

FLOW

It's a fairly common experience. People from every walk of life and profession around the world report having the experience: rock climbers, meditators, dancers, artists, machinists, scientists, teachers, parents, lovers, chess players, and motorcycle gang members all report it. Athletes call it "being in the zone." It's what Mihaly (Mike) Csikszentmihalyi, PhD (pronounced Mee-high Cheek-sent-mee-high), a preeminent researcher and scholar on the subjects of happiness, creativity, and optimal experience, calls *flow**.

Dr. Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues have studied thousands of people around the world, from many age groups, socioeconomic classes, and cultures. The subjects of the studies report the same gratifying experiences while participating in a task which involve these components:

- The task is challenging and requires skill
- It requires concentration
- There are clear goals
- One has some form of immediate feedback
- There is an experience of deep, effortless involvement
- One has a sense of control
- The sense of self disappears
- Awareness of time is altered

It is interesting to note that while they are experiencing *flow*, there is usually no conscious awareness of emotions because they are so focused on their task. However, in retrospect, after the experience has ended, individuals frequently report joy, exhilaration and even ecstasy.

It's been found that following a *flow* experience the self is more complex than it had been before. The notion of complexity here is not how we often think of the term as being confusing or overly complicated. Psychological complexity is used to describe two processes: *differentiation*, the movement toward uniqueness, and *integration*, a movement toward union with other people, ideas or something beyond the self. So a *flow* experience helps you to feel better about yourself and your accomplishment, building self-esteem, and a differentiated, unique self, and, at the same time, it integrates the self because in that deep state of concentration, your consciousness is extremely well ordered—your thoughts, intentions, senses, feelings are all focused toward the same goal. The resulting experience is one of deep fulfillment and you look forward to experiencing it again.

Dr. Csikszentmihalyi writes*, "The self becomes complex as a result of experiencing flow. Paradoxically, it is when we act freely, for the sake of the action itself rather than for ulterior motives, that we learn to become more than we were. When we choose a goal and invest ourselves in it to the limits of our concentration, whatever we do will be enjoyable. And once we have tasted this joy, we will redouble our efforts to taste it again. This is the way the self grows." (P. 42, *Flow*)



Any activity can produce a *flow* experience if you organize it so that it meets the above criteria. How enjoyable it is depends on its complexity and challenge to the doer. An activity for one person may be boring because it doesn't challenge her, but the very same activity could produce a deep *flow* experience for another who must concentrate intently to accomplish it. For a very shy person, a simple conversation with another person could provide such a challenge.

Any kind of work can provide *flow*; even the most tedious job can be organized in such a way to create the kind of involvement necessary. Creating games out of a repetitive job can produce profound enjoyment. Just set it up so that it meets the above criteria and voila, you have *flow*.

Flow is an important aspect of what positive psychology researchers are finding to be the three components of a happy life: pleasure, meaning, and engagement through regular *flow* experiences. Studies have shown that those who experience *flow* on a regular basis report a higher degree of happiness and fulfillment in their lives than those who don't. Experiencing *flow* regularly builds a kind of positive self-esteem capital that pays off in your long term happiness and it gives you more physical and emotional resiliency.

EXERCISE:

- Assess your daily activities. How much of your day do you spend in activities that “zone you out” or put you to sleep, such as watching TV or overeating, rather than engaging in activities requiring focus or skill that puts you “in the zone” and wake you up?
- What activities used to provide this kind enjoyment? What gave you this kind of fulfillment as a child?
- What activities can you cultivate that will give you more *flow* experiences?
- What activities do other people engage in that you admire?

EXAMPLES:

Here are some examples of activities in which people enjoy *flow*.

- Reading or listening to music — must be complex enough to require concentration
- Engaging in stimulating conversation with others
- Games of all sorts — chess, cards, competitive sports
- Artistic pursuits — painting, sculpting, dancing, art appreciation, writing
- Work — anything from brain surgery to garbage collecting
- Contemplation, meditation, prayer, journaling, therapy
- Exercise — walking, running, working out, weight lifting, rock climbing, back packing, sailing, yoga, tai chi, pilates, sex

*For more information, read *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, PhD, 1990, Harper & Row and *Authentic Happiness* by Martin Seligman, PhD, 2002, Simon & Schuster.

