



By stretching skills and reaching toward higher challenges, a person can experience flow and become an increasingly extraordinary individual.

- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Ph.D.

Finding Flow in Daily Life

People who have experienced a state of peak performance often seek ways to recapture it. They may describe full immersion in an endeavor as being in a “flow state” or “in the zone.”

Flow is often associated with physical, mental, or spiritual activities such as running, creating art, playing an instrument or computer game, writing, praying, or meditating. Characteristics of a flow state include:

- Losing track of time
- Being unaware of surroundings
- Focusing with deep intensity
- Acting without self-judgment
- Feeling a sense of effortlessness

In the workplace, evidence of flow includes higher output, improved quality, more meaningful engagement with colleagues, and increased generation of fresh ideas to solve problems.

Optimal Experience

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Ph.D., a prominent psychologist, introduced the concept of flow in the 1970s. In his groundbreaking book on the [Psychology of Optimal Experience](#) (published in 1990), he outlined positive aspects of human experience, such as joy and creativity, and described conditions that contribute to deep satisfaction and happiness in life.

Csikszentmihalyi said flow is “autotelic,” meaning it is driven by intrinsic values rather than external rewards. He suggested that it’s possible to exert conscious control over attention and focus to achieve a flow state – even in mundane or challenging situations – and that that an “optimal state of inner experience is one in which there is order in consciousness.” This state may occur when attention (psychic energy) is invested in realistic goals and skills that match with opportunities for action.

Csikszentmihalyi theorized that the “pursuit of a goal brings order in awareness because a person must concentrate attention on the task at hand and momentarily forget everything else.” He also postulated that “a person who has achieved control over psychic energy and has invested it in consciously chosen goals cannot help but grow into a more complex being. By stretching skills, by reaching toward higher challenges, such a person becomes an increasingly extraordinary individual.”

Physiological Response

According to the [Yerkes-Dodson law](#), a certain amount of stress, not too much or too little, helps a person achieve optimal performance. A flow state may be depicted as the peak on an arousal-continuum curve that ranges from apathy or boredom to extreme anxiety.

Flow states involve a complex combination of neurocognitive functions. A [study published in Behavioral Sciences](#) refers to evidence of a shift in the prefrontal cortex from the left side of the brain to a right-brain function associated with increased visual-spatial awareness, reduced self-consciousness, and diminished awareness of time passing.

When working on a task, the brain releases dopamine, a neuro-transmitting chemical that enhances focus, stimulates motivation, and triggers a pleasure-reward response. Another chemical, norepinephrine, heightens alertness and energy levels. Endorphins reduce cortisol-driven stress responses and help sustain concentration.

In addition, human performance moves toward its peak when respiration, heart rate, and other physiological systems are in sync, similar to a car that runs more smoothly after a tune-up. [Studies show](#) that elite athletes and meditators are among those who experience cardiopulmonary synchronization, which may contribute to a state of flow.

Achieving Flow

While a flow state is often perceived as a condition that occurs spontaneously, it's possible to take intentional steps to foster deeper engagement in a meaningful activity that can be consistently repeated without feeling bored or anxious.

Learning how to move into a flow state helps bring a person's nervous system back into a state of balance, according to an article published by the [U.S. Pain Foundation](#). This may be particularly helpful for people who suffer from chronic pain and other debilitating physical or mental health conditions.

Some people use biofeedback technology under the direction of a trained practitioner to monitor their heart rate, brain waves, body temperature, and other biometric data. By watching biometric feedback in real time, a person can learn how to modify responses and transition to a more relaxed state. In certain situations, a virtual reality headset may be used to help a person become immersed in a specific activity or environment for creative or therapeutic reasons.

People who practice mindfulness - being present in the moment - may experience a state similar to flow regardless of whether they are deeply engaged in a task.

Here are some ways to improve concentration and have a greater sense of accomplishment in daily life:

- Find a space free of interruptions and deactivate device notifications.
- Let others know you will be focusing on a task for a specific period.
- Identify the times of day when you feel the most productive.
- Follow a routine that helps you easily settle into a repetitive activity.
- Give yourself time to improve specific skills and overall performance.
- Monitor and reward yourself for progress and goal achievement.

Depending on your skills and interests, an activity that induces a flow state may seem relatively easy or difficult to accomplish. Would you rather knit a baby blanket or train for a marathon? The ability to accomplish either one depends on your intrinsic motivation.

As you prepare for the new year ahead, you may want to take stock of your attitude toward goal achievement. Rather than resolving to change something in your life, you may find it more productive to resolve to enjoy the journey more and worry less about the end result.