

What is Flow?

In flow it has been said that 'our identity disappears from our conscious awareness; there simply isn't 'enough' awareness to share between the activity and ourselves'

There are great parallels here between many of the experiences that we might be familiar with from deep immersion into meditation as well as many concepts from buddhism, taoism etc

Flow is a term that was coined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi an American - Hungarian psychologist. After the scars of world war two were evident all around him he became fascinated with what made people happy and became intrigued by people that seemed to invest great time and effort into activities such as playing the piano but yet which didn't seem to offer any tangible reward such as payment or fame.

He began interviewing people like this, not just musicians but artists and others engaging in activities that seemed to give them some inexplicable pleasure. He was surprised to hear the same sort of feedback from 11 of the participants about how they felt during the activity.

From his research he found certain characteristics that seemed to typify a state that many of those interviewed used the word life flowing or in flow to describe and hence the term flow state was born.

Q -

Who has ever felt like life was in flow during an activity?

What were you doing?

What did it feel like?

The Characteristics they described were:

- Complete Focus on the task at hand
- An ecstatic feeling outside of normal experience
- Total clarity - there was no question of what needed to be done or how well it had been done

- A sense of it being just possible - the challenge v skills trade off
- There was a sense of serenity - no concern about the self
- A feeling of timelessness 0 where hours could pass in minutes or time could expand an a second seemed to go on forever
- There was intrinsic motivation - no ulterior motive but to do the activity - this seemed to arise when the other characteristics were in place

So What Happens Physiologically when Flow is Accessed?

Much of the research around flow has been done by Mihaly and his contemporaries but there are now also some very advanced research and data collection programmes such as the Flow Genome Project who have taken it to new depths with enormous online surveys that you can go and take yourself.

Scientifically something unexpected happens to the brain. We are always told that we only access around ten percent of the brain and there is this wonder of what we would achieve if we could access the other 90%.

However in flow state brain scans have shown that we actually access far less than that 10%, in fact the pre-frontal cortex - the decision making and logical thinking part of the brain - largely shuts down as the brain attempts to save energy by shutting down thought processing and shunting energy to where it is more needed - to concentration, coordination etc

There is no time for logical decision making in flow, everything is done by impulse. Its a little like when you are driving down the road and a car pulls out in front of you, if you went to logical decision making you would hit it, but instead there is simple reaction and if the speeds aren't too fast you will swerve and avoid it.

A side effect of this shutting down of the pre frontal cortex is that the sense of self (which is derived from thought) disappears and therefore time perception shifts (this links nicely to the teaching that time is simply a construct of thought - if thought ceased, so would time, literally)

Other physiological effects include the release of increased levels of our happy and performance drugs in the brain such as epinephrine, dopamine, serotonin, endorphins, anandamide

These chemical changes in turn enhance our creativity, motivation, learning, information processing and future prediction. In fact the benefits can be felt often long after flow state activities have finished.

Why Bother with flow?

A lot of that is probably explained in the 'what happens' bit that we just discussed.

A mass of research has concluded that the **enjoyment of the experience** is very significant but not the only benefit, Flow is also associated with:

- Life satisfaction
- General happiness
- Subjective feeling of well being
- Greater productivity

How to Hack flow

Gemma always moans that I seem to pick things up really quickly and it is true but that is because I have some of the characteristics of a person that can access flow more easily. For example, I am persistent and motivated when i want to learn something new, I will happily repeat the same thing over and again all day until I get it right. In this there are several conditions that are necessary to access flow. For example if you are someone that isn't overly motivated to persist with an activity you will find it harder to access flow states.

However **everyone** can be trained to hack flow and many of the big silicon valley companies train their staff to do so. Importantly though everyone will have a tendency to hack flow access more easily in certain ways. Some will be risk takers, for some it is through peace and solitude, for others group activity is best.

To find out which you are complete the survey at the flow genome project website.

There are a couple of simple suggestions that will help before we look at the specific conditions:

- Ensure that you wont be disturbed by noises, whatsapp pinging etc It takes a while to get into flow and when you re distracted from it you cant bounce straight back in
- Engage in a meaningful activity that you feel you can succeed at
- Engage in a familiar task, one that you already have some skill at but with enough motivational challenge to keep you engaged
- Statistically, the challenge should be around 4% greater than your current skill level (there is a game called flow that will automatically adjust the difficulty level as you get more skilled so that it keeps you in flow)

The conditions for flow are generally agreed to be something like the following, they don't all need to be met but the more that are, the more rapidly and easily flow will be accessed:

- Challenge V Skill level is just right (challenge about 4% greater than our skill level)
- Must need to be focussed entirely on the task at hand
- Risk can enhance flow access as the focus needs to be more intense
- Complexity of the activity should be suited to the participant
- A degree of unpredictability - this avoids falling into boredom or apathy
- Deep embodiment - we need to progress with the activity by engagement (not by reading about it)
- Clear Goals - there is a need to know what is needed to 'succeed'
- Instant feedback - you should be able to see immediately if you are succeeding or not
- Autotelic experience - the activity should be rewarding in and of itself ' for the love of the game'

Practising Access to Flow:

- Remove all other distractions
- Choose something that you are interested in and enjoy doing

- Physical activities are best, however unenergetic, music, art, sport, a degree of physical coordination seems to be of assistance
- Risk can be a great help, this doesn't have to be life or death it can be for example walking across a tree that has fallen over a cold pond!
- Make sure the task is not too easy or too difficult, flow is a very fine balance to be found
- Simple games

Closing your eyes when doing many activities can enhance the activity greatly
E.g. sun salutations blindfolded

Adding a layer of complexity - e.g holding tissues in your palms during sun sals

Lying on your back throwing a ball into the air and catching it

Matchstick games

Balancing on one leg with eyes closed

Challenging yourself to do something that you arent sure you are capable of

Mindfulness v flow

- **Mindfulness** can have similar properties to flow state but it is a different approach. Whereas flow loses the sense of the observer, mindfulness cultivates the observer as the observer of awareness
- **Wu wei and flow**
The taoist concept of wu wei is much more akin to flow because it isn't a practice that the self engages in. In wu wei there is an allowing of whatever happens, and this allowing is

Links to resources including these notes...

yogalikewater.com/flowstate