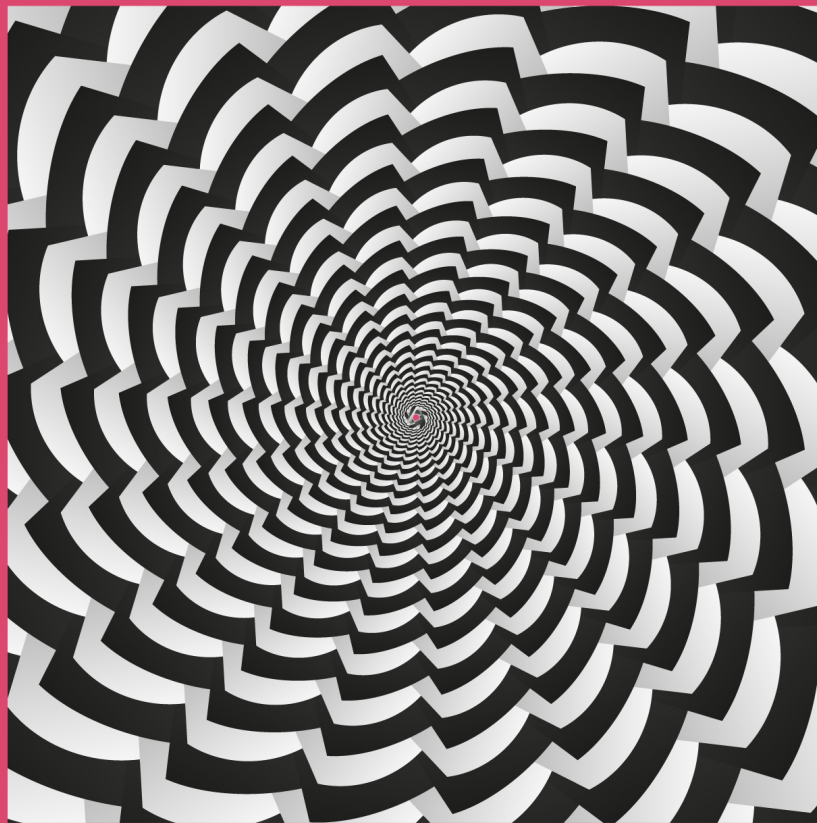


SUMMARY

FLOW

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF
OPTIMAL EXPERIENCE

MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI



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Summary of “Flow” by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Written by: Alyssa Burnette

Flow invites us to step outside the mundane experiences of our everyday lives to craft the optimum psychological experience through making a few simple yet radical choices in our everyday lives.

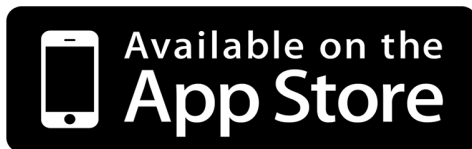


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Introduction

We've all heard the phrase "just go with the flow," but what does that actually look like in practice? In some cases. It might mean simply going along with the status quo or allowing things to happen to you without making waves. But what about finding your own personal flow-- that state where everything just comes naturally, where nothing's too easy or too hard, and you're just pleasantly engaged in a stimulating experience? Chances are, you've experienced that feeling a few times, probably when doing something you really, really love. But if you'd like the moments that make up your life to flow in a more pleasant, relaxing stream, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's formula can show you how to make that happen.

We All Crave Meaning in Our Lives

Have you ever felt like your life is meaningless? Like it lacks purpose and stimulation? Although we might not admit it, each of us has felt this at one point or another, and whether we realize it or not, we all attempt to generate meaning or else hide from the lack of it. And most often, we attempt to distract ourselves by seeking meaning through some form of escape like drugs, alcohol, or even a system of religious beliefs. And although this is unlikely to provide us with the stimulation we crave, we often take refuge in the rules and structure provided by religion because it allows us to indulge in the belief that our lives have meaning. Alternately, we make an active attempt to disable our critical faculties-- the very skills that enable us to think, solve problems, or identify what we crave in life-- through substances that let us drift away.

Similarly, our attempts to make our lives meaningful through the pursuit of luxury is also doomed to fail. After all, we've all heard the old adage that money can't buy happiness, and if you've ever tried to solve your problems with shopping, you know this to be true! In fact, studies increasingly show that, if anything, over-consumerism makes our lives feel emptier and less fulfilling as we attempt to facilitate meaning through the accumulation of more stuff. And we have only to check out a magazine to see that fame, wealth, or popularity doesn't make our lives better either! But even if we accept those truths, what are we to do with them? If none of those routes bring happiness, what does?

Don't Be Basic

In this case, however, I'm not talking about your sense of style. No, in this context, I'm referring to the kind of simple, basic pleasures we privilege over the accumulation of harder but more satisfying skills. For example, let's think about this scenario. If you're bored on a Sunday afternoon with nothing to do, where do you turn to find pleasure? You could try learning a new language, taking up a new instrument, or attending a class to learn a new skill. However, each of these things require effort and none of them provide an instant reward. Through the pursuit of any of these options, you might fail, get bored, or grow annoyed. And because of this, it's highly likely that most of us will just give up and watch something on Netflix. Will watching Netflix bring you lasting satisfaction and fulfillment? Probably not. But it will engage you for a little while and that's what most of us are seeking.

And that's exactly what I mean by pursuing basic pleasures. Because although watching Netflix is awesome, it's unlikely to make you a better person or fill a void in your life. That's where the trouble comes in. If we repeatedly choose basic, thoughtless pleasures over the pursuit of activities that might bring us personal development and meaning, then our lives will continue to be as hollow as our choices. Fortunately, choosing a better future is as simple as understanding the difference between instant gratification and true enjoyment.

Instant gratification is exactly what it sounds like: a quick burst of pleasure that makes us happy right now. It's biting into a Big Mac after we've been starving all day. It's that first sip of coffee in the morning that gives us energy for the day ahead. We definitely need pleasure, but it doesn't have the power to sustain us. That's where enjoyment comes in. Enjoyment is what motivates us to complete ambitious goals, to push ourselves, and gain control over situations. Enjoyment is what we get when we learn a new skill, like cooking a meal we've never made before. Sure, it might have been stressful at times and there may have been moments where we didn't know

what we were doing, but when we persevere and take that first bite of something we made ourselves through passion and effort and determination, we can almost taste our pride and accomplishment right along with that delicious meal.

And yet, we rarely choose the pursuit of lasting enjoyment over the temporary pleasure of turning our brains off. Instead, we often succumb to the weariness of our work weeks and the stresses of our days by disabling our minds through alcohol and formulaic TV shows that require little critical engagement from us. And in so doing, we train ourselves to take the path of least resistance when it comes to finding happiness.

Find Your Flow

So, once we've identified the difference between instant gratification and enjoyment, how do we relinquish our attraction to quick and easy pleasure? Well, according to Csikszentmihalyi, the answer lies in finding your "flow" or optimum psychological experience. How do you define flow? Think of it as that feeling you get when you're really in the zone. That zone can look different for everyone, but the universal commonality is the feeling it produces. Whether you derive satisfaction from mountain climbing or performing a life-saving surgery, when you're in your zone, you'll feel a sense of pure enjoyment that only comes from engaging in a task that balances skill and challenge in a pleasurable way. You might also really benefit from the completion of easily identifiable goals and feedback on how you did.

In some cases, that feedback will be immediate, like if you perform a successful surgery and can visually and medically confirm that you saved that person's life. Likewise, if you climb a mountain, you'll be able to both identify the completion of your goal and get feedback on how you did when you reach the top. But in other cases, that will look different. Perhaps it's the successful completion of a research paper. After months of intense study and writing, you might have to wait a few more weeks to receive a grade or review. Similarly, an artist who creates a visual masterpiece might wait weeks or even months to determine-- either through their own assessment or that of art critics-- that they've achieved their goal.

But no matter what your goal is, no matter how you accomplish it, the universal and magical thing about flow is that sensation of being totally immersed in what you're doing. You're acutely aware and completely in control. As you complete your task, you feel a sense of pride, accomplishment, and power that you might not feel in any other aspect of your everyday life. When you're in that zone, you can master your fears, insecurities, and every other pesky thing that besets you. And when we're in

that zone, we can draw on a sense of power and self-worth that will carry us through all the ordinary moments of our lives.

Developing Your Flow

There's an old story about an American tourist who walked into a shop in Italy and saw a beautiful sculpture he liked. When he asked to buy it, the owner named an exorbitant price. But when the tourist pulled out his wallet, the owner suddenly backpedaled and announced the sculpture wasn't for sale. Now, at first, that story might seem confusing. Why would anybody play mind games with someone like that? Why not simply say you don't intend to sell the painting? But in fact, the answer is simpler than we might think.

Although the shop owner was definitely playing mind games, he wasn't intending to be mean. Instead, he was setting the stage for a mental challenge, inviting the customer to barter with him. So far from trying to exploit a tourist, the owner just wanted to sharpen his wits through the process of bargaining, a mental battle which would improve both his selling skills and his mental agility. In practice, it's a lot like engaging in a spirited debate, which many people do for fun. But if you're wondering what this story has to do with developing your personal flow, the answer is that it has a lot to teach us about the practice of sharpening our minds. That's because one of the key tenets of flow is finding an activity that's neither too easy nor too difficult.

Because we tend to get bored if something isn't challenging enough or give up if we find it too hard, it's vital to find a balance that motivates us to push our personal limits and achieve new things. And the best way to do that is by aligning our quest for personal improvement with passions and interests that speak to each of us individually. In so doing, it's also important to find something that interests enough to transcend external motivations like the promise of a reward. Because if you think about it, external circumstances are often what we use to make ourselves do things we don't want to do. Promises like, "Just finish this essay and then go grab a cookie!" or "If I get all my paperwork knocked out this week, I can relax on the weekend" are usually how we keep ourselves going.

But what if we were enjoying something so much that we didn't need to bribe ourselves? One of the best examples of personal passion can be found in the story of intellectual and artist Eva Zeisel who was imprisoned by Stalin in 1936. Falsely accused of participating in an assassination attempt, Eva was imprisoned for nearly two years. Of her sixteen month sentence, twelve of those months were spent in solitary confinement, a practice which we now know is both barbaric and insidious to mental health. Many hardened criminals have lost their minds under the pressure of solitary confinement, but Eva managed to retain not only her sanity but her zest for life.

Miraculously, she did so by maintaining the hope that she would one day get out and reminding herself that when she did, she would need to retain the intellect and creativity she cherished in herself. So, to keep her mind intact, Eva played chess with herself in her mind every day. She repeated poems to herself and quizzed herself on her memorization. She even did gymnastics and forced herself to practice constant self-improvement under the worst possible circumstances. So, as you mull over Eva's incredible story, ask yourself what you would do in the same situation. Is there anything you're that passionate about? What would you do to keep yourself afloat?

Fine-tune Your Senses

We're all probably familiar with Peter Parker's spidey-senses-- that little added Spider Man bonus that allowed him to feel danger coming and be prepared. And, let's be honest, it's pretty cool! And although we could all do with some spidey-senses in real life, chances are, we're unlikely to acquire them unless we come across another infamous radioactive spider. But we can develop our own powers of sight and sound to enhance our everyday lives.

In fact, fine-tuning our senses is as simple as engaging with the ordinary things we probably never pay attention to. To get started, think about the walk or drive you take every day. What do you notice on your way? Are you paying attention to the color of the leaves around you? To the conversations you overhear? To the sights and sounds and shapes and colors that add depth to your world?

If you're like most people, chances are that you tune out all those things, lost in your daily grind rather than the beautiful complexity of the world that moves and breathes around you. And though it's easy to get overwhelmed by the pressures of our daily lives, by simply tuning into the world around you, you can gain an added element of control over your mind, body, and day simply by training yourself to focus on the little things. Because when you do that, you might find that there is so much beauty you've missed. A little thing might make you smile. An overheard snippet of conversation becomes a funny story you tell over dinner. An unexpectedly beautiful leaf that falls across your path will brighten your day and make you wonder at the splendor of nature. So, fine-tune your senses and find out about the world that's waiting to be explored!

Retrain Your Brain

In addition to sharpening your focus on the world around you, you can also add meaning to your life through the redirection of your thoughts. Because if you're like me, the thoughts that circle through your brain each day often ping-pong back and forth between what you should have said or done differently, that awkward thing you just did, or something embarrassing from twenty years ago that you really should have forgotten about. None of those thoughts are constructive! We know that, but yet we still often let our brains wander to toxic, harmful, or simply counterproductive places.

So, how do we stop it? We start by teaching ourselves to be less self-focused. Instead of dwelling on what we wish we had done or what makes us insecure, what if we pondered complex theories? What if we trained ourselves into the flow zone by making up and solving our own crossword puzzles in our heads or memorizing lines of poetry? What if we simply chose a subject that interests us, like quantum physics or the Art Deco movement, and engaged ourselves in reading everything about it? When we remove our focus from ourselves, fixating it instead on a new interest or on personal development, we provide ourselves with a clarity of focus that can't be achieved through mundane, selfish pursuits.

The best part about engaging in this form of self-improvement is that you don't have to be an academic or give up on your day job to try it! All you need is a willingness to open your mind and engage with new ideas. So, hone your amateur scientific skills. Formulate theories like how long it would take you to memorize a certain poem or how you would go about creating your own crossword puzzles. Then sharpen your focus and go test your own hypothesis. By retraining your brain in these ways, you'll not only be happier, you'll be smarter too!

Treat Your Work Like a Game

You know that old saying, “do what you love and you’ll never work a day in your life?” Well, like most adages, there’s a reason they’ve become tried and true cliches. Because if you’ve ever had a hobby you loved or a job you hated, you know that time flies when you’re having fun, but every second you spend on something you don’t want to do feels like an hour. One of the saddest facts of life is that many of us spend our lives that way: trapped in jobs we hate and counting the hours until we can be free to do something we enjoy with the limited time we have left. That generally means that we use our free time for being as lazy and thoughtless as possible and that’s no way to spend our lives!

So, how can we reclaim our lives and minds? We can start by treating our work like a challenge. And although that might not be equally easy for everyone, even small attempts to make our work more stimulating can radically change our outlook on life. So, start by making small bets with yourself. Can you beat your usual time on completing a task? Can you surpass your own personal best on this assignment? What’s something new you can learn about your job?

Although you don’t have to love your job, you can make your daily life more interesting by stimulating your brain through little games that make you less likely to succumb to boredom and depression. By keeping your brain sharp all through the day, you can get yourself into a state of flow, find new meaning in your job, and feel more alert at the end of your workday.

Connect With Your Community

However, as awesome as it is to play games with yourself in your head, growth doesn't happen in a bubble. And because our days often necessitate us being alone for the purpose of completing our work or solving a problem, it's easy to feel isolated. Likewise, daily commutes on busy trains can leave us feeling alone in a crowd and make it harder to connect with others. This is not only toxic to our mental health, it also impinges on our personal growth.

We can remedy these affects by seeking out the company of good friends, families, and neighbors, and in so doing, cultivate support systems that will help keep us positive and on track. Spending time with people who love us and have our best interest at heart will bring us out of our own heads and nurture our self-esteem, compassion, and happiness. Friends and family can also help us feel more connected to the world around us. For example, we can work together to solve puzzles as part of a family game night or take up a new hobby with a friend.

By inviting others to share our experiences, we increase not only our learning skills but our social skills as well, and in so doing make our lives bigger, brighter, and happier. And as we invest in our relationships, we can even have a positive influence on others. Because while we work to improve our own lives, we can encourage our friends to be their best selves as well and undertake a journey of improvement together.

Increase Focus, Decrease Anxiety

Whether we struggle with clinical anxiety or not, each and every one of us will experience anxiety at some point in our lives. Whether we're nervously awaiting the outcome of a stressful situation or we're wrestling with a loss, sadly we're all guaranteed to wrestle with doubts, worries, and intrusive thoughts. And although we've all probably heard it a million times, the way we choose to handle these moments will make all the difference in the world.

However, that's often more easily said than done, so let's take a look at a few practical strategies we can employ to keep from getting overwhelmed. One of the first and most important things we can do is to surrender our egos and trust in our ability to handle the situation at hand. That might not seem possible when we're at our most emotional and overwhelmed, but that's exactly the moment where we have to reassure ourselves by mentally cataloguing the times we've gotten through stressful situations before. Whether we did so by asking for help, relying on a friend, or brainstorming a way to solve our problems, it's critical to bolster our confidence in ourselves and remember that we can get through it.

Likewise, we need to be mindful of our environments. Although it often seems that negative circumstances occur just to spite us-- ever had your computer crash thirty seconds before you had to submit important?-- we have to try and reduce our stress levels by being realistic. It can also help to minimize our anxiety by focusing on our surroundings. If you find yourself succumbing to an anxiety attack, try to stay present by focusing on something you can feel, hear, touch, or see. By redirecting your attention, you can free up a portion of your mind to help yourself complete a task or get through a situation.

And finally, use your negative experience to generate a positive solution. We all want to give up in the face of difficult situations. Sometimes, we feel that it's just so much easier and would reduce so much stress. But although

it might be tempting to just give up and go to bed instead of pulling an all-nighter to study for that test, in the long run, we'll probably be a lot more stressed if we fail. Giving up also creates a pattern of failure and disappointment in ourselves that's detrimental to our self-esteem.

So, instead, look for ways you can motivate yourself to power through difficult situations. Although it may mean you don't get what you want at the moment (remember instant gratification vs. pleasure?), visualizing your success after you pass that test can inspire you to come up with new ways to keep yourself awake and retaining information. And no matter what your circumstances are, focusing on creative solutions instead of your negative experience can reduce your anxiety and retrain your brain.

Discover Your Purpose Through Actionable Goals

A goal is a dream with legs. No one seems to know who came up with that phrase, but it's often used as an inspirational tagline and I happen to think it's a pretty good one. Because while it's great to have dreams, unless your dream has a deadline and actionable steps you can take to make it come true, it's going to remain static and unaccomplished. That's why it's only by giving legs to your dreams that you can bring purpose and meaning to your life.

And in order to make that happen, you need to start by establishing a goal. Ask yourself what you want to accomplish and then identify what you need to do to make it happen. But don't stop at creating to-do lists. Although lists are an awesome way to organize your thoughts and chart progress, if you stop at that step, you'll remain an armchair activist-- someone who talks and writes about what they're going to do, but never actually does anything. So, avoid this trap by giving yourself practical steps and feasible deadlines for when you will complete your goal.

It might also help to plan your small goals around the formulation of one overarching goal or life theme. Maybe your small goal for right now is to improve your own life by winning your battle with addiction, procrastination, or poor time management. But your life goal could be to become an activist and inspire other people to conquer their own struggles! But no matter what it is, once you determine your life theme, every small goal you set will directly contribute to the completion of that overarching goal. In fact, that's exactly what Malcom X did.

After growing up in poverty, he followed the life pattern of the many people who surrounded him and made a living through dealing drugs. This eventually landed him in jail and that's when he decided to turn his life around. With unlimited, empty time on his hands, he dove into reading and discovered the restorative power of reflecting on what he'd read and applying that knowledge to his own life. Through this process, he developed

the self-awareness that later identified his life theme: he wanted to become a civil rights activist and help others. Finding that goal changed Malcom X's life. How will you change yours?

Final Summary

Finding your flow involves a calculated effort at improving your life through a pattern of positive choices. By choosing enjoyment over instant gratification, identifying your life theme, sharpening your focus, and connecting with your community, you can improve your mental clarity and overall satisfaction with life.



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