

# Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

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## **Flow: The psychology of optimal experience by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi**

Aristotle believed that humans seek happiness above all. It's been centuries since the days of Greek philosophers, but we do not understand happiness better and certainly have difficulty in how to attain it. If seeking happiness is our ultimate goal, we need to find out what makes people most happy.

Happiness is not a result of chance or good fortune. It cannot be bought with money or power. It is not dependent on what happens around us but about how we interpret the situations. Looking outside of ourselves in order to be happy is a sure way to fail at it. Controlling our inner experience indicates the degree to which we will be happy. At the same time, happiness isn't something that one can achieve by searching for it consciously.

When we feel in control of ourselves and our actions, we experience happiness. This is defined as *optimal experience*. This can be experienced in the midst of a trying situation. When our abilities are stretched to a maximum and we are trying our best to achieve something, we are making way for an optimal experience. At the outset, it may not be easy and perhaps, even be painful. However, in the long run, these experiences lend themselves to a sense of mastery further leading to happiness.

*Flow* can be defined as a state in which people are so intensely involved in an activity they find immensely enjoyable that they are not aware of anything else happening around them. The idea of flow has been used to inspire school curriculum, generate practices in clinical psychology, rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents and so on.

### **Why are we never satisfied?**

Frustration is natural. There is no escape from it. When our needs aren't met, we feel frustrated. There comes a point when most of our needs are met but then we start wishing for more. This vicious cycle never ends.

Happiness depends on inner harmony. Controlling our outer environment is necessary to the extent that we may survive physically but it does not impact upon how we feel. All of us have goals we wish to accomplish in our life. The closer we are to attaining these goals, we feel good about ourselves and our lives in general. However, when these goals seem out of reach, we feel resigned or resentful.

Working towards our goals poses no problems as long as we are enjoying the struggle. However, when we are so fixated on reaching the end goal, we tend to lose pleasure along the way. This robs us of contentment.

Material goods do not pose an obstacle to happiness. Several people who are not better off are happy leading vigorous lives and learning every day. They have strong ties to other people and enjoy what they do. Their greatest strength thus lies in the fact that they are in control of their lives.

### **Change in the role of culture and religion**

One of the important roles of culture is to protect its members from chaos and to reassure them about their need, importance, and success. However, trouble begins when we start feeling entitled and the world does not respond in that manner. It leads to an erosion of our sense of security and makes us lose courage and determination when we hit a rough patch. We then begin to question our faith in everything and this leads us to anxiety and apathy.

Despite our living in good times for the most part, genuinely happy people are hard to find. Discontent is deeply rooted within us and needs to be untangled on a personal level. Shields that protected us in the past, like culture, religion etc. does not save us from chaos any longer.

Finding no inner order in our lives makes us feel anxious and fearful. We start questioning the meaning of life and existence without any answers in sight.

During childhood, all we want to do is to grow up so that we can be who we are and do what we want. However, this myth is shattered when we grow up. Quite late into adulthood, we realize that youth has gone by and we still haven't begun doing all the things we wanted to. People react differently to this realization. Some may ignore it and go about their lives while others may reflect upon this and understand the disillusionment which has had them running after money, power, and status while their life went by.

In the early centuries, religion was a solace for people. It provided goals for individuals to work on. But with changing worldviews, religion no longer retains the power it once had. The world is suffering from the problems of illegal drugs, terminal illnesses, violent crimes, and suicide. Despite emerging strong financially, humankind still finds happiness eluding them.

### **Reclaiming experience**

Suffering through frustrations in childhood may make us more prone to engaging in irrational behavior as adults. We need to become independent of our social environment and achieve autonomy. We need to find pleasure and enjoyment in activities regardless of external circumstances. However, this is difficult as we have been brought up on rewards and punishments. Recently our focus has shifted to instinct. If we feel good about something, we feel we must be on the right track. We need to control our instinctual drives in order to be independent of the society which aims to exploit us for its own end. In order to do this, we need to substitute societal rewards with each moment being its reward. We need to find meaning in experience and in life.

### **Control of Consciousness**

The ability to control consciousness determines the quality of life. Psychoanalysis aimed to liberate the consciousness from the domination of impulses and social controls. Freud believed id, the pleasure lover and superego, the moral one, fought for control over the mind, the ego, which had the genuine needs of the self at its core.

In the East, yogis in India, Taoism in China and Zen in Buddhism, all sought to achieve control over the consciousness. They tried to free the self from the external chaos and biological conditions as well as from social controls.

Despite our ancestors finding the ways to control consciousness, it appears we are still facing chaos that interferes with the happiness. There are two reasons for this. One, the wisdom is not cumulative. Even if our ancestors found it, it cannot be memorized or applied into a condensed formula. It has to be earned through trial and error, with each generation. Second, with the change in cultural context, the knowledge of how to control consciousness needs to be regenerated every time.

Control over consciousness leads to a control over the quality of experience and makes our life more meaningful and enjoyable.

### **The Anatomy of Consciousness**

Consciousness represents information about what is happening inside and outside our body. It helps us evaluate and decide in what manner to react. By changing the contents of consciousness, we can change hopeless situations into hopeful ones. We can be in control of our feelings and thoughts once we order our consciousness.

Although consciousness mirrors the feedback from our senses, it does so selectively. The force which keeps information ordered in our consciousness may be called intentions. These are organized in goal hierarchy in the order of precedence. Usually, these goals are sensible and flexible.

Despite its functionality, consciousness has its limits. It can only process a limited amount of information at a time. The way in which information enters consciousness is either because we focus attention on it or because of biological or social reasons.

### **The Self**

The self includes everything that has passed into our consciousness, be it memories, actions, pleasures or pain. The self represents the goal hierarchy that we have built over the years. The self is the most important element of consciousness and represents all of consciousness's contents and their inter-relational patterns.

Our attention or psychic energy shapes the self, which, in turn, shapes the attention. Consciousness is not linear; there is a circular causality to it. Our experience depends on how we invest our psychic energy, which is then related our goals and intentions. All these processes are connected to each other by the self. If we wish to improve things, we need to maneuver some of these variables.

### **Psychic Entropy**

Psychic disorder is a force that affects consciousness adversely. It may be comprised of information that conflicts with our intentions or it may be distracting us from achieving our goals. This psychic energy may take many forms like rage, jealousy, fear etc. When the internal order of the self is disrupted in this manner, attention is directed towards bringing the order back. This, in turn, leaves less energy to attend to other tasks. This results in a state of psychic entropy wherein a disorganization of the self occurs impairing its effectiveness and suspending work on goals.

Whenever an event occurs in the environment, our consciousness processes it merely as information. It is the self that interprets the information and gives it a positive or negative connotation. Depending on the meaning we attach to it, new information either creates psychic entropy making us work to ward off the threat or reinforces our goals.

### **Complexity and the Growth of the Self**

Complexity is a result of either differentiation or integration. Differentiation implies a movement towards uniqueness, being separate from others. Integration, on the other hand, implies a union with other people and ideas. A complex self is the one which succeeds in combining these two opposite tendencies.

When we are in flow, we become more differentiated as we are more capable and skilled after overcoming a challenge. Flow makes us unique, less predictable and more skillful.

However, flow also helps us integrate the self because when we are in a state of deep concentration, our consciousness is well-ordered. All our thoughts, senses and feelings are focused on a singular goal. We experience harmony. We feel more together after an episode of flow. This integration is not only with one's own self but also with others.

A differentiated self may achieve great accomplishments, but risks becoming a self-centered egoist. Similarly, a self with integration will be connected to others but would lack autonomy. Thus, both differentiation and integration are required for a person to reflect complexity and lead to growth of the self.

As we experience flow, our self becomes complex. When we choose a goal and invest our energy into it, we find it enjoyable. This makes us invest energy in the same again and again. This is how our self grows.

### **Flow**

When the information we receive in our consciousness aligns with our goals, psychic energy flows effortlessly and is used to pursue goals. This is called *flow experience*. It is the opposite of psychic entropy. The more our life is filled with flow experiences, the better our quality of life is.

Flow helps in the integration of the self as it is a state of deep concentration in which our consciousness is in order. All our senses, thoughts and feelings are aligned with respect to a single goal. These efforts towards a goal ensure that it gets achieved. This results in increased

self-confidence, allows us to develop skills and ensures we make significant contributions to the society.

Flow is often seen to emerge in activities which are goal-directed and bound by rules. These activities lead to enjoyment when the capabilities of a person equal the demands placed on him and provides him with opportunities for action. Enjoyment lies in the middle of a continuum flanked on opposite sides by boredom and anxiety.

Challenges need to be balanced with the person's abilities to act on them in order to lead to enjoyment. When relevant skills are needed to cope with the challenges in the environment, attention is directed towards the task at hand, and no excess psychic energy is left to process further information. This results in entire energy being focused on the task. People become so involved in accomplishing it that they stop being aware of themselves as separate from their actions.

Flow is often seen in activities where goals are clear and immediate feedback is received. While in flow, we tend to be capable of exercising control in difficult situations. We tend to forget all the unpleasant aspects of life and focus only on the moment. This concentration provides an order to our consciousness.

### **Loss of self-consciousness**

In our normal life, we spend a considerable amount of time thinking about ourselves. However, when in flow, this takes a backseat. We are so thoroughly engrossed in an activity that there is no psychic energy left to invest in the past or the future. This loss of sense of a self is often accompanied by a feeling of being one with the environment.

Everyday life presents several threatening situations in response to which we focus our energies on the self. However, flow does not allow room for self-scrutiny. With clear goals, bound rules and challenges well matched to skills, there is no opportunity for the self to be threatened.

This loss of self-consciousness does not mean we forget our sense of self. It only means we forget who we are for a brief period of time while engaged in an engrossing activity. This is quite enjoyable experience and helps broaden our self-concept. It also leads to self-transcendence.

When in flow, we are challenged to do our best and constantly seek to improve our skills. At this time, we do not reflect on what this means. If we become self-conscious at this moment, the experience would not be deep or as enjoyable. Once the activity is over, self-consciousness returns. The self that we now reflect upon is not the same that existed before the flow experience. We are now enriched by new skills and achievements.

### **The Autotelic Experience**

The term autotelic is derived from Greek words 'auto' (self) and 'telos' (goal). An autotelic experience refers to a self-contained activity which is done as it serves as a reward without a need for an external benefit. Often first steps in an activity require external reward but once

feedback comes in for the person's skills, the activity in itself begins to be intrinsically rewarding.

Most of the things that we invest our time in are neither autotelic nor exotelic, but a combination of the two. We might start reading because our parents forced us to but may eventually come to like the feeling. Sometimes we need external incentives to begin with an activity but later come to enjoy it.

Many people feel they are wasting their time at work. Some feel so even during their leisure time. The autotelic experience, on the other hand, provides involvement and enjoyment. It gives a sense of purpose, a feeling of control, and reinforces the sense of self.

However, we must be wary of the addictive power of flow. Nothing in the world is entirely positive and all powers can be misused. Optimal experience can be used to both help and destroy. To the extent flow makes our life meaningful and increases the complexity of the self, it is good. However, we must constantly reevaluate our habits and not be blind to new possibilities.

### **The conditions of flow**

Flow activities usually require one to learn skills and set up goals. Everyone seeks to actualize their true potential. Flow activities provide a sense of discovery, of transporting the person into an entirely different reality. It makes the self-more complex which is how growth happens.

Engaging in similar activities day in and out leads to boredom and frustration. Flow activities are freely chosen and intimately related to what we regard as meaningful. They are thus precise indicators of who we are.

### **The Autotelic Personality**

The traits of an autotelic personality are often seen in those who enjoy situations which others find unbearable. People with this personality tend to pay attention to minute details of the environment. They match their skill sets with the challenges that stand in front of them. Thereafter, they set goals to achieve and monitor their progress with the feedback they receive. Once they reach their goals, they set more challenging goals for themselves.

### **The body in flow**

Simple physical acts can be transformed to produce flow. This includes setting a realistic goal, finding ways to measure one's progress, concentrate on the task at hand, and develop skills necessary to meet the challenges and to keep setting increasingly challenging goals for one.

### **The flow of thought**

Several optimal experiences are those that one generates in the mind. These include reading, solving mental puzzles etc. In order to enjoy flow in thought, the task must have rules, a goal and



a way of obtaining feedback. The task must require concentration and opportunity to interact at a level in alignment with one's skills.

### **The paradox of work**

Although work has been labeled as boring and not fulfilling by most people, surprisingly flow experiences are quite often seen at work. When both challenges and skills are high, the person is happy, active, and satisfied. However, the motivation at work was seen to be low despite when it provided flow. Conversely, the motivation for leisure was high despite the flow experiences being less in that area.

One of the explanations includes the fact that we tend to dismiss the quality of our experience at work without taking feedback from our senses. We tend to feel that we are wasting psychic energy in a task against our will. Lack of variety and challenge at the workplace is a common complaint by those who are dissatisfied with their jobs. Further, conflict with people at work and burnout are among other causes for work being disliked despite its potential for creating an optimal experience.

### **Flow and the family**

In order to provide flow, a family has to have a goal. Extrinsic reasons about what is considered natural are not enough. Both short and long-term self-set goals are required. In order to accomplish these goals, the family should be both differentiated (each member is encouraged to develop own traits and maximize personal skills) and integrated (what happens to a member affects the others).

Short-term objectives like planning a vacation, buying a TV are also important for the members to be together physically. Clear feedback is an essential part of flow experience and it applies to the family as well. Communication channels need to be open between family members. New challenges need to be found to continue with the flow experience.

### **The Autotelic Self**

In summary, in order to experience flow, one must have clear goals. Challenges must be recognized, skills must be developed in accordance and feedback should be monitored. One must be deeply immersed in the chosen activity and focus on what is happening. Distractibility should be at a minimum. The person must learn to enjoy the moment.

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