

FLOW: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF OPTIMAL EXPERIENCE

In his seminal work, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, **Mihaly Csikszentmihályi** outlines his theory that people are happiest when they are in a state of *flow*— a state of concentration or complete absorption with the activity at hand and the situation.

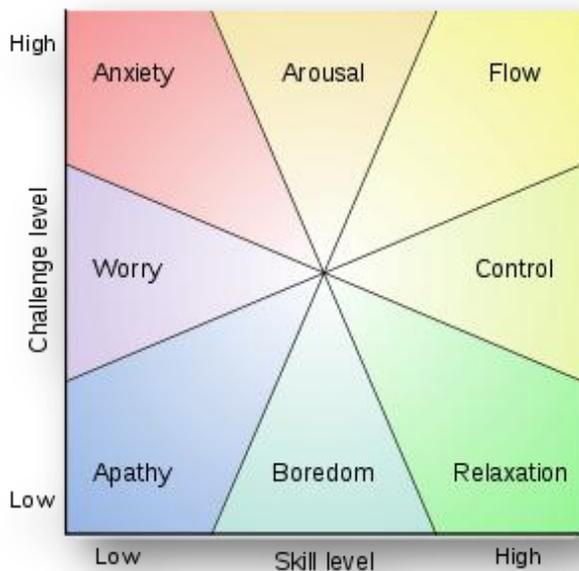
It is a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter.

The idea of flow is identical to the feeling of being *in the zone* or *in the groove*. The flow state is an optimal state of *intrinsic motivation*, where the person is fully immersed in what he is doing.

This is a feeling everyone has at times, characterized by a feeling of great absorption, engagement, fulfillment, and skill—and during which temporal concerns (time, food, ego-self, etc.) are typically ignored.

In an interview with *Wired* magazine, Csikszentmihályi described 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, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost."

Csikszentmihályi has characterized component states of achieving flow including "challenge-skill balance, merging of action and awareness, immediate and unambiguous feedback, concentration on the task at hand, paradox of control, transformation of time, loss of self-consciousness, and autotelic experience."



To achieve a flow state, a balance must be struck between the challenge of the task and the skill of the performer. If the task is too easy or too difficult, flow cannot occur. Both skill level and challenge level must be matched and high; if skill and challenge are low and matched, then apathy results.

One state that Csikszentmihályi researched was that of the autotelic personality. The autotelic personality is one in which a person performs acts because they are intrinsically rewarding, rather than to achieve external goals. Csikszentmihályi

describes the autotelic personality as a trait possessed by individuals who can learn to enjoy situations that most other people would find miserable. Research has shown that aspects associated with the autotelic personality include curiosity, persistence, and humbleness.

He describes such people who are internally driven, and as such may exhibit a sense of purpose and curiosity, as autotelic. This determination is an exclusive difference from being externally driven, where comfort, money, power, or fame are the motivating force.

"An autotelic person needs few material possessions and little entertainment, comfort, power, or fame because so much of what he or she does is already rewarding. Because such

persons experience flow in work, in family life, when interacting with people, when eating, even when alone with nothing to do, they are less dependent on the external rewards that keep others motivated to go on with a life composed of routines. They are more autonomous and independent because they cannot be as easily manipulated with threats or rewards from the outside. At the same time, they are more involved with everything around them because they are fully immersed in the current of life."

Yogacharya Dr Ananda adds, "To me this represents the cream of humanity, the true humane beings who are truly self-realized and self-actualized. These are the nishkama karma yogis of the Bhagavad Gita and the Jivana mukthis of our beloved culture.

As Yogeshwar Krishna tells us in the Srimad Bhagavad Gita (II:47), "*Karmanyē vadhikaraste ma phaleshou kada chana, ma karma phala hetur bhurmatey sangostva akarmani-* You have the right to perform the action, but not to the fruits of the action. Never consider yourself the cause of the resultant fruits, and don't let this make you cling to non-action either." This is basically the key message, "Do your best and leave the rest" for that choice of the right beatitude is the only way one can grow and evolve in consciousness.

"*Tasmad yogi bhavarjuna- be thou a Yogi*" says Krishna in VI: 46. May we all grow and glow in consciousness until we reach that highest state of consciousness, the state of Yoga."



Dr Ananda and Smt Devasena Bhavanani performing at the Gitananda Ashram in Altare, Italy