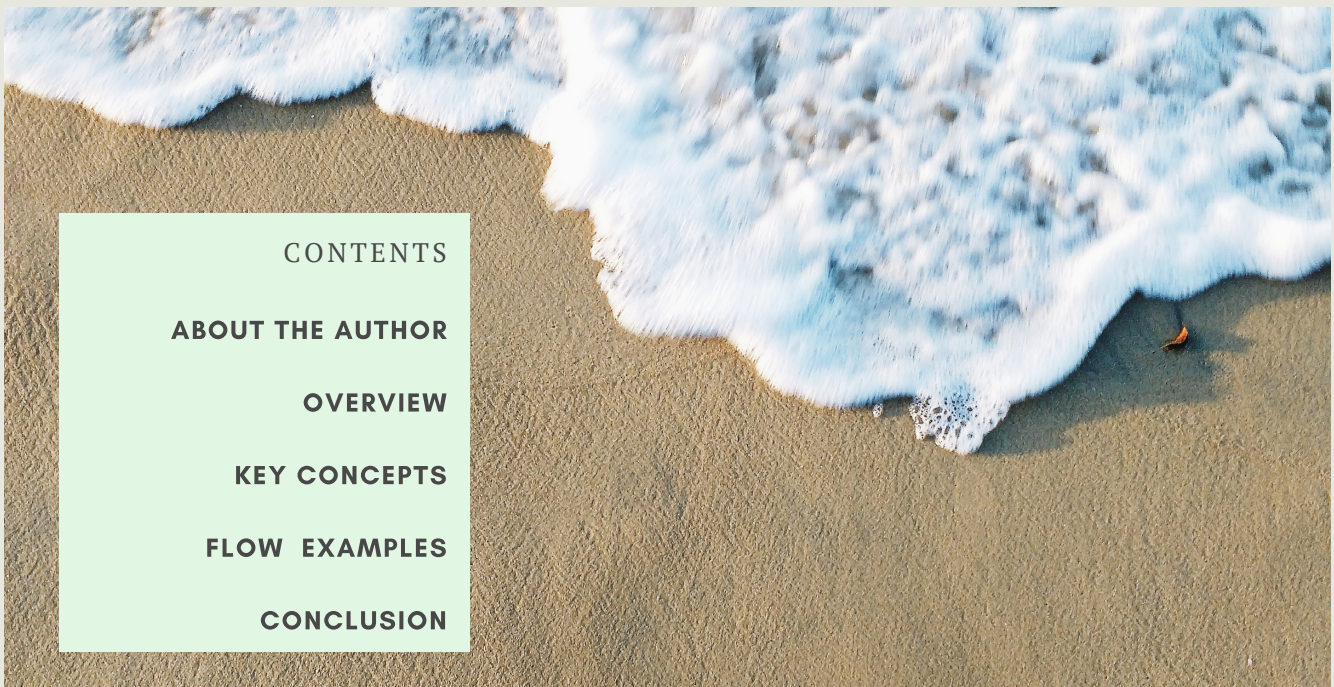


FLOW

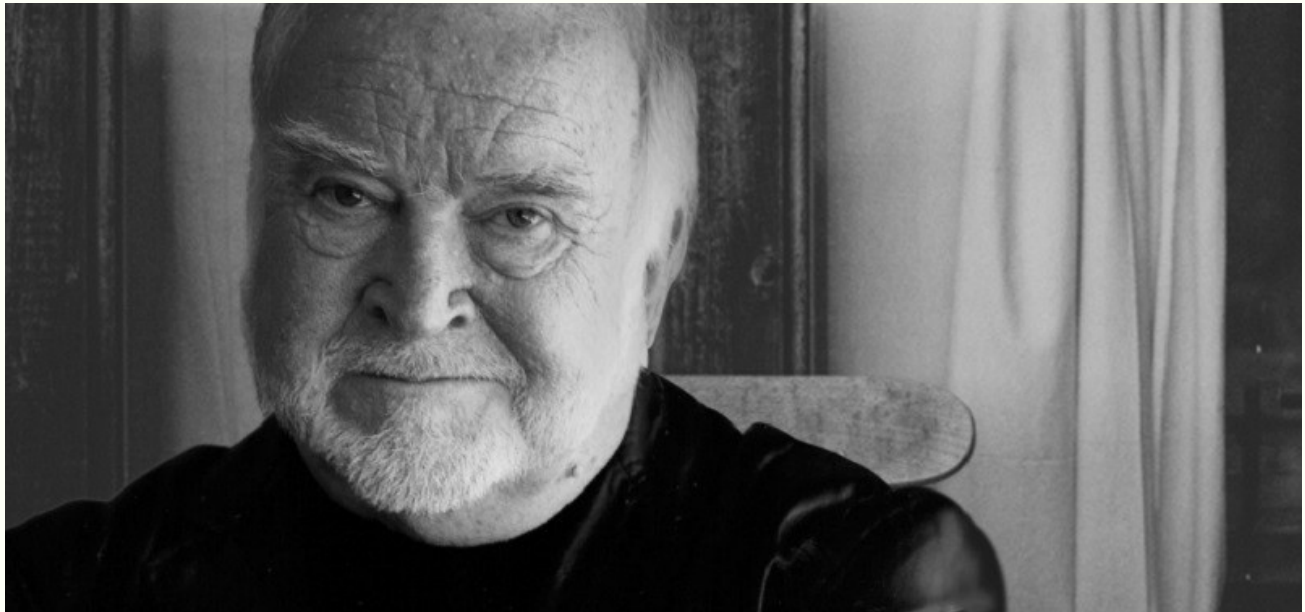
The Psychology of Optimal Experience



How to
experience a
genuinely
satisfying state
of consciousness

*Written by Mihaly
Csikszentmihalyi*

Flow offers individual's the opportunity to reflect on the research of human experience and the state of consciousness called flow. When an individual is in a state of flow they may experience heightened levels of happiness, creativity, and a full conscious level of involvement with a task or even life itself. Czikszentmihalyi discusses how the state of flow does not always happen by chance. It can be created and fostered by an individual when they organize their consciousness to truly discover happiness and improve one's quality of life.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Me-High Chick-Sent-Me-High)

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is a psychologist who is well known for both his studies in positive and flow psychology. He is also well known for the theory *flow*.

Born in what is now known as Rijeka, Croatia, Csikszentmihalyi grew up during World War II. During this uncertain time, he spent much some of his childhood in an Italian prison. As a young boy he discovered the game of chess and found it to be an excellent way to divert his negative thoughts and feelings. The game of chess helped him to focus on something other than war and gave him the opportunity to escape the hardships going on around him. At the age of 22 Csikszentmihalyi immigrated to America in the hopes of studying psychology. He attended the University of Chicago and received his B.A and later Pd.D in 1965.

Today Csikszentmihalyi's work revolves around motivation in individuals. Alongside his colleagues he continues his work in psychology and how individuals can increase their overall wellbeing.

“Happiness is not something that happens. It is not the result of good fortune or random chance. It is not something that money can buy or power command. It does not depend on outside events, but, rather, on how we interpret them.”

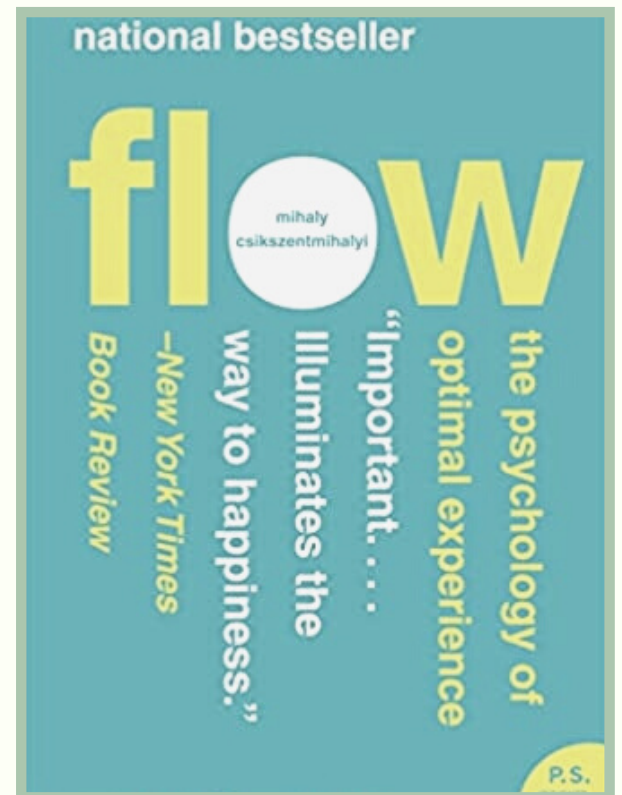
OVERVIEW

The Psychology of Optimal Experience

Have you ever been doing something where you find yourself in a state that is almost indescribable. Your mind and body is so involved in what you are doing that nothing around you matters? The task or experience is so enjoyable that you are in your own little world and lose track of time?

This book provides an overview of how optimal experience depends on one's ability to control what happens in their consciousness. Flow examines the process of working toward personal happiness independently rather than relying on external factors.

The next several pages draw upon key concepts discussed within the book.

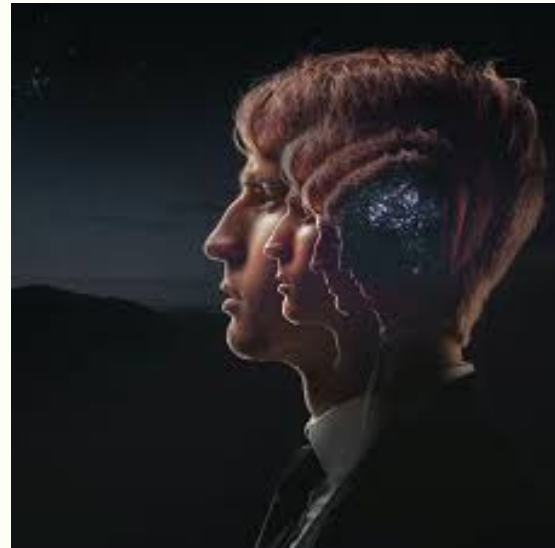


"The most important step in emancipating oneself from social controls is the ability to find rewards in the events of each moment."

THE ANATOMY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

How consciousness works and is controlled

One's consciousness is a result of biological processes. It is a complex structure within our nervous system. Consciousness represents information happening internally and externally within an organism's mind. With that, information and knowledge can be rearranged, organized, or acted upon. With consciousness we can daydream, make up lies, and write beautiful poems and scientific theories (p. 24). However there isn't exactly a branch of science that studies consciousness directly, so there is no single description of how it works. The anatomy of consciousness can be seen as the core concept when looking at the concept of flow as it helps direct the course of one's mind. We can control our consciousness, and are able to direct the course of our thoughts and feelings if we put our mind to it. Someone who may find more enjoyment in their day to day life exerts the power to use consciousness as a resource. They are able to control what they think and focus their attention to things more enjoyable. Thus this may lead to the ability of experiencing flow resulting in an improved quality of life.



ENJOYMENT AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE

Exploring the optimal state of inner experience

Pleasure and enjoyment are often two words that can be used interchangeably. An example of pleasure is eating food when we are hungry. In consciousness this is set by biological programs therefore leading to some sort of contentment. Eating is fulfilling our biological needs, therefore our body finds pleasure when we are sufficiently full. Pleasure helps to maintain order, but by itself cannot create new order in consciousness (p. 46).

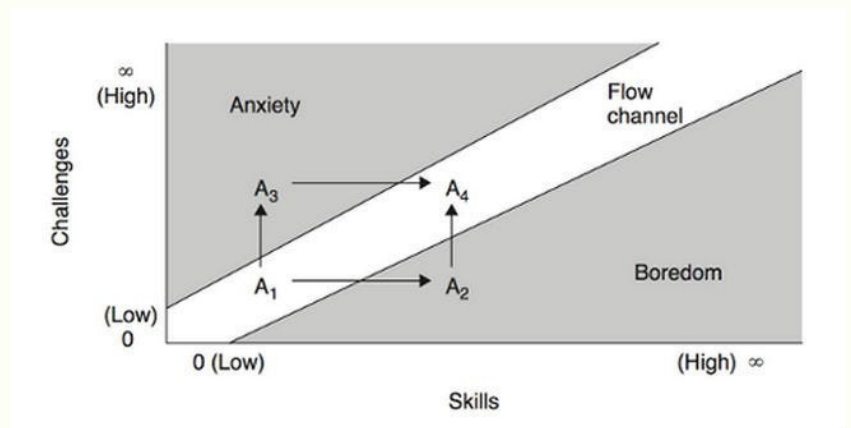
On the other hand there is enjoyment. Often described by a sense of novelty or accomplishment. This is when not only needs are met, but another sort of accomplishment is achieved. An example may be winning a close game of tennis. When an individual enjoys something, they want it to happen again. Something inside of them has grown and become more complex as a result of it.

Experiences give pleasure and also enjoyment. Everyone takes pleasure in eating. Yet not everyone enjoys the food they eat. It is impossible to enjoy a game of tennis, or eating at a new restaurant unless attention is fully concentrated.

CONDITIONS OF FLOW

Examining flow in games, sports, art and activities

Activities must have key dimensions in order for a game, sport or art to be considered a flow activity. Challenges and skill level are two very important components in the creation or occurrence of flow. When a person is pushed to higher levels of performance they are challenged and then may master that particular skill. After awhile an individual will improve and feel a sense of achievement. If one's challenge and skill are off balanced an individual will not be in a state of flow because they will either get bored, frustrated and experience levels of anxiety. This can be seen in the diagram below representing how the complexity of consciousness can increase in the result of flow experiences.



THE BODY IN FLOW

Developing flow through physical and sensory skills

Flow within the body is often untapped by many individuals. Our bodies are of great worth- and capable of so many different things. Often one's physical body is misused or abused leading to unexploited opportunities for flow. If the functions of the body are not used to the best of their ability it will lead to receiving chaotic information. However if one takes control of their body and what it can do they may learn different physical sensations that lead to a more enjoyable harmony within their life. Our body many different functions it is capable of and with these functions comes opportunity for flow. Our body does not merely produce flow through movements. One's consciousness and mind is always involved as well.

"Without relevant thoughts, motives and feelings it would be impossible to achieve the discipline necessary to learn to swim well enough to enjoy it. Moreover because enjoyment takes place in the mind of the swimmer, flow cannot be a purely physical process: muscles and brain must be equally involved."



"The future will belong not only to the educated man, but to the man who is educated to use his leisure wisely."

WORK AS FLOW

Transforming work into a flow-inducing activity

Many people enjoy the work they do. They are engaged, motivated and feel genuinely good in doing what they do. It is even said that people experience flow more often at work, than they do during their leisure time at home. This is because at work people feel skillful and challenged. They are creative, and accomplishing tasks therefore they may feel more satisfied. Whereas when one may "feel" like they are in the state of flow while watching a long movie, or series of shows. They aren't experiencing a challenge or accomplishment like on the diagram mentioned above. In this idea, Csikszentmihalyi talks about how the flow experience that results from the use of skills leads to growth, whereas watching tv or passive entertainment leads nowhere.



ENJOYING SOLITUDE AND OTHER PEOPLE

Flowing on our own and in our relationships

Human interaction with friends, family members, colleagues and even acquaintances can become a source for enjoyable experiences. The quality of life depends on two factors: how we experience work and our relationships with other people (p. 164). Who we are is often a direct result from those we surround ourselves with. Human interaction and relationships are one of the most important factors in a good quality of life. Relationships with others can become like flow experiences. Having good role models, positive relationships and friendly people in your life will have a trickle effect on those within your friendship "bubble".

FLOW IN REAL TIME

Examples of Flow Seen in Other's Lives
Cziksentmihalyi, 1990, p. 53-54

"The concentration is like breathing—you never think of it. The roof could fall in and if it missed you, you would be unaware of it."

-Chess Player



"Your concentration is very complete. Your mind isn't wandering, you are not thinking of something else; you are totally involved in what you are doing... Your energy is flowing very smoothly. You feel relaxed, comfortable and energetic."

-Dancer

"You are so involved in what you are doing that you aren't thinking of yourself as separate from the immediate activity... You don't see yourself as a separate from what you are doing."

-Rock Climber



"Her reading is the one thing that she's really into, and we read together. She reads to me and I read to her, and that's a time when I sort of lose touch with the rest of the world, I'm totally absorbed in what I'm doing."

-Mother

CONCLUSION

Finding Flow

The concept and practice of flow can be beneficial for people in so many ways. Whether applying it to life, relationships, work or well being. The ultimate goal of flow is to find passion and happiness within one's life independently. Being aware of our own personal consciousness helps to identify things in our lives that have meaning, and things that do not.

Many people will enter a flow state of mind differently. Whether it be through their mind/body during physical activity, relationship building with those around them or even personal reflection and mediation time.

Working toward finding flow will set individuals on a journal to a happy, peaceful state of mind where they are able to fully immerse themselves in whatever it may be feeling engaged and fulfilled.

"Repeatedly we question the necessity of our actions and evaluate critically the reasons for carrying them out. But in flow there is no need to reflect, because action carries us forward as if by magic."

-Mihaly
Cziksentmihalyi

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How can an individual transform their activities so that they find rewards in and of themselves?
2. How can we continue to challenge ourselves so that we do not become in a state of boredom without becoming frustrated/stressed?
3. When you are in a state of flow, are you in control?
4. How many activities or relationships can you think of that when encountered you are instantly in a state of flow?
5. How would you describe your state of flow with a friend/family member/partner?

