situations. However, when a person becomes dependent on the ability to control an enjoyable activity then he loses the ultimate control: the freedom to determine the content of consciousness. While experiences are capable of improving the quality of existence by creating order in the mind, they can also become addictive, at which point the self becomes captive of a certain kind of order, and is then unwilling to cope with the ambiguities of life.

### **The Loss of Self-Consciousness**

When in a flow experience, what slips below the threshold of awareness is the concept of self, the information we use to represent to ourselves who we are. And being able to forget

temporarily who we are seems to be very enjoyable. When not preoccupied with our selves, we actually have a chance to expand the concept of who we are. Loss of self-consciousness can lead to self-transcendence, to a feeling that the boundaries of our being have been pushed forward.

### **The Transformation of Time**

One of the most common descriptions of optimal experience is that time no longer seems to pass the way it ordinarily does. Generally, after the experience we do not know where the time went; however, during the actual experience, time seems to stand still.

The key element of an optimal experience is that it is an end in itself. It is an autotelic experience. The term "autotelic" derives from two Greek words, "auto" meaning self, and "telos" meaning goal. It refers to a self-contained activity, one that is done not with the expectation of some future benefit, but simply because the doing itself is the reward. Teaching children in order to turn them into good citizens is not autotelic, whereas teaching them because one enjoys interacting with children is. Most enjoyable activities are not natural; they demand an effort that initially one is reluctant to make. But once the interaction starts to provide feedback to the person's skills, it usually begins to be intrinsically rewarding.

Flow in the family context has five characteristics:

- **Clarity:** children know what parents expect from them;
- **Centering:** children know that their parents are interested in what they are doing in the present;
- **Choice:** children feel that they have a variety of possibilities from which to choose;
- **Commitment:** trust that allows the child to feel comfortable enough to set aside the shield of defenses and become unself-consciously involved; and
- **Challenge:** providing increasingly complex opportunities for action.

These same elements are necessary to creating flow and meaning in one's work life and in one's relationships with others.

Creating meaning involves bringing order to the contents of the mind by integrating one's actions into a unified flow experience. People who find their lives meaningful usually have a goal that is challenging enough to take up all their energies, a goal that can

give significance to their lives. This is called achieving *purpose*. However, it is not enough to find a purpose, one must also carry through and meet its challenges. This is called *resolution*. When an important goal is pursued with resolution, and all one's varied activities fit together into a unified flow experience, the result is *harmony*. Purpose, resolution, and harmony unify life and give it meaning.