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Flow – The Psychology of optimal experience

- **By Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi**

- **Harper, 1990**

Introduction

This fascinating book is all about happiness and how to find it. Csikszentmihalyi is an authority on the subject. As he explains, happiness is not something that happens, that money or power can command. Happiness is a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated and defended privately by each person. It is only by controlling our inner experience that we can become happy. Happiness cannot be reached by consciously searching for it. As J S Mill once put it, “Ask yourselves whether you are happy and you cease to be so”.

Optimal Experience

The author uses the term “optimal experience” to describe those occasions where we feel a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment, which we cherish for long and that becomes a landmark in our lives. These moments are often not passive, receptive relaxing times. They tend to occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something that is difficult or worthwhile.

Everything we experience is represented in the mind as information. If we are able to connect this information, we can determine what our lives will be like. Optimal states result when there is order in consciousness. This happens when we are focused on realistic goals with our skills matching the opportunities for action. Goals allow people to concentrate attention on the task at hand, forgetting other things temporarily.

The key element of an optimal experience is that it is an end in itself. It may be undertaken for other reasons but the activity soon becomes intrinsically rewarding. It is autotelic. (Auto means self and teleos means goal). An autotelic experience lifts life to a different level.

Building Inner Harmony

Our level of happiness ultimately depends on how our mind filters and interprets everyday experiences. Happiness depends on inner harmony, not on our ability to exert control over the great forces of the universe. There are people who regardless of their material conditions are satisfied and have a way of making those around them more happy. On the other hand, there are people who despite being blessed with so much money and power, are unhappy.

People must learn to find enjoyment and purpose, regardless of external circumstances. To become happy, we must strive to become independent of the social environment, i.e. become less sensitive to its rewards and punishments.

The essence of socialization is to make people dependent on social controls, to make them respond predictably to rewards and punishments. All social controls are ultimately based on a threat to the survival instinct. Practically, every desire that has become part of human nature, sexuality, aggression, a longing, security, receptivity to a change, has been exploited as a source of social control by politicians, churches, corporations and advisers. We must learn to enjoy and

find meaning in the ongoing stream of experience, in the process of living itself. This will ensure that the burden of social controls falls off from our shoulders.

Controlling the Conscious

Control over consciousness is not a cognitive skill. It cannot be memorized or routinely applied, but must be learnt by trial and error. It requires the commitment of emotions and will. Knowledge of how to control consciousness must also be reformulated, every time the cultural context changes. Rituals should not win over substance. Control over consciousness cannot be institutionalized. As soon as it becomes part of a set of social rules and norms, it ceases to be effective in the way it was originally intended to do.

The function of consciousness is to represent information about what is happening inside and outside the organization in such a way that it can be evaluated and acted upon by the body. The consciousness becomes a clearing house for sensations, perceptions, feelings, establishing priorities among all the diverse information. Without consciousness, we would have to depend on our instincts and reflexes. With consciousness, we can deliberately weigh what the senses tell us and respond accordingly. It is consciousness which enables us to daydream, write beautiful poems and scientific theories. Unfortunately, the nervous system has definite limits on how much information it can process at any given time. The information we allow into consciousness becomes extremely important. It is what determines the content and quality of life.

The shape and content of life depends on how attention has been used. The terms extrovert, high achiever, paranoid refer to how people structure their attention. Attention is our most important tool in the task of improving the quality of experience.

One of the main forces that affects consciousness adversely is psychic disorder – that is information that conflicts with existing intentions, or distracts us from carrying them out. Depending on how we feel, it can lead to pain, fear, rage, anxiety or jealousy. These disorders divert attention to undesirable objects. Psychic energy becomes unwieldy and ineffective. When information disrupts consciousness by threatening its goals, it leads to inner disorder or psychic entropy.

Pleasure and Enjoyment

Pleasure is essentially a feeling of contentment that one achieves whenever information in consciousness says that expectations set by biological programs or by social conditioning have been met.

Pleasure improves the quality of life by helping to maintain order but it cannot create new order in consciousness. Pleasure does not produce psychological growth.

Enjoyment results when a person has not only met some prior expectation but also gone beyond what he or she has been programmed to do and achieved something unexpected. Enjoyment, in other words, is characterized by a sense of novelty or accomplishment. Enjoyment has eight major components:

1. Tasks with a reasonable chance of completion
2. Clear goals
3. Immediate feedback

4. Deep but effortless involvement that removes from awareness the frustrations and worries of everyday life.
5. Sense of control over our actions
6. No concern for the self
7. Alteration of the concept of time, hours can pass in minutes and minutes can look like hours.

Understanding Flow

During flow, attention is freely invested to achieve a person's goals because there is no disorder to strengthen out or no threat for the self to defend against. When a person can organize his or her consciousness so as to experience flow as often as possible, the quality of life starts to improve.

In flow, we are in control of our psychic energy and everything we do adds order to consciousness. Following a flow experience, our self becomes more complex than that it had been before, due to two broad psychological processes – differentiation and integration. The self becomes differentiated as the person after a flow experience feels more capable and skilled. Flow leads to integration because thoughts, intentions, feelings and the senses are focused on the same goal. After a flow episode, one feels more together than before, not only internally but also with respect to other people and the world in general. Differentiation promotes individuality while integration facilitates connections and security.

To improve the quality of life, we can try to make external conditions match our goals and also change how to experience external conditions. Both are needed. Each by itself is insufficient.

Some individuals are constitutionally incapable of experiencing flow, eg: schizophrenics. They notice irrelevant stimuli and get side tracked. Some people find it difficult to concentrate psychic energy. Others are too self conscious. Self centered people also find it difficult to reach flow. Alienation, a condition which forces people to act in ways that go against their goals, is also an impediment to flow. Another impediment is anomie where the norms of behaviour in the society become muddled. When it is no longer clear what is permitted and what is not, behaviours may become erratic.

People who require a lot of information to form representations of reality in consciousness may become more dependent on the external environment for using their minds. They have less control on their thoughts. By contrast, people who need only a few external stimuli to represent events in consciousness, are more autonomous from the environment. They have a more flexible attention that allows them to restructure experience more easily and therefore to achieve optimal experiences more frequently. People who can enjoy themselves in a variety of situations can screen out unwanted stimuli and focus only on what is relevant for the moment.

But there is no permanent genetic disadvantage. Learning can compensate for any inherent weaknesses. People who achieve flow more regularly pay close attention to the minute details of their environment, discover hidden opportunities for action, set goals, monitor progress using feedback and keep setting bigger challenges for themselves.

The most important trait of people who find flow even during adversity is non self conscious individualism, i.e. a strongly directed purpose that is not self seeking. Because of their intrinsic motivation, they are not easily disturbed by external events.

Different ways to achieve Flow

The body

Everything the body can do is potentially enjoyable. Yet many people ignore this capacity. If one takes control of what the body can do and learns to impose order on physical sensations, entropy leads to a sense of enjoyable harmony in consciousness. Sports, dance, sex, yoga, the martial arts, music, fasting, can all help produce enjoyment. The skills necessary to become athletes, dancers, etc are demanding. But it is possible to develop sufficient skills to find delight in what the body can do.

The Mind

Some of the most exhilarating experiences we undergo are generated inside the mind, triggered by information that challenges our ability to think. These activities that order the mind directly are primarily symbolic in nature. They depend on natural languages, mathematics or some other abstract system like a computer language to achieve ordering of the mind. Like in the case of physical activities, there must be rules, a goal and a way of obtaining feedback. The normal state of the mind is chaos. Without training and without an object in the external world that demands attention, people cannot focus their thoughts for more than a few minutes at a time. It is relatively easy to concentrate when attention is structured by outside stimuli and we place ourselves on automatic pilot. But when we are left alone, the basic disorder of the mind reveals itself. With nothing to do, it begins to follow random patterns, usually stopping to consider something painful or disturbing. The mind will usually focus on some real or imaginary pain, on recent grudges or long term frustrations. So it is important to gain control over mental processes.

Leveraging Memory

Memory is the oldest mental skill. Remembering is enjoyable because it entails fulfilling a goal and so brings order to consciousness. For a person who has nothing to remember, life can become severely impoverished. A mind with some stable content is much richer than one without. The author emphasizes that creativity and rote learning are not incompatible. A person who can remember stories, poems, etc often finds it more easy to find meaning in the contents of her mind.

The Philosophy

A fact often lost sight of is that philosophy and thinking were invented and flourished because thinking is pleasurable. Great thinkers have always been motivated by the enjoyment of thinking rather than the material rewards that would be gained by it. Indeed, playing with ideas can be exhilarating. Not only philosophy but the emergence of new scientific ideas is fueled by the enjoyment one obtains from creating a new way to describe reality.

Communication

Conversation is another way of enhancing our lives by improving the quality of experience. Writing also provides important benefits. Writing gives the mind a disciplined means of expression. It allows one to record events and experiences so that they can be easily recalled and

relived in the future. It is a way to analyse and understand experiences. It is a self communication that brings order to them.

Writing

Observing, recording and preserving the memory of both the large and small events of life is one of the oldest and most satisfying ways to bring order to consciousness. Having a record of the past can free us from the tyranny of the present and make it possible for consciousness to go back to older times.

Lifelong Learning

Many people stop learning after they leave school. The long years of education often leave behind unpleasant memories. Their attention manipulated by text books and teacher, they look at graduation as the first day of freedom. The goal of learning is to understand what is happening around us and develop a personally meaningful sense of what one's experience is all about. So the end of formal education should be the start of a different kind of education that is motivated intrinsically.

The Job

A job can also provide opportunities for flow. The more a job resembles a game with variety, appropriate and flexible challenges, clear goals and immediate feedback, the more enjoyable it will be regardless of the worker's level of development. Jobs can always be made more enjoyable. But unfortunately in today's business environment where the emphasis is on productivity and compensation, making jobs more enjoyable is low on the priority list. Another problem is that many people consider their jobs as something they have to do, a burden imposed from the outside. So even if the momentary on-the-job experience is positive, they tend to discount it, because it does not contribute to their own long range goals.

Solitude

If we learn to make our relations with others more like flow experiences, our quality of life will improve. But the fact is the average adult spends about one third of his or her working time alone. So one must also learn to tolerate and enjoy being alone. We must learn to control consciousness even when we are alone. Most people feel a nearly intolerable sense of emptiness when they are alone, especially with nothing specific to do.

Indeed, the ultimate test for the ability to control the quality of experience is what a person does in solitude, with no external demands to give structure to attention. It is relatively easy to become involved with a job, to enjoy the company of friends or to enjoy a movie in a theatre. A person who rarely gets bored, who does not constantly need a favorable external environment to enjoy the moment, has passed the test for having achieved a creative life. If being alone is seen as a chance to accomplish goals that cannot be reached in the company of others, then instead of feeling lonely, a person will enjoy solitude and might be able to learn new skills in the process.

Coping with Stress

While coping with stress, a person has three resources to draw from:

- External support, especially the network of social support
- Psychological support, intelligence, education, relevant personality factors
- Coping strategies

Coping strategy is what makes the big difference. People respond to stress in two main ways. The positive response is called a mature defense. The negative response is called neurotic defense or regressive coping. The ability to make something good of a misfortune is a very rare gift. No trait is more useful, more essential for survival or more likely to improve the quality of life than the ability to transform adversity into an enjoyable challenge. Such people have unconscious self assurance. They believe destiny is in their hands. They are self assured but not self centered. They do not doubt that their own resources would be sufficient to determine their fate. They recognize their goals may have to be subordinated to a greater entity. Such people spend little time thinking about themselves. They are not focused on satisfying their needs. They are alert, constantly processing information from the surroundings. Instead of becoming internally focused, they stay in touch with what is going on. So new possibilities and new responses emerge.

One can cope with new situations either by trying to remove the obstacles or by focusing on the entire situation and asking whether alternative goals may be more appropriate. The moment biological or social goals are frustrated, a person must formulate new goals and create a new flow activity.

The autotelic self transforms potentially entropic experience into flow. Developing an autotelic self involves the following:

- Setting goals – monitoring feedback
- Becoming immersed in the activity
- Paying attention to what is happening
- Enjoying the immediate experience

Creating a Unified Flow Experience

Having achieved flow in one activity does not necessarily guarantee that it will be carried over into the rest of life. All life must be turned into an unified flow experience. As the author mentions, “If a person sets out to achieve a difficult enough goal, from which all other goals logically follow and if he or she invests all the energy in developing skills to reach that goal, then actions and feelings will be in harmony and the separate parts of life will fit together and each activity will make sense in the present, as well as in view of the past and the future.”

It does not matter what the goal is. What is important is it should be compelling enough to order a lifetime’s worth of psychic energy. A goal can give meaning to a person’s life if it provides clear objectives, clear rules for action, and a way to concentrate and become involved.

Creating meaning involves bringing order to the contents of the mind by integrating one’s actions into an unified flow experience. It is not enough to find a purpose. One must also carry through and meet its challenges. When an important goal is pursued with commitment and focus, and all the varied activities fit together into an unified flow experience, the result is harmony that is brought into consciousness. Purpose, resolution and harmony unify life and give it meaning by transforming it into a seamless flow experience. Whoever achieves this state, will never really

lack anything else. A person whose consciousness is so ordered, need not fear unexpected events. Every living moment will make sense. By and large, life will become enjoyable.

Conflicting Claims on attention

The availability of too many choices today has increased uncertainty and led to a lack of resolve among competing claims. Inner conflict is the result of competing claims on attention. We should learn to sort out essential claims from those that are not. There are two ways of doing this – a life of action and a life of reflection.

Action helps create order but it has its drawbacks. For one, options may become restricted. Sooner or later, postponed alternatives may reappear as doubts and regrets. The goals that have sustained action over a period do not have enough power to give meaning to the entirety of life. This is where a path of reflection scores.

Detached reflection, a realistic weighing of options and their consequences are generally considered to be the best approach to a good life. Activity and reflection should complement each other. Action is blind, while reflection is impotent.

The psychic entropy peculiar to the human condition involves seeing more to do than one can actually accomplish and feeling able to accomplish more than what conditions allow. This becomes possible only if one keeps in mind more than one goal at a time, being aware at the same time of conflicting desires. When there are too many demands, options, challenges, we become anxious. When there are too few, we get bored. The inner harmony of technologically less advanced people is the positive side of their limited choices and of their stable repertory of skills, just as the confusion in our soul is due to unlimited opportunities.

Consciousness has become more complex over time, because of the biological situation of the central nervous system, the development of culture, technologies, specialization and exposure to contradictory goals.

Instead of accepting the unity of purpose provided by genetic instructions or by the rules of society, the challenge for us is to create harmony based on reason and choice. When a person's psychic energy coalesces into a life time, consciousness achieves harmony. But not all life themes are equally productive.

In authentic projects, a person realizes that choices are free and makes a personal decision based on relational evaluation of experience. Inauthentic projects are those a person chooses because they are what she feels ought to be done, because they are what everybody is doing. Authentic projects tend to be intrinsically motivated while inauthentic ones are motivated by external forces.

Similarly a distinction can be drawn between discovered and accepted life themes. In discovered life themes, a person writes the script for her actions out of personal experience and awareness of choice. In accepted life themes, a person simply accepts a predetermined role from a script written long ago by others.

People who succeed in building meaning into their experience tend to draw from the order achieved by past generations. There is much well ordered information accumulated in culture, ready for use. Great music, architecture, art, poetry, drama, dance, philosophy and religion are

there for anyone to see as examples of how harmony can be imposed on chaos. But people ignore this source of knowledge by and large.

To extract meaning from a system of beliefs, a person must first compare the information contained in it with his or her concrete experience, retain what makes sense and then reject the rest. An increasing majority of people are not being helped by traditional religions and belief systems. Many are unable to separate the truth in the old doctrines from distortions and degradations that time has added. Since they cannot accept error, they reject the truth as well. Others are so desperate for some order that they desperately cling to some belief. If a new faith is to capture our imagination, it must be able to account rationally for the things we know, the things we feel, the things we hope for and the ones we dread. It must be a system of beliefs that will direct our psychic energy towards meaningful goals. Such a system must be based to some degree on what science has revealed about humanity and about the universe.

For the past few thousand years, humanity has achieved incredible advances in the differentiation of consciousness. We have learned to separate ourselves from other forms of life and from each other. We have learned to separate objects and processes. We have developed science and technology to capture nature. Now the focus must be on integration. We must learn how to reunite ourselves with other entities around us, without losing our individuality. We must realize that the entire universe is a system related by common laws and that it makes no sense to impose our dreams and desires on nature without taking them into account. We must accept a cooperative rather than a ruling role in the universe. The individual's purpose should merge with universal flow.