

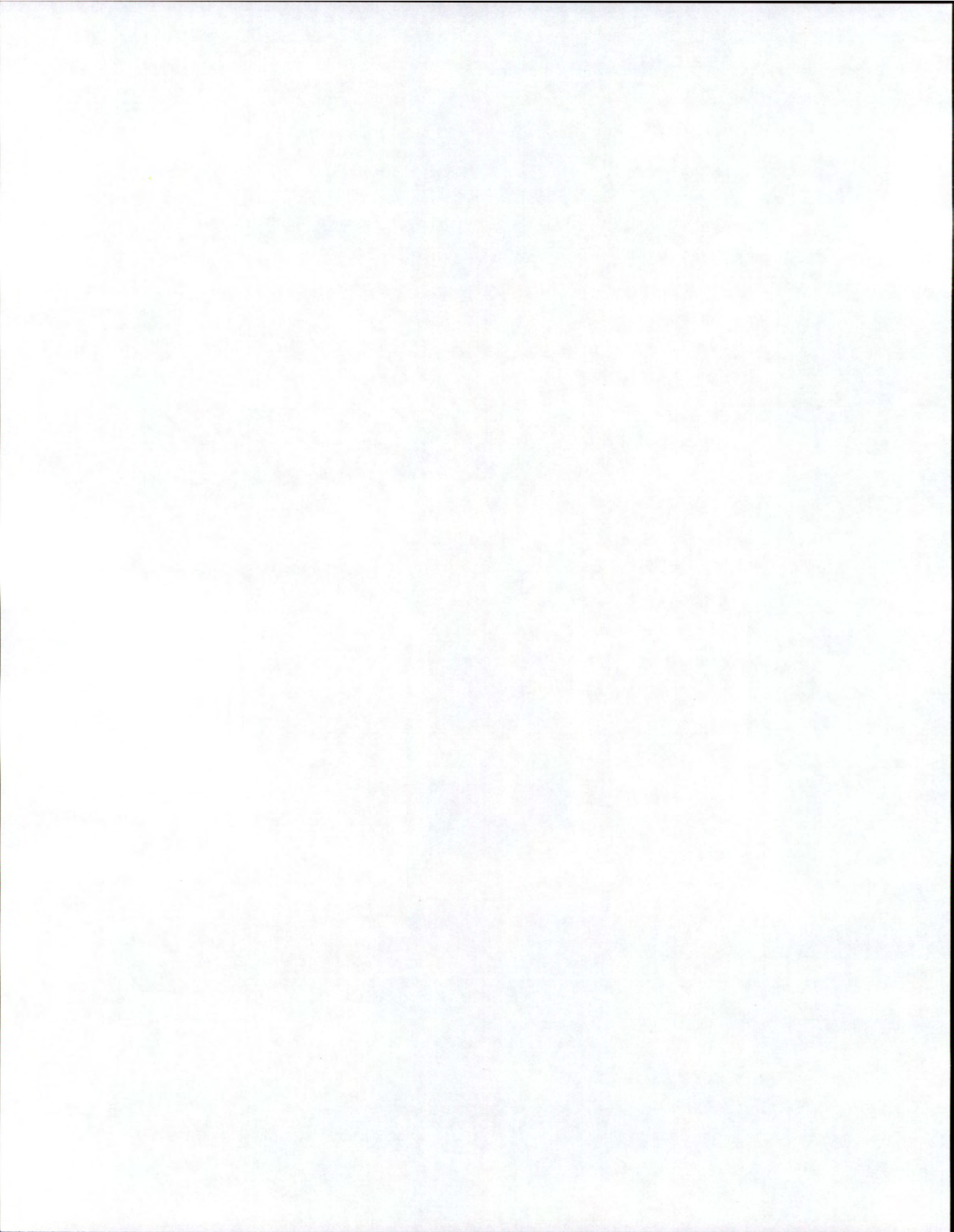
ACTION GUIDE

*Living
with*

FLOW

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LIVING WITH
F L O W

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INTRODUCTION

Dear Listener:

For more than 30 years I have been studying happiness. My interest in this subject came from my own experience during World War II when, as a child, I saw many adults being completely destroyed by the tragic events of the war. Among these people there were always a few who kept their courage, reached out to help others, and were able to give a sense of purpose and meaning to their lives. I wanted to discover more about how one could build a life that was more fulfilling and enjoyable. I chose the discipline of psychology to seek out some answers.

Using the Experience Sampling Method, we have interviewed thousands of people all over the world. These people wear electronic pagers which signal them several times a day. When they are beeped, they answer a series of questions in a notebook. Through this method, we are able to track human experience as it occurs.

What is still intriguing to me after all my studies is that no matter what the activity, from rock climbing, to painting, to factory work, to surgery, to going for a walk, the same feeling I have now identified as

“flow” is reported by people when they are totally involved and satisfied with what they are doing at the moment.

Understanding the concept of flow is the first step. When you learn what research has revealed about the conditions that produce flow, it will be much easier to build these same conditions into your life. The second step is taking this information and putting it to work for you with conscious, focused effort.

This guidebook is designed both to highlight some of the key information about the flow experience, and provide a vehicle for you to do some deep thinking about how you can apply it to your daily life. It will help to write down some of your thoughts as you listen to the tapes and read through this guidebook.

I am not offering a simple formula for happiness. But I can say this: If you want to build more satisfaction into every moment of your life, it is possible to do so. In time and with practice, your life can resemble a complex tapestry where each thread contributes to a masterpiece that brings delight to yourself, and adds greater meaning and beauty to the world.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

LESSON 1

WHAT IS FLOW?

Some people experience the state called flow nearly all the time. Others have a flow experience less often, perhaps once a day, once a week or once a month. Still others would say that they have been in flow very rarely or never in their life. Below are two descriptions. Read them and decide which one best describes your usual state of mind.

Flow: a state in which you are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. The experience itself is so enjoyable that you do it for the sheer sake of doing it. Consciousness is harmoniously ordered. Your attention is singularly focused like a laser beam.

Psychic Entropy: a state in which your attention becomes split by conflicting demands. Consciousness is experienced as depressing, stressful, or anxiety-producing. You may feel very self-conscious and worry about how you are doing or how others are judging you.

Questions to Ask Yourself

Do I ever do anything where my concentration and attention is so intense that I stop noticing my surroundings or even if I am hungry or tired?

YES NO

If yes, what is the activity that you would typically be doing when you feel this way?

Do I ever do anything where my skills have become so well practiced that everything seems to come spontaneously and effortlessly and where I feel confident that I will be ready to meet any new challenge?

YES NO

If yes, what is the activity that you would typically be doing when you feel this way?

Do I ever do something that I feel is worth doing for its own sake? In other words, something I would do even if I didn't get money, praise, or recognition for it, and even if it didn't get me anything else, like better health or improved skills?

YES NO

If yes, what is the activity that you would typically be doing when you feel this way?

If you answered NO to all three questions you may be lacking the experience of flow in your life. In this case, it is highly likely that you will learn to bring more flow into your life by listening closely to the six cassettes and doing the exercises in this guidebook.

If you answered YES to one or more of the questions, how often do you have such feelings?

a few times a year once a week
 once a month once a day
 a few times a month more than once a day

If you experience flow rarely — for example, less than once a week — you may want to increase the frequency of such optimal experiences. You can do this by trying to get involved more often with the activity that produces flow for you, or by learning new skills that will make it possible for you to experience flow in a variety of new activities.

LESSON 2

THE EIGHT COMPONENTS OF ENJOYMENT

After collecting more than 8,000 interviews of people from all parts of the world, we have found that they report eight essential components which make up an enjoyable, flow experience. As you increase your ability to experience these eight different key factors, you'll find more flow in your every day life.

1. A Clear Goal

Knowing what you want to do in any given moment is a key element of the flow experience. That's why games like tennis or chess easily become flow experiences. The rules and goals are very clear. When you are doing an activity where the goals are more vague, you can create specific goals and intentions for yourself. Any activity can be broken down into major goals and sub-goals.

2. Feedback

You need to be able to tell if you are getting closer to your goal or not. Again, in a sport like tennis, you can see immediately if you hit the ball well. When playing a musical instrument you can hear if you hit the wrong note. Almost any kind of feedback can be enjoyable if it is related to your goal. In gardening, you can see how your plants are growing. In a conversation with a friend, his or her response becomes your feedback. When you are working against a deadline you can measure progress in terms of the amount of work you have completed in a certain time period.

3. Challenges Match Skills

It is important that what you do matches your ability to do it. If the task is too easy, you will become bored. If the task is too difficult you will become frustrated. The best place to be is somewhere between those two states where there is a balance between your skills and the demands of the activity. You must pursue attainable but challenging goals.

4. Concentration

In daily life your attention is often split among different distractions as you think about several things at once. In flow, this split attention merges into a single beam of concentrated energy. You are able to achieve much more since all your energy is devoted to the task at hand. You feel a sense of ease and inner harmony.

5. Focus

With this component of the flow experience operating for you, your worries and problems seem to fade away as you disappear into your work or activity. Everyday frustrations are removed from your attention. This brings a great sense of relief as you operate fully in the present moment.

6. Control

When you are in flow you feel that you can be in control of your actions and experience. Of course, you're not in complete control because that would mean that your skills were higher than your challenges. But you sense the possibility of control. You are on an edge where control is possible.

7. Loss of Self-Consciousness

Thinking and worrying about yourself can consume a tremendous amount of psychic energy. In flow, there is no room for this relentless self-monitoring. You are so involved, committed and concentrated that you forget yourself. You become part of all that surrounds you. Loss of self-consciousness leads to a sense of self-transcendence. You go beyond the boundaries of your own self-concept.

8. Transformation of Time

In flow, time seems to adapt itself to your individual experience. Hours may seem like minutes when you are so absorbed in whatever you are doing that you don't notice time is passing. Or, in contrast, seconds may seem to last for minutes, as in the case of a ballerina doing a pirouette on her toes or a firefighter pulling a child from a smoke-filled building.

LESSON 3

DEVELOPING AN AUTOTELIC PERSONALITY

An individual who possesses an autotelic personality is capable of injecting everything they do with the flow experience. They are able to find enjoyment in anything they encounter whether it is waiting in a traffic jam, solving a complex problem, or planning a business trip. They enjoy an activity solely for its own sake. Autotelic comes from the Greek words “auto” meaning “self” and “telos” meaning goal. It refers to a self-contained activity that is done for its own sake without regard to any future benefit.

The Five C's of the Complex Personality

The people most likely to experience flow are those who have perfected two dimensions of consciousness—differentiation and integration. Differentiation involves becoming an individual with unique skills, one who is autonomous and different from other people. Integration is the process that unites your goals, skills and relationships into a harmonious entity. When you master both integration and differentiation you develop a complex personality that is oriented toward growth. There are five characteristics that describe a complex personality:

1. **Clarity:** knowing what you want to do as you go through the everyday activities of your life.
2. **Centering:** becoming one with what you are doing.
3. **Choice:** the understanding that you have possibilities, that you are not forced to do the things you do.
4. **Commitment:** the ability to care about the activities you are engaged in.
5. **Challenge:** the setting of higher and higher goals for yourself as you master your current skill level.

Overcoming the Obstacles to Flow

Obstacle Number One: Lack of Clarity

Some people don't bother setting short-term goals for their day, and so spend most of their time floating through life aimlessly and feeling bored. Clarity of goals is a critical element of flow since any goal pursued with concentrated effort can provide a transformative experience making anything you do more interesting.

How can you add more definition, through goal-setting, to the various activities of your day? And what feedback will let you know that you have reached your goal? (Think simply. Even the perfectly-tied tie or the well-parked car can give you a small jolt of satisfaction. Any activity can be worked into a set routine with specific rules and goals that only you know about.)

Goals I can set when I wake up in the morning:

Goals I can set while I am commuting:

Goals I can set while running or attending a meeting:

Goals I can set during leisure time:

Goals I can set at a meal with the family:

Obstacle Number Two: Anxiety and Frustration

If you often feel anxious or frustrated, you might have overly high expectations for yourself. You may be trying to do too much by living up to excessively high standards. You may have trouble focusing because too many options and alternatives are always on your mind. If this is true of you, you may have to learn how to concentrate, avoid distraction, and set more realistic goals for yourself.

Here are some suggestions:

- Break down tasks into manageable chunks. Focus first on routine maintenance tasks, then on leisure projects, and then on the tasks involved on your job. Worry only about what you can realistically accomplish. Nobody is expected to do more than that.
- Make sure that every day you have periods of time when you don't have to do anything or think about any problems. (Twenty minutes twice a day at minimum.) Make sure no one can disturb you. Be ruthless in establishing this safe space for your consciousness to play freely.

Obstacle Number Three: Boredom and Depression

If boredom and depression is the problem, you need to discover new opportunities around you, to learn new skills. Remember, the world is only as interesting as you make it, and if you bury your head in the sand, the view is going to be dark and uncomfortable.

Some ideas:

- Think of new ways to do the same old things, first with routines like cooking, cleaning and dressing yourself, then with leisure activities, then finally with work—related activities. (What new sports could you learn? What good books could you read? How can you change the way you perform some of your key responsibilities at work?)
- Learning is one of the surest ways to happiness. Unfortunately, few people learn well in school, so by the time they reach the age of twenty, they are relieved that their learning days are over. What a big mistake. Unless one keeps learning all through life, you die early even if you live to be a hundred. What would you be interested in learning, really learning, not like you did in school?
- Describe some activities that bore you because they are too easy. How can you make them more challenging?

LESSON 4

THE BODY AS FLOW

One of the most accessible tools for achieving the flow state is your own body. As you learn to explore its vast potential for providing enjoyment, you grow in complexity. Seeing, hearing, touching, swimming, throwing, catching, tasting, dancing—all of these activities are capable of producing a flow experience as you develop your ability to control the body and its senses.

Do you experience flow by harnessing the potential of your own body?

Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

An excellent way to demonstrate how physical activities lead to flow is by the simple act of walking. Even this simplest of actions can be transformed into a flow activity. Here's how:

- Set goals for yourself upon setting out on your walk such as where to walk, how to walk, how fast to walk and so on. You can choose different landmarks you will pass by as you determine the route you will take to get there. You might decide to avoid certain places or try to encounter specific people. You can set a duration for your walk and keep track of how long it takes to get to certain places. After this, you can raise the challenge on your next walk by trying to beat your own time.
- Other goals to set during walking can concern the movement of your body. Become conscious of the sensations in your muscles and limbs. How freely do your arms swing? How brisk or wide is your stride. Is your back flexible and free or stiff and unyielding? How do your shoulders feel? How about your hips?

Your body is a link between your consciousness and the external world. Sports and fitness provide just one of the myriad possibilities for strengthening your bodily connection to the flow experience. Listed are several activities that call upon the skills of your body and senses. Place a check mark next to the ones

you'd like to develop further. Then, beside those, write down three goals you plan to attain for stretching your skills and heightening your enjoyment of that activity. Remember, even a very modest goal is useful if you are fully invested in it. Too grand a goal may leave you frustrated and anxious.

Seeing Goal #1 _____

Goal #2 _____

Goal #3 _____

Hearing Goal #1 _____

Goal #2 _____

Goal #3 _____

Running Goal #1 _____

Goal #2 _____

Goal #3 _____

Racket sports Goal #1 _____

Goal #2 _____

Goal #3 _____

Yoga Goal #1 _____

Goal #2 _____

Goal #3 _____

Sex Goal #1 _____

Goal #2 _____

Goal #3 _____

Tasting Goal #1 _____

Goal #2 _____

Goal #3 _____

Massage Goal #1 _____

Goal #2 _____

Goal #3 _____

Stretching Goal #1 _____

Goal #2 _____

Goal #3 _____

Dance Goal #1 _____

Goal #2 _____

Goal #3 _____

Martial arts Goal #1 _____

Goal #2 _____

Goal #3 _____

Music Goal #1 _____

Goal #2 _____

Goal #3 _____

Write down other possibilities that interest you if you don't see them listed above and choose three goals to attain for those as well:

Five Steps to Using Your Body to Create Flow

1. Set an overall goal and as many subgoals as possible.
2. Find a way to measure your progress and get feedback.
3. Heighten your concentration and keep refining the challenges in the chosen activity.
4. Develop the skills you need to engage in the activity at ever increasing levels.
5. Keep raising the stakes if the activity becomes boring.

LESSON 5

THE FLOW OF THOUGHT

Using the mind is one of the most profoundly enjoyable experiences you can have, although controlling the mind is actually quite challenging, as it often drifts off to problems, worries and self-consciousness. Although you may think that disconnecting your mind by taking in a few hours of television is a pleasurable way to spend time, in fact, it provides little opportunity for growth and enjoyment. There are many ways to use the mind as a source of flow. Your mind is your own, so make it work for you.

Learning to play with the thoughts in your mind is one of the easiest ways to add flow to your life. Like physical ways of reaching flow, mental activities require the same basic conditions to make them enjoyable: you have a specific skill to work on with a clear goal and a way to obtain feedback. You have to focus your attention which depends on the challenges being well-matched with your skills.

Here are some exercises for increasing flow in three key areas of mental activity: memory, reading and science.

Memory

- To begin enjoying and playing with your memory, choose a subject about which you would like to become more knowledgeable. Then start paying attention to information you see or hear about this subject. Write down ideas you come across that you find particularly interesting. Talk to others who may have some expertise in this area. Memorize facts. Clip newspaper or magazine articles and start a file. Share the information with other people.

I am interested in cultivating my memory by collecting information about _____.

I can begin to find this information by:

Use of Language

- Reading is the most commonly reported flow activity around the world but even the most exciting book can lose your attention and make your mind wander if you don't know how to keep your attention focused. Here are some suggestions for turning reading into a flow experience:
 1. As you read, ask yourself what the author is trying to accomplish. What is he/she trying to say?
 2. Think about the author's use of language. What is good about it? What could be improved?
 3. Conjure up visual images to match the narrative. What do you see while you read?
 4. Think ahead. Where is the author heading with his or her ideas?
 5. Consider joining a reading group where you can read and discuss books on a regular basis with other people.

Science

- Some of the greatest scientists in history were untrained in the very areas where they made their discoveries. One of the gifts of a complex consciousness is the ability to be open to new areas of reality which are interesting or puzzling. Anyone can dedicate time and energy to discovering new things about the world. See what you can make of it!

The only tools you need to make science enjoyable are:

1. A compelling interest. Here are some ideas.

- learning more about a particular area of your own health
- growing different species of plants like orchids or violets
- collecting rocks and minerals
- breeding domestic animals
- developing a new computer program
- recording and observing infant behavior

Name some scientific pursuits that interest you:

2. The right mental framework which includes:

- curiosity
- careful observation
- the diligent and organized recording of events
- openness of mind balanced with skepticism
- the humility to learn from those who came before you

LESSON 6

WORK AS FLOW

Most of us wish that we didn't have to work and believe we would be extremely happy if we never had to return to work again. Yet people report feelings of flow on the job much more often than they do during their leisure time. This is where we confront an interesting paradox. The fact is that throughout history, jobs have been designed primarily for efficiency, not for enjoyment. It is up to you to discover the hidden potential for flow in the work that you do. If you can, you will transform what may seem like a bothersome necessity into an exciting opportunity for optimal performance.

I believe my greatest opportunity for experiencing flow is during my leisure time, in other words, when I don't have to work.

YES NO

My work doesn't offer me enough challenge or variety.

YES NO

I often think my work is unpleasant because the people in charge are incompetent, uncaring or otherwise uninspiring.

YES NO

Sometimes it seems impossible to communicate productively with certain people at work.

YES NO

I would enjoy my work more if it didn't make me feel so stressed.

YES NO

I believe that work is something that I do because I *have* to. It is a necessary but unpleasant activity.

YES NO

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you may be missing out on one of the greatest opportunities for experiencing personal growth and enjoyment. In many ways, work is an excellent arena for experiencing flow because the challenges are higher, the goals are clearer, and the feedback is more consistent than in other parts of life. The following questions and suggestions will help you make work more enjoyable no matter what you do or how you currently feel about your job.

Describe three occasions when you really felt involved in your work. What were you working on? What exactly were you doing when you felt focused and in control?

Describe an activity you regularly perform at work that you find boring and repetitive.

In many jobs the goals are unclear or highly repetitive. If you typically feel bored at work, you would likely benefit from bringing more challenge and variety to your everyday tasks. It can be helpful to develop an internal sense of variety toward the responsibilities you perform, to make your work into something bigger and better than what it may have started out as. There is also an external payoff for approaching your work this way since you will be recognized as someone who is growing on the job. People like this signal a sense of responsibility and intrinsic interest

in their work which is appealing to those around them.

Here are some suggestions for transforming a boring situation into a flow state:

- develop very fine performance distinctions for the tasks you perform;
- create your own rules and follow them;
- develop your own system to make things run as efficiently as you can;
- find out more about different aspects of your job by talking to people in other positions;
- ferret out useless procedures that are just remnants of the way things have always been done;

If you have trouble communicating with specific people at work consider the following questions:

- What tends to be the cause of friction between you and this person?
- What changes can you make now to try to improve this relationship?
- What is your goal for this relationship?
- How will you know when you have reached this goal? What will your feedback be?

If you feel chronically stressed by the requirements of your job, you may have overly high expectations for your own performance. Do any of these internal reactions to a new task or assignment sound familiar to you?

- I wonder if this will turn out OK?
- I don't know how to do this.
- I don't think I can handle this.
- Will they approve of the way I get this done?

If so, can you identify less stressful reactions to the work challenges that face you?

Finally, if you truly believe that you would be happier if you didn't have to work at all, it might be helpful to examine your ideas about what you really want to do with the minutes, days and hours of your daily life. Here are some questions to consider:

List the things you would do with your day if you had all the time and money in the world.

Can you integrate some of these activities with your current job? How? (If you can't find any connection between your desires and your current work life, perhaps it's time to explore new possibilities so you can take advantage of the opportunity to experience flow at work.)

LESSON 7

RELATIONSHIPS AS FLOW

Relationships can be vastly improved if you apply the principles of flow to them. Intimate relationships with family and friends don't grow very well unless they are cultivated. The enjoyment you derive from your family and friends depends to a large degree on the energy and attention you invest. First of all, to derive flow from relationships, you need to learn to live with yourself.

Flow in Solitude

On average we spend about one-third of our waking time alone. For many people, solitude brings with it the unhappiest feelings in life including depression, worry, anxiety, and boredom. The depression experienced in solitude, if uncontrolled, leads some people to drinking and drugs. Others escape into hours of passive entertainment through television. Here are some suggestions for making the most of your time alone:

- Think about ways you can structure your space. How can you change your living space to make it reflect more of who you are? Are there rooms that you'd like to change? Family pictures to be put up? Is there an area you can create, even if it's just a corner, where you will enjoy going to think, write, meditate or draw?

- Structure your time. Routines can inject a sense of focus and control into your time alone. Are there specific activities to be done in the morning, mid-day or evening? Can you set aside certain times and days for accomplishing specific tasks?
- Think "activity." A walk in the neighborhood. A drive in the country. Writing letters or writing in a journal. Preparing a meal plan. Arranging your accounts. Planning future goals.
- Work on a hobby. Time alone is an excellent opportunity to do things you can't get done when other people are around, and that require your full attention. If you don't have a hobby, think about something you've always wanted to try. Then take the first step toward learning more about it.

Flow with the Family

Many people believe that once they are married and have children, their whole life is secure and they need no longer invest any effort in it. Like any other activity, relating well within a family requires goals, for the family at large and for each individual member. In a happy family, members are willing to help each other attain personal goals through plenty of love and support.

In the space provided write down the names of each of your family members. Beside each name write down three goals that are important to this person. If you don't know, pay attention until you figure it out. If you are still in the dark, you can always ask. Then, beside those goals describe how you can help that person attain them. (Add as many family members as you need to complete this exercise, and don't forget to include yourself!)

Family Member #1 _____
name

Goal _____

Goal _____

Goal _____

Family Member #2 _____
name

Goal _____

Goal _____

Goal _____

Family Member #3 _____
name

Goal _____

Goal _____

Goal _____

Family Member #4 _____
name

Goal _____

Goal _____

Goal _____

Flow in Friendship

There is a skill involved in cultivating friends. Like anything else, you have to invest energy to keep friendships alive and growing. Here are some suggestions for making the most of these highly enjoyable relationships:

- Learn more about your friends' work, family and important goals by asking them questions and sharing feelings. People change so you want to keep up with them before they become unrecognizable.
- Explore mutual interests by going to the movies or sports events together, sharing reading material or going to lectures.
- Take risks to make new friends. Make the first step by extending an invitation to dinner or a movie. You may be ignored or rejected, but your efforts may lead to a new and valuable relationship.
- Give freely. Stay alert for things that might please or interest your friends—a book, a newspaper article, a business contact, a gift you knew they would like when you saw it.
- Write letters or phone long distance. Since we live in a highly mobile culture, sometimes we rarely see our closest friends. Keep in touch. Friendships at a distance require sustained effort to stay fresh.

LESSON 8

FLOW AND THE DIFFERENT STAGES OF LIFE

The life cycle from early childhood to old age provides distinctly different opportunities for enjoyment. From the physical activities of youth to the reflective introspection of the elderly, each season of a person's life has its own particular strength. Flow is not granted to you as a once in a lifetime event. If you want to enjoy life to its fullest you must constantly take on new challenges, acquire new skills, and give up those you have outgrown.

Psychologists like Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson have studied the unique characteristics of human development throughout the life cycle. In each stage there are new opportunities for enjoyment and growth. A basic outline of the challenges inherent at different stages of the life cycle is described here.

1. Infancy

In infancy we interact with the environment through our senses and by the movement of our bodies. Physical movement—reaching, grabbing, sucking, touching—teaches us about the world. Flow in infancy involves learning to trust our environment so that we can explore it joyfully and without fear.

2. Early Childhood

By the third or fourth year we develop more skillful uses of our body as fine motor coordination develops. Music and drawing become available as tools to express ourselves and develop the body and mind. By age four or five, reading and listening to stories opens up a whole new realm for the flow experience as symbolic representation of the world becomes possible.

3. Later Childhood

Unfortunately, the moment the child begins school the natural process of growing up is often badly hindered. The child can no longer self select goals that match his or her challenges and skills at the optimal level. Instead the child sits in a confined environment and is forced to pay attention to goals chosen by an educational bureaucracy. It is important at this stage for parents to offer alternative opportunities for flow, so that the growing child will not forget curiosity and zest for life.

4. Adolescence

The teenage years present a whole new set of challenges. Puberty announces the arrival of adult sexuality. We set out to discover who we are. In this process of building our identity, we take risks, test our limits, and rely on friendships. Teenagers have very few opportunities for exploring their identities through serious activities that test their skills. Extra-curricular activities like the school newspaper, the yearbook, plays, band, and athletics are probably the best means to keep teenagers feeling that they are learning adult skills.

5. Early Adulthood

Erik Erikson refers to this stage of life, during the twenties, as the stage of intimacy. Here we are ready to share with another person by learning through relationships. Often this means developing a romantic relationship or marriage. In this stage, whether romantically involved or not, sharing ideas, sharing feelings, sharing activities with others is important. Without learning intimacy, one may become power hungry or overly concerned with material acquisitions, and eventually succumb to loneliness.

6. Middle Adulthood

Erikson described the stage of life encompassing the years between the mid-thirties to the late fifties as generativity. In addition to sharing, it involves the passing on of one's values, ideas and identity to a new generation. Physiological generativity, the passing on of genes by having children, is just one way to be generative. This stage offers a wonderful opportunity to provide mentoring and leadership in a variety of ways, from coaching to managing community involvement.

7. Late Adulthood

The last stage of life according to Erikson is one of integrity. This is a time to reflect on the event of life through piecing together the meaning of what you experienced and the relationships you had. If you succeed in integrating the past with the present, you gain understanding, acceptance and enjoyment of the total picture of your life. If you don't achieve this integration, you may fall into despair and cynicism, feeling that your life was wasted and meaningless.

LESSON 9

TRANSFORMING STRESS INTO STRENGTH

Some people learn to use hardship or tragedy to redirect their energies and take control of their lives. Similarly, it is possible to experience the daily stresses of life either as difficulties to endure, or as challenges to overcome. This is the choice you have when confronted by misfortune or stress: either let it disrupt and disorder your life, or use it to help you grow.

There are many, many examples of events that can cause stress in life. They range from the tragic—experiencing the death of a child—to minor annoyances like parking tickets and waiting in line. Our families and our jobs can be a constant source of conflict. But suffering negative effects from stress is not inevitable. The following are three concepts that will help you to survive stressful events, and even find in them opportunities to experience flow.

1. Take Yourself for Granted

To take the sting out of stressful stimuli, you need to be able to derail worries and anxieties. Forget about constantly protecting and defending yourself. Focus instead on your skills and abilities. What others think about you matters little compared to what you think of yourself. Self-assurance comes from a realistic perspective of the skills you have combined with a knowledge of past experience in dealing with similar events.

Describe something that seems to always be stressful for you, something you have experienced more than once with the same negative effect.

Below, list the skills you have to help you deal with this if it ever happens again. Also write down the ways in which you have handled this situation in the past.

2. Immerse Yourself in Life

When experiencing stress it is important to pay attention to what is happening around you, outside of you. Many people turn inward when experiencing stress, feel sorry for themselves, and worry about what will happen next. Instead, it is helpful to focus outward and find out as much as possible about what is causing the stress. This allows you to stay completely involved in the external reality, and helps to prevent the stressful event from happening again.

Now, think of the same situation you identified earlier. What challenge could you focus on that might reduce the stress while keeping you from wallowing in useless anxiety?

3. Try New Solutions

It is only by forgetting yourself and focusing outward that you can move on to discover new solutions to your problem. With a mind clear of worry combined with a confident knowledge of your resources, you are free to focus on what is causing this stress in the long run and how you can overcome it.

Describe three potential solutions to the stress you described above.

LESSON 10

FLOW AND CREATIVITY

Anyone who discovers or creates something new enjoys tremendously the act of creation. Creativity results in a more complex consciousness as you stretch your skills in new directions and master new challenges. Every human being has this creative urge as a birthright. It can be squelched and corrupted but it cannot be completely extinguished. If you can constantly find new challenges to face, you will be amazed at the creative possibilities, the opportunities for action that the world presents.

The act of creation, despite its many hardships, is generally described as one of the most profoundly enjoyable experiences available to us. The following questions explore your ideas and feelings about creativity and the role it plays in your life.

What does being creative mean to you?

Do you consider yourself to be a creative person? Why?

What unique talents do you possess?

Describe some areas in life in which you would like to be more creative.

What new creative challenges would you like to set for yourself?

What skills do you need to attain to meet greater challenges in this area?

What routines can you integrate into your day to prepare you to focus attention and concentrate?

LESSON 11

THE MAKING OF MEANING

Enjoying the separate elements of life like work, relationships, play and solitude will go a long way toward bringing more happiness to your life. Still, most people need to find a unifying theme that relates the various facets of experience into a meaningful whole. When an entire life is transformed into a single flow experience, the dissatisfaction that casts a shadow on so many lives becomes just a distant memory. Everything you do is imbued with meaning.

To have a unifying life theme requires three components:

1. A purpose or over-arching goal that will create and order priorities in all of your actions;
 2. Skills and habits in combination with discipline that will allow you to move steadily towards the realization of those goals;
- and
3. A harmonious connection between all of your actions and your goals.

There are two kinds of life themes.

1. A presented life theme

This is a script or scenario you adapt from the culture in which you live. A presented life theme usually includes the desire for a good job, a faithful spouse, a nice family, two cars in the garage and a home in a good neighborhood. This type of life theme has its limitations. It may leave you dissatisfied and unfulfilled in mid-life if these goals do not reflect your unique potential.

2. A discovered life theme

This describes goals and a purpose that you develop by paying attention to your unique skills and desires. Out of these arises a life theme that is in tune with who you are, with the particular gifts that were given to you. A discovered life theme provides a unique purpose and set of challenges to work on within an overarching goal.

Questions to Ask Yourself

What is it that I need most to accomplish in this world?

What in my life is most precious to me?

By the end of my life, what do I want to look back and see I've done?

Who are the mentors from whose lives I can derive inspiration?

What can I do to get myself closer to what's most important to me?

What things am I presently doing which prevent me from reaching this main goal? Can I stop myself doing these things?

LESSON 12

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT FLOW

Is there an automatic way to get into flow?

If you know what usually provides this experience for you, then often just focusing on that activity will help. It is important to have some ready-made routines—cooking a meal, exercising, doing a crossword puzzle, talking to a good friend—as part of a repertoire to get you into the flow state automatically.

Can you be in flow all the time or do you need time to just relax without anything to do?

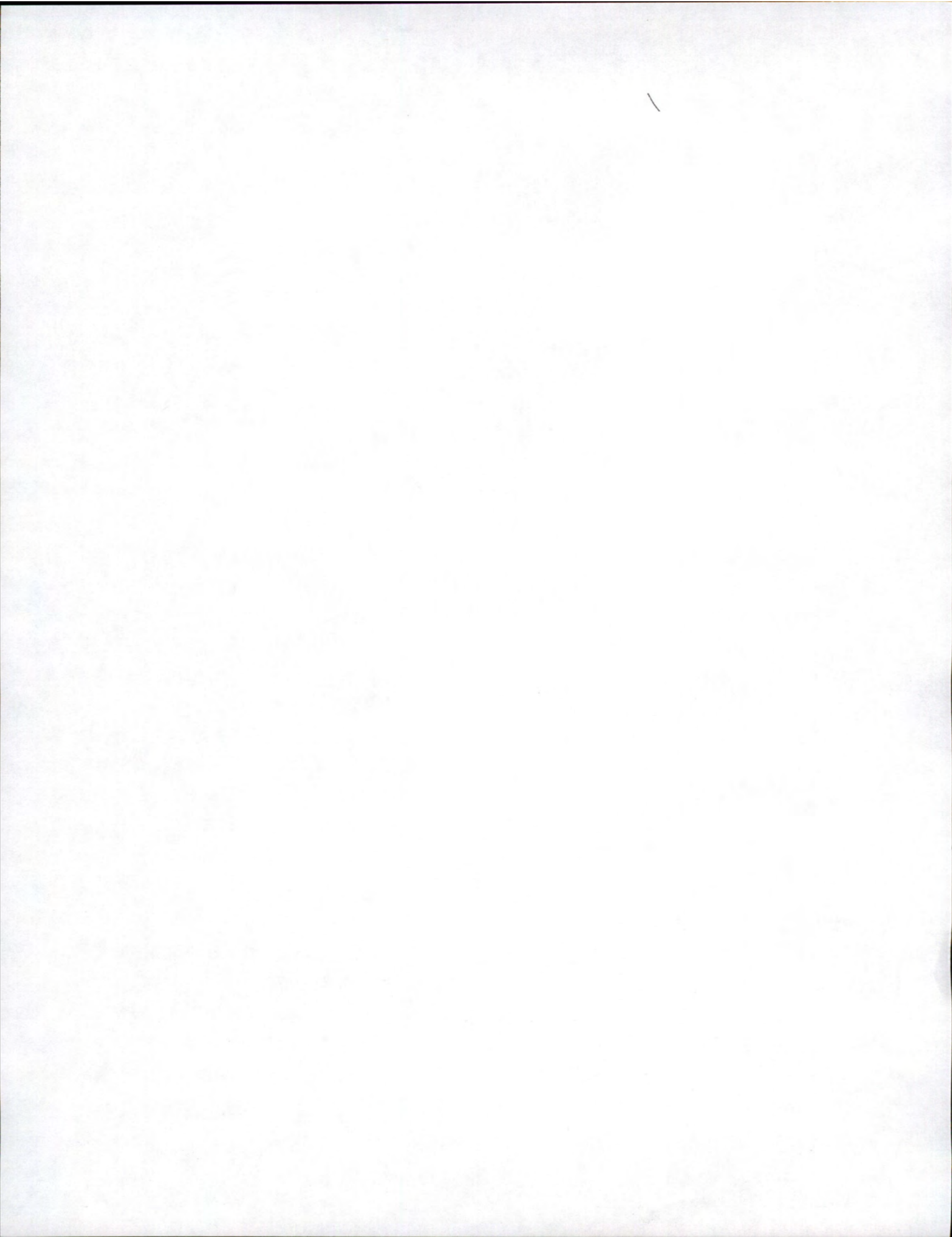
It is true that we cannot be in flow all the time. It is just not possible to sustain a high level of involvement in challenges and skills 24 hours a day. But we find that as people try to relax, they soon become tense again. The paradox is that too much relaxation can be stressful. It is better to spend the minimum time necessary in pure relaxation, and spend the rest in activities that are enjoyable and allow you to grow as a person.

Can flow become addictive?

One of the secrets of using flow is to find it in activities which are constructive. Flow can also be experienced in activities like violence and theft. If a person has few skills it is likely that he or she will seek flow in destructive activities, which are usually easier. Also, some jobs are so enjoyable that there is nothing else one would rather be doing. This single source of flow can be dangerous because it misses opportunities for flow in other areas of life. It is important to be open to as many opportunities for flow as possible.

Can flow make a person more successful?

I can't promise that experiencing flow will lead to success in financial or professional terms. However, most successful people get to where they are in large part because they enjoy what they do. The reward is not what you get in the end. The success you achieve comes from the skill you have, the challenges you overcome, and the enjoyment you experience along the way.



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