

FLOW



“You know that what you need to do is possible to do, even though difficult, and sense of time disappears. You forget yourself. You feel part of something larger.” – Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on experiencing 'flow'.

Primary Reading

Csikszentmihalyi, I. and Csikszentmihalyi M. (1988). Optimal experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). The Contribution of Flow to Positive Psychology. The Science of Optimism and Hope: Research Essays in Honor of Martin E.P Seligman. Radnor, PA: Templeton Foundation Press.

What is Flow?

The term flow was first introduced by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to describe the mental state that humans experience when they are fully immersed in an activity. It is a manner of self-expression, through the conscious state and pure focus on the action at hand. There are two methods to reaching flow: the activity itself can create it or the person can create it themselves regardless of external conditions.

There are six stages to flow:

1. There must be a goal accompanied by immediate feedback
2. A feeling of control
3. Feeling of time distortion
4. Complete attention given to the activity
5. Doing task for intrinsic motivation only
6. Gaining a new sense of self

History

Csikszentmihalyi's interest and research began in studying people who were happy with the life they had chosen and the things they were doing (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). He interviewed musicians, rock climbers and even chess players who did the things they did out of sheer enjoyment and not for monetary gain. Later on it became a technical term for intrinsic motivation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). What he found interesting was that there was no clear profitability to what these people were doing; yet they did them anyway. He learned that these people all did it for the same reason, the experience from performing the activity itself. Although people describe the experience as effortless, it is also very much a feeling of control. People lose themselves in their activities but at the same time are very aware of their actions.

Research

The concept of flow was sparked by curiosity. For Csikszentmihalyi it was a step towards solving another puzzle in the world of human behavior (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). The concept is a very abstract one and veers away from the typical solid evidence commonly found in psychology. Nonetheless, flow has been applied successfully to several areas of research.

Individual differences were found to be of importance in terms of how long flow is experienced. In a study by Patton (1998), the amount of time teenagers spent in a state of flow at the age of 12 determined the amount of hope they expressed at the age of 17. Anxiety, on the other hand, led to less hope and even physical pain. Flow proved positive and to some extent even healthy in this experiment. It demonstrated that with enough participation and production of flow, people were happier and expressed a more positive outlook on life.

In a study involving undergraduate students, researchers sought the effects of different levels of flow (Rogatko, 2009). Students were placed in either a high or low flow condition. They were then given an activity to do for an hour that would induce the amount of flow desired per group. Results showed that those placed in the high flow condition had increased positive effects. As with the previous study, this experiment also proved to be beneficial.

Below is a video of Csikszentmihalyi further explaining how flow can bring about happiness through the things we love.

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The experience of flow has also been linked to religion by many researchers in the area of positive psychology (Czikzentmihalyi, 2000). The elements that make up flow including meditation, clarity, and concentration are all aspects shared by spiritual practices (Crook, 1980). There are several religions like Buddhism and Hinduism that focus on getting people on having this experience through control of consciousness. They do this through practices like flow that provide smooth transitions of thoughts and actions.

Conclusion

Critics have argued against flow's placement in the social sciences. They have criticized Csikszentmihalyi for describing an experience rather than providing a guide to its inception. However, flow is a solid concept in psychology, and not simply a recycled idea. Further study can provide a greater window of observation to discover how much flow can really achieve. Research has proven its significance and the benefits that can be obtained from flow when properly executed.

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References

Crook, J. H. (1980). *The Evolution of Human Consciousness*. Oxford University Press.

Kristjansson, Kristjan. (2012). Positive Psychology and Positive Education: Old Wine in New Bottles? *Educational Psychologist*.

Patton, J. D. (1998) Exploring the Relative Outcomes of Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Forces of Order and Entropy in Adolescence: A Longitudinal Study. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Chicago.

Rogatko, T. P. (2009). The Influence of Flow on Positive Affect in College Students. *Journal of Happiness Studies*.