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Finding flow

From Finding Flow by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Copyright 1997 by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

We all are capable of reaching that state of effortless concentration and enjoyment called "flow." Here, the man who literally wrote the book on flow presents his most lucid account yet of how to experience this blissful state.

IMAGINE THAT YOU ARE SKIING DOWN A SLOPE and your full attention is focused on the movements of your body and your full attention is focused on the movements of your body, the position of the skis, the air whistling past your face, and the snow-shrouded trees running by. There is no room in your awareness for conflicts or contradictions; you know that a distracting thought or emotion might get you buried face down in the snow. The run is so perfect that you want it to last forever.

If skiing does not mean much to you, this complete immersion in an experience could occur while you are singing in a choir, dancing, playing bridge, or reading a good book. If you love your job, it could happen during a complicated surgical operation or a close business deal. It may occur in a social interaction, when talking with a good friend, or while playing with a baby. Moments such as these provide flashes of intense living against the dull background of everyday life.

These exceptional moments are what I have called "flow" experiences. The metaphor of flow is one that many people have used to describe the sense of effortless action they feel in moments that stand out as the best in their lives. Athletes refer to it as "being in the zone," religious mystics as being in "ecstasy," artists and musicians as "aesthetic rapture."

It is the full involvement of flow, rather than happiness, that makes for excellence in life. We can be happy experiencing the passive pleasure of a rested body, warm sunshine, or the contentment of a serene relationship, but this kind of happiness is dependent on favorable external circumstances. The happiness that follows flow is of our own making, and it leads to increasing complexity and growth in consciousness.

WHERE TO FIND FLOW

Flow tends to occur when a person faces a clear set of goals that require appropriate responses. It is easy to enter flow in games such as chess, tennis, or poker, because they have goals and rules that make it possible for the player to act without questioning what should be done, and how. For the duration of the game the player lives in a self-contained universe where everything is black and white. The same clarity of goals is present if you perform a religious ritual, play a musical piece, weave a rug, write a computer program, climb a mountain, or perform surgery. In contrast to normal life, these "flow activities" allow a person to focus on goals that are clear and compatible, and provide immediate feedback.

Flow also happens when a person's skills are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable, so it acts as a magnet for learning new skills and increasing challenges. If challenges are too low, one gets back to flow by increasing them. If challenges are too great, one can return to the flow state by learning new skills.

How often do people experience flow? If you ask a sample of typical Americans, "Do you ever get involved in something so deeply that nothing else seems to matter and you lose track of time?" roughly one in five will say that this happens to them as much as several times a day, whereas about 15 percent will say that this never happens to them. These frequencies seem to he quite stable and universal. For instance, in a recent survey of 6,469 Germans, the same question was answered in the following way: Often, 23 percent; Sometimes, 40 percent; Rarely, 25 percent; Never or Don't Know, 12 percent.

A more precise way to study flow is the Experience Sampling Method, or ESM, which I

developed at the University of Chicago in the early 1970s. This method provides a virtual filmstrip of a person's daily activities and experiences. At the signal of a pager or watch, which goes off at random times within each two-hour segment of the day, a person writes down in a booklet where she is, what she is doing, what she is thinking about, and whom she is with, then she rates her state of consciousness on various numerical scales. At our Chicago laboratory, we have collected over the years a total of 70,000 pages from about 2,300 respondents. Investigators in other parts of the world have more than tripled these figures.

The ESM has found that flow generally occurs when a person is doing his or her favorite activity--gardening, listening to music, bowling, cooking a good meal. It also occurs when driving, talking to friends, and surprisingly often at work. Very rarely do people report flow in passive leisure activities, such as watching television or relaxing.

Almost any activity can produce flow provided the relevant elements are present, so it is possible to improve the quality of life by making sure that the conditions of flow are a constant part of everyday life.

FLOW AT WORK

Although adults tend to be less happy than average while working, and their motivation is considerably below normal, ESM studies find more occasions of flow on the job than in free time. This finding is not that surprising: Work is much more like a game than most other things we do during the day. It usually has clear goals and rules of performance. It provides feedback either in the form of knowing that one has finished a job well done, in terms of measurable sales or through an evaluation by one's supervisor. A job tends to encourage concentration and prevent distractions, and ideally, its difficulties match the worker's skills.

Nevertheless, if we had the chance most of us would like to work less. One reason is the historical disrepute of work, which each of us learn as we grow up.

Yet we can't blame family, society, or history if our work is meaningless, dull, or stressful. Admittedly, there are few options when we realize that our job is useless or actually harmful. Perhaps the only choice is to quit as quickly as possible, even at the cost of severe financial hardship. In terms of the bottom line of one's life, it is always better to do something one feels good about than something that may make us materially comfortable but emotionally miserable. Such decisions are notoriously difficult and require great honesty with oneself.

Short of making such a dramatic switch, there are many ways to make one's job produce flow. A supermarket clerk who pays genuine attention to customers, a physician concerned about the total well-being of patients, or a news reporter who considers truth at least as important as sensational interest when writing a story, can transform a routine job into one that makes a difference. Turning a dull jot into one that satisfies our need for novelty and achievement involves paying close attention to each step involved, and then asking: Is this step necessary? Can it be done better, faster, more efficiently? What additional steps could make my contribution more valuable? If, instead of spending a lot of effort trying to cut corners, one spent the same amount of attention trying to find ways to accomplish more on the job, one would enjoy working--more and probably be more successful. When approached without too many cultural prejudices and with a determination to make it personally meaningful, even the most mundane job can produce flow.

The same type of approach is needed for solving the problem of stress at work. First, establish priorities among the demands that crowd into consciousness. Successful people often make lists or flowcharts of all the things they have to do, and quickly decide which tasks they can delegate or forget, and which ones they have to tackle personally, and in what order. The next

step is to match one's skills with whatever challenges have been identified. There will be tasks we feel incompetent to deal with. Can you learn the skills required in time? Can you get help? Can the task be transformed, or broken into simpler parts? Usually the answer to one of these questions will provide a solution;that transforms a potentially stressful situation into a flow experience.

FLOW AT PLAY

In comparison to work, people often lack a clear purpose when spending time at home with the family or alone. The popular assumption is that no skills are involved in enjoying free time, and that anybody can do it. Yet the evidence suggests the opposite: Free time is more difficult to enjoy than work. Apparently, our nervous system has evolved to attend to external signals, but has not had time to adapt to long periods without obstacles and dangers. Unless one learns how to use this time effectively, having leisure at one's disposal does not improve the quality of life.

Leisure time in our society is occupied by three major sorts of activities: media consumption, conversation, and active leisure--such as hobbies, making music, going to restaurants and movies, sports, and exercise. Not all of these free-time activities are the same in their potential for flow. For example, U.S. teenagers experience flow about 13 percent of the time that they spend watching television, 34 percent of the time they do hobbies, and 44 percent of the time they are involved in sports and games. Yet these same teenagers spend at least four times more of their free hours watching TV than doing hobbies or sports. Similar ratios are true for adults.

Why would we spend four times more of our free time doing something that has less than half the chance of making us feel good? Each of the flow-producing activities requires an initial investment of attention before it begins to be enjoyable. If a person is too tired, anxious, or lacks the discipline to overcome that initial obstacle, he or she will have to settle for something that, although less enjoyable, is more accessible.

It is not that relaxing is had. Everyone needs time to unwind, to read trashy novels, to sit on the. couch staring into space or watching TV What matters is the dosage. In a large-scale

study in Germany, it was found that the more often people report reading books, the more flow experiences they claim to have, while the opposite trend was found for watching television.

To make the best use of free time, one needs to devote as much ingenuity and attention to it as one would to one's job. Active leisure that helps a person grow does not come easily. In fact, before science and the arts became professionalized, a great deal of scientific research, poetry, painting, and musical composition was carried out in a person's free time. And all folk--art the songs, fabrics, pottery, and carvings that give each culture its particular identity and renown--is the result of common people striving to express their best skill in the time left free from work and maintenance chores. Only lack of imagination, or lack of energy, stand in the way of each of us becoming a poet or musician, an inventor or explorer, an amateur scholar, scientist, artist, or collector.

SOCIAL FLOW

Of all the things we do, interaction with others is the least predictable. At one moment we experience flow, the next apathy, anxiety, relaxation, or boredom. Over and over, however, our findings suggest that people get depressed when they are alone, and that they revive when they rejoin the company of others. The moods that people with chronic depression or eating disorders experience are indistinguishable from those of healthy people as long as they are in

company and doing something that requires concentration. But when they are alone with nothing to do, their minds begin to be occupied by depressing thoughts, and their consciousness becomes scattered. This is also true, to a less pronounced extent, of everyone else.

The reason is that when we have to interact with another person, even stranger, our attention becomes structured by external demands. In more intimate encounters, the level of both challenges and skills can grow very high. Thus, interactions have many of the characteristics of flow activities, and they certainly require the orderly investment of mental energy. The strong effects of companionship on the quality of experience suggest that investing energy in relationships is a good way to improve life.

A successful interaction involves finding some compatibility between our goals and those of the other person or persons, and becoming willing to invest attention in the other person's goals. When these conditions are met, it is possible to experience the flow that comes from optimal interaction. For example, to experience the simple pleasures of parenting, one has to pay attention, to know what the child is "proud of" or "into"; then to share those activities with her. The same holds true for any other type of interaction. The secret of starting a good conversation is to find out what the other person's goals are: What is he interested in at the moment? What is she involved in? What has he or she accomplished, or is trying to accomplish? If any of this sounds worth pursuing, the next step is to utilize one's own experience or expertise on the topics raised by the other person--without trying to take over the conversation, but developing it jointly. A good conversation is like a jam session in jazz, where one starts with conventional elements and then introduces spontaneous variations that create an exciting new composition.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

A deprived childhood, abusive parents, poverty, and a host of other external reasons may make it difficult for a person to find joy in everyday life. On the other hand, there are so many examples of individuals who overcame such obstacles that the belief that the quality of life is determined from the outside is hardly tenable. How much stress we experience depends more on how well we control attention than on what happens to us. The effect of physical pain, a monetary loss, or a social snub depends on how much attention we pay to it. To deny, repress, or misinterpret such events is no solution either, because the information will keep smoldering in the recesses of the mind. It is better to look suffering straight in the eye, acknowledge and respect its presence, and then get busy as soon as possible focusing on things we choose to focus on.

To learn to control attention, any skill or discipline one can master on one's own will serve: meditation and prayer, exercise, aerobics, martial arts. The important thing is to enjoy the activity for its own sake, and to know that what matters is not the result, but the control one is acquiring over one's attention.

It is also important to develop the habit of doing whatever needs to be done with concentrated attention. Even the most routine tasks, like washing dishes, dressing, or mowing the lawn, become more rewarding if we approach them with the care it would take to make a work of art. We must then transfer some psychic energy each day from tasks that we don't like doing, or from passive leisure, into something we never did before, or something we enjoy doing but don't do often enough because it seems too much trouble. This sounds simple, but many people have no idea which components of their lives they actually enjoy. Keeping a diary or reflecting on the past day in the evening are ways to take stock systematically of the various influences on one's moods. After it is clear which activities produce the high points in one's day, it becomes possible to start experimenting, by increasing the frequency of the positive

ones and decreasing that of others.

To make a creative change in the quality of experience, it might be useful to experiment with one's surroundings as well. Outings and vacations help to clear the mind, to change perspectives, to look at one's situation with a fresh eye. Taking charge of one's home or office environment--throwing out the excess, redecorating to one's taste, making it personally and psychologically comfortable--could be the first step in reordering one's life.

With time of day as with the other parameters of life, it is important to find out what rhythms are the most congenial to you personally. There is no day or hour that is best for everyone. Experimenting with various alternatives--getting up earlier, taking a nap in the afternoon, eating at different times--helps one to find the best set of options.

Many people will say that this advice is useless to them, because they already have so many demands on their time that they absolutely cannot afford to do anything new or interesting. But more often than not, time stress is an excuse for not taking control of one's life. As the historian E. P. Thompson noted, even in the most oppressive decades of the Industrial Revolution, when workers slaved away for more than 80 hours a week, some spent their few precious free hours engaging in literary pursuits or political action instead of following the majority into the pubs. Likewise, we don't have to let time run through our fingers. How many of our demands could be reduced if we put some energy into prioritizing, organizing, and streamlining the routines that now fritter away our attention? One must learn to husband time carefully, in order to enjoy life in the here and now.

FINDING A GOAL

Flow is a source of mental energy in that it focuses attention and motivates action. Like other forms of energy, it can be used for constructive or destructive purposes. Teenagers arrested for vandalism or robbery often have no other motivation than the excitement they experience stealing a car or breaking into a house. War veterans say that they never felt such intense flow as when they were behind a machine gun on the front lines. Thus, it is not enough to strive for enjoyable goals, but one must also choose goals that will reduce the sum total of entropy in the world.

How can we find a goal that will allow us to enjoy life while being responsible to others? Buddhists advise us to "act always as if the future of the universe depended on what you did, while laughing at yourself for thinking that whatever you do makes any difference." This serious playfulness makes it possible to be both engaged and carefree at the same time. We may also discover the foundations on which to build a good life from the knowledge scientists are slowly accumulating. The findings of science makes us increasingly aware of how unique each person is. Not only in the way the ingredients of the genetic code have been combined, but also in the time and place in which an organism encounters life. Thus each of us is responsible for one particular point in space and time in which our body and mind forms a link within the total network of existence. We can focus consciousness on the tasks of everyday life in the knowledge that when we act in the fullness of the flow experience, we are also building a bridge to the future of the universe.

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