moodwatchers STRESS BUSTER: WEEK TWO

PUT MORE 'FLOW' INTO YOUR LIFE!

Paul plays the piano. He is exceptionally good at it. Since childhood he has spent extensive hours developing his skills. His parents invested heavily in music lessons while he was at school and he performed at annual school concerts and community events during the teenage years. One of the greatest memories he has is when the grand piano arrived at home. The large room to the side of the house became a dedicated refuge for his musical endeavours – a place for him to become *lost* in the melody!

I was watching him recently and the word 'lost' seems a very apt word for describing him as he plays. He literally goes into his own world! Eyes close and he swishes and sways on the stool. His fingers dance and every few minutes his eyes open and then he returns to his inner world. His mind is fully engaged. His full attention is focused on the melody, the movements of the notes, the positioning of his fingers and how his left hand stays in synch with his right. He is 'lost in the moment'. Researcher Mihaly Csikszentmihlayi (pronounced 'Cheeks-sent-me-high') would describe this state of being as a 'state of flow'. Science has confirmed that it is an important factor linked to happiness and health.

If playing the piano is not your type of thing, this complete immersion in an experience can occur while we are singing, playing bridge, fixing something in the shed or running in a race. Often people experience flow as they read. All of a sudden they realise that it is dark outside. Because they were so absorbed in the storyline they became unaware of the passing of time. Flow is also be experienced when people are socially engaged – maybe as friends lose hours catching up on the news. These are exceptional moments. Flow occurs when we are doing the things we like best, the things we are best at or even in doing new things – as we become 'stretched' in the new activity. It happens when we are totally engaged to such an extent that you lose consciousness of yourself, others and the world around you. Our awareness of time evaporates as you become stretched in meaningful activity.

Flow comes from doing the things we love most. Sadly, when we became adults we leave behind the things that made us tick – the things that had us at our happiest e.g. musicians no longer playing music, artists with paintings in their attic ever since they got married or became a parent!! But we need flow even more during the challenges and the crises that life poses. When we are in flow our worries and anxieties are not in the room with us! We all need to switch the channel sometimes. Flow also comes from doing new things and by embracing challenges. I will always remember the old man in the tiny cottage pointing to his garden and saying "You're a therapist, aren't you?" and he continued, "I'll tell you where the therapy is! It's in the clay!" This wise man loses many evenings in his garden. And the flow has served him well!

The metaphor of flow is often used to describe the sense of effortless action people feel in these special moments. Paul on the piano would describe himself as 'being in the zone'. Mihaly Csikszentmihlayi describes this complete immersion in an activity as 'flow' and has spent years researching the concept. He describes the mental state of flow as "being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement and thought follows inevitably from the previous one. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost."

INCREASING FLOW IN OUR LIVES

Almost any activity can produce flow provided that the relevant elements are present. We should aim to increase the flow in our lives by making sure that the conditions of flow are a constant part of our lives. Flow tends to occur when we have a clear set of

goals that require appropriate responses. For instance, flow is very achievable when playing chess or poker. The rules and goals are clear. Immediate feedback is also possible as the games progress – we know how we are doing and what we should do next! Paul on the piano knows what notes are coming next and when the musical piece comes to an end. Flow activities allow a person to focus on goals that are clear and compatible. The person is being 'stretched' – challenged but the challenge is just about manageable. The satisfaction comes from the *chase* as well as is realising the goal.

We can also have flow in our work. The surgeon experiences flow as he performs the operation. The business entrepreneur experiences flow as he closes a new deal. The secretary experiences flow as she becomes accustomed to the new software package. Sometimes the very thing we dread i.e. change is the very thing we need in order to experience more satisfaction at work. Often people find themselves doing the same things for too long. They are no longer being *stretched*. They can almost complete these tasks in their sleep. The job inevitably becomes boring. Often a new challenge or a change in responsibility provides more fulfilment as the employee experiences flow again. Being overly skilled at work leads to boredom and the experience of never-ending days. Being under skilled leads to stress and anxiety. It's about getting the balance right. That's why it is so important to have clear goals, rules of performance and regular feedback to sustain a healthy work environment. According to research people experience more flow at work than at home. Sitting aimlessly in front of a television set or lying on the couch does not provide flow. Indeed, the evidence suggests that free time is more difficult to enjoy than work. We would never feel that we waste so much of our free time if we experienced more flow when we are actually free!

In contrast to the work environment, people often lack a sense of purpose and direction when spending time at home with the family or alone. Often it is assumed that no skills are required to enjoy free time and that anyone can do it. But we know that sometimes a weekend of 'rest' or a fortnights' holiday do not refresh us! The evidence suggests that free-time is sometimes more difficult to enjoy than work! Csikszentmihlayi maintains that leisure time in our society is occupied by three major activities: media consumption (ever growing!), conversation and active leisure (i.e. hobbies, going out to restaurants/cinema, sports and exercise etc). Not all these free-time activities produce the same flow. In a survey of American teenagers flow was only experienced about 13% of the time in front of a television, 34% when doing a hobby and 44% when at sport. However these same teenagers spend at least four times more of their free hours in front of the box!! Similar ratios were recorded for adults. To make the best of free time, we need to devote much planning and attention to it as we would do within the dynamics of work.

We all need more flow in our lives. In addition to making activities more enjoyable, flow also has a number of other benefits too. Flow can lead to improved performance. Research indicates that flow enhances performance in a large number of areas including teaching, learning and artistic creativity, Because the act of achieving flow involves a strong mastery of specific skills, we need to continually seek new challenges to maintain the flow! Isn't it interesting that when we assess for depression one of the areas measured is pleasure and a low score in pleasure is considered significant in the overall diagnosis? We need to legislate for more pleasure and flow in our lives. In doing so we will experience more happiness and better health too!!

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