

Subtitles Video 7: Flow

The next habit is Flow. This is one of my favorite quotes:

“Flow is about 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.”

This is a quote by the Hungarian-American psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a very innovative scientist who discovered the concept of Flow in the 1970s.

Csikszentmihalyi originally discovered Flow through numerous interviews with highly creative people who loved what they were doing, such as musicians and artists.

The experience of Flow has a lot in common with Abraham Maslow's description of blissful, almost mystical moments that he called “peak experiences.”

Maslow claimed that these peak experiences were often reported by people who had achieved what he called self-actualization, which he places at the top of his famous pyramid, the Hierarchy of Needs. Once we have satisfied what he calls the “deficiency needs,” the very basic needs that we have, such as food, safety, and love, we've arrived at neutral.

But Maslow took a giant step beyond traditional psychology and insisted that we should not be satisfied by “neutral.” Do we only want to overcome depression or do we want to be truly happy?

In his words, “The story of the human race is the story of men and women selling themselves short.” What he meant is that we are not aware of our full potential.

We have growth needs as well as deficiency needs. We need to progress from neutral to happy, to the top of his famous pyramid, and so Maslow was fascinated by people who had achieved what he called “self-actualization.” These people, usually highly creative people such as scientists and musicians, sometimes had what he called peak experiences.

In his words, these people had “rare, exciting, oceanic, deeply moving, exhilarating, elevating experiences.”

But Maslow's description of self-actualization, one of the first scientific efforts to describe happiness, was not based on concrete scientific data.

The big question is, how do we create peak experiences and progress from neutral to happy? How do we achieve self-actualization?

Csikszentmihalyi was very curious about this question, and he was one of the first people to use a scientific method, called the “experience sampling” method, to discover how we achieve what he called “optimal experience.”

So what is the Experience Sampling method? How did Csikszentmihalyi use it to uncover the secrets of happy people?

In those days, people did not have phones, so Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues gave his volunteers electronic beepers. During a period of about one week, he and his team would beep his human guinea pigs at random intervals, about eight times a day. As soon as a beeper went off, his volunteers had to answer two kinds of questions. “What are you doing, and how are you feeling?”

The reason why this new method was so useful is that our memory about happiness, about how happy we felt doing something in the past, is famously unreliable. If you're feeling great, you may look at yesterday's experiences through rose-colored glasses. You may recall that washing the dishes yesterday was a fantastic experience. Actually, if you were in a state of Flow, maybe it was! But that's often not the case.

So Csikszentmihalyi and his team asked people how they felt about something right after they experienced it. And they discovered that what we think makes us happy, and what actually makes us happy, are often two different things.

For example, many people think that they will become happier vegging out in front of a TV. But on the contrary, Csikszentmihalyi and his student Larson found out that many of the most unhappy moments of the day were the passive moments. For example, staring at a screen doing nothing. The Experience Sampling experiments showed that on the contrary, it is the active moments, and especially activities that we choose, such as talking to friends or playing sports, that led to greater happiness.

But Csikszentmihalyi discovered that people seemed especially happy when they were involved in what is called a "flow experience."

Flow is very close to what many athletes call getting "in the zone."

One of the best definitions that I can find is this one: If we are actively involved in trying to reach a goal or an activity that is challenging and well suited to our skills, we experience an enjoyable state called Flow.

The experience of Flow in both professional and leisure activities leads to increased positive effect or emotions, performance, and commitment to long-term meaningful goals.

So for example, think about something you love doing, not something that you have to do. How about listening to your favorite band? If you love music, you're getting a little closer. But that's still not Flow, as listening to music is not really a creative activity.

How about listening to your favorite band while you're working out? Now you're getting into Flow, especially if you try to work out in sync with the music or if you're dancing!

So what is the bottom line?

Perhaps the best way to understand Flow is to ask two questions:

Number one is, what do I have to do in order to experience Flow? In other words, what are the preconditions of Flow?

Question number two is, how do I know if I'm experiencing Flow? What are the qualities of Flow?

So for example, let's say you love playing soccer. I'm a huge soccer fan.

The first condition is that you should play soccer because you want to do it.

I was nine years old when my parents forced me to wear a kilt and learn Scottish Country dancing. Definitely not a Flow experience.

You have to pick your own Flow activity.

People who like setting goals and reaching those goals are much more likely to experience Flow.

And as we find out in the next video, setting goals, and, especially, meaningful goals, is one of the best ways you can find long term happiness.

Csikszentmihalyi found out that people like that are some of the happiest people in the world. He called those people “autotelic personalities,” auto meaning self, and telic meaning goal. The happiest people are people who set their own goals, doing things they love.

The second condition is that Flow requires creativity. Going back to soccer, if you are playing professional football, you need to think up some new moves. You can't keep on doing the same old stuff if you want to catch the other team off guard. Think about the bicycle kick. What a beautiful thing. Now that's what I call skill.

In the third place, there has to be clarity of rules and goals. The rules should be clear. And the goals should be attainable. For example, if you are a forward or a striker, and you can't score a goal occasionally, you won't experience Flow.

Finally, the challenges should match your skills. So let's say you end up on the wrong soccer pitch and you suddenly find yourself playing Lionel Messi. You will probably experience anxiety and not much Flow. The challenges are too big and your skills are too basic. And you may get a huge inferiority complex.

The best way to understand the skills-challenge balance is to think about a Flow channel, like a traffic lane, that you need to stay in.

If the challenge is too big and your skill set is too small, you may experience some anxiety.

If the challenge is too small, but you are highly skilled, you may get bored.

And don't forget, if you want to continue to experience Flow and avoid boredom, if you want to stay in the Flow channel, you need to slowly raise the bar and increase your skills.

So, we've talked about the preconditions of Flow, what you need to do to experience Flow.

But the next question is, how do you know you are experiencing Flow? How do you know you're in the zone? If you've experienced it, you know it! But let's try to describe it.

Number one, you get completely absorbed in the activity, you lose your sense of self.

As you may have experienced, when we get depressed, we tend to focus on ourselves. So, naturally, Flow makes you happier, because you lose your self-consciousness by turning your focus outwards towards something that you love doing. You are thinking constructively. You are thinking positively.

If you want to think positively, Flow is way more effective than sitting on a couch and trying to dispute negative thoughts in a vacuum. That's like trying to pick yourself up by pulling at your own shoelaces. The discovery of Flow is a big key to positive thinking.

A second result of Flow is that you experience a distorted sense of time.

For example, I love teaching, and as long as my students don't fall asleep, I get in the zone.

If I look at the clock, it says one hour has passed. But it feels like a few minutes!

In the third place, if you are in Flow, you feel that you are in complete control.

If you've been practicing enough, and if your skills are good enough, you don't even have to think about the next step. The steps flow into each other. Your whole being is involved. You don't realize that you're making a huge effort. You don't even realize that you're experiencing peak happiness because you are so immersed in the experience.

In conclusion, Flow is about being “in the zone” and staying “in the zone” channel.

Number one: find something creative that you love doing. If you don't already have a Flow activity, I would begin by picking an easy Flow activity such as working out. That way you practice two habits of happy people, exercise and Flow.

Number two, set clear goals. For example, what kind of exercises are you going to do, and for how long?

Number three, stay in the Flow channel by using your creativity, slowly raise the bar, and gradually polish your skills to get over it.

Flow is a great way to think positively, or, perhaps I should say, to feel positively.