



FLOW: The Psychology of Optimal Experience

by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi



Overview

Flow is a state one enters when they are “in the zone”, performing an activity with single-minded focus. Seeking happiness externally is a wasted effort, for only in Flow do we truly experience our peak mental state. This book discusses precisely what Flow is, and how to achieve it in any activity, whether friendships or work.

“[Every Flow experience] provided a sense of discovery, a creative feeling of transporting the person into a new reality. It pushed the person to higher levels of performance, and led to previously undreamed-of states of consciousness.”

Chapter 1. Happiness Revisited

Despite the many strides man has made in science and standards of living, the key to happiness is still very much a mystery. True joy is born out of being actively involved in every aspect of our lives rather than searching for happiness directly. Thus, success and happiness are the results of *actions*, rather than separate entities to be obtained.

The optimal experience is a state where you are in complete control of fate. It is the *result* of the experience, rather than the experience itself, that brings joy.

The author conducted research on the concept of “Flow”: the state of being completely engrossed in an activity. He studied why there are some experiences people will pursue merely for fulfillment, even if it costs them something. Flow signifies control over your inner life (consciousness), which results in the feeling of being in control over your overall life.

“For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue.”

There are many internal and external obstacles to achieving Flow. These include (1) the universe’s indifference to our needs and (2) the constant dissatisfaction of wanting what we cannot have. Happiness cannot be achieved if someone does not

enjoy the *journey* to a goal, or the achievements beyond it. Also, we are only more privileged than our ancestors in terms of material possessions. Internally, we have not improved the “content of experience” of our lives.

Working for a better tomorrow, people neglect to appreciate today. To break from this cycle, one must learn to find enjoyment in the present moment by taking control of their consciousness. This joy does not come from giving in to biological or social desires that feel good in the moment, but from finding a happiness separate from external stimuli.

“Happiness in fact, is a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated, & defended privately by each person.”

Chapter 2. The Anatomy of Consciousness

Our consciousness is a result of our nervous system, which is based around our biological needs but also allows for self-direction. Humans can make themselves happy or sad by controlling the state of their consciousness independent of external stimuli. Consciousness can be thought of as “subjectively experienced reality”, since nothing exists to us unless we perceive it somehow.

Of all the information we internalize, intention determines what our consciousness focuses on. It does not explain *why* we do things, only *that* we do, since we can change our intentions based on our goals.

If we want to reach certain goals, we must think of our consciousness as a beam that can be intentionally focused on certain things. Attention can be considered energy because (1) it is needed to do work and (2) it is a limited resource that must be divided between tasks. It is the most crucial factor in our quality of experience.

“The mark of a person who is in control of consciousness is the ability to focus attention at will, to be oblivious to distractions.”

The “self” is a bundle of information contained within our consciousness, formed as the interpretation of the other information in our consciousness.

