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## Episode 6 – Flow



I'm Mia O'Brien from the School of Education and Professional Studies at Griffith University, and welcome to my podcast: Positive on purpose – no magical thinking required.

This podcast is about Flow, what 'flow' is and how to find it...

**Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi** is one of the original co-founders of positive psychology, and while his work is very multifaceted, he is most famous for conceptualising the notion of 'flow'. Flow is best described in his own words as follows:

*"The best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times . . . The best moments usually occur if a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile"* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Now this quote is from Mihaly's popular 1990 book 'Flow: the psychology of optimal experience' which provides some brilliant empirical evidence to show that happiness and subjective well-being can be substantially influenced or further enhanced by experiences of 'flow'.

### So what is meant by 'flow' and how do we know we're in it?

Mihaly describes flow as "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it" (1990).

That sounds wonderful, if perhaps a little amorphous; however given a little time most of us can think of the kinds of experiences that 'flow' might refer to.

Flow can apply to any context – it can be an activity you're engaged in at work, as a hobby or as part of your relaxation routine.

Flow experiences occur when you're involved in an activity that so deeply engages you that you lose track of time, and at some point, look up and wonder where the time has gone.

In that regard flow relates to personal areas of interest and ability. For example a lot of people experience flow when they're deeply immersed in a book by their favourite author; keen writers or authors experience flow as they write (when the ideas are flowing! And talk about 'writers block' when those ideas are not!); and in his original research, Mihaly even describes how his original research tapped into the experience of people working on a factory floor (building automobiles); in that setting people reported deep experiences of flow as they put doors onto car bodies – particularly when the assembly line was running smoothly and there was a close match between the timing of the activity, and design of the task, and their abilities. The factory workers talked about getting into a rhythm that they found simultaneously engaging and satisfying – and its these kinds of experiences that Mihaly used to build his theory of flow.

*So when was the last time you experienced flow? What kinds of experiences put you into flow?*

Flow can be described by 8 defining characteristics, and we're going to unpack each one by one.

- i) Firstly, you're in flow when you experience *complete concentration* on the task, and that concentration is easy to maintain; we talked a little about concentration in our attention podcast, and how difficult it can be to sustain attention on any single stimulus at will; Flow is the experience you have when it feels easy to sustain that attention or concentration.
- ii) Secondly, and perhaps the most commonly recognised characteristic of being in flow, is that in that sense of deep concentration, you completely lose track of time; your sense of time is completely transformed, in that appears to speed up or slow down, as you engage deeply. You've probably had that experience of losing track of time; and if that has occurred when you've been deeply engaged in at task or activity (and we're not talking about Netflix here), then you've been in flow!
- iii) The third characteristic of flow is the bit that helps us differentiate between losing time over a Netflix series; and flow. Flow entails a strong sense of personal purpose in the task, and that purpose stimulates immediate feedback on your progress as you engage in the task; you're connecting the process to that purpose or those goals as you go along. So it can be a particular task you do for work, that you are quite connected to (such as working with figures or creating graphs and diagrams for a project) even if you aren't as connected to the bigger project itself, if you love creating graphs, doing the graphs will put you into flow. To use an example from my personal life: I feel this sense of clarity and personal purpose acutely when I'm working on a linocut print, which can be very slow going and require meticulous detail. Despite that slow progress, each cut takes me closer to the goal – but importantly each cut is itself the process that has great personal meaning and purpose for me (which isn't necessarily the print itself, it's the goal of working artistically on something). That takes us to the fourth defining characteristic flow.
- iv) Which is [The fourth characteristic of flow] is the sense that the activity is rewarding for its own sake; so anything that is a truly flow like experience for you will feel *intrinsically rewarding*, in that you don't need any external reward,

recognition or outcome to feel that it was a satisfying and valuable experience to be engaged in; participating in the activity is its own reward.

- v) The fifth characteristic of flow is really interesting, and crucial to consider if you're looking for opportunities to build more flow into your work or personal life. That is, for flow to occur, there needs to be a *balance* between challenge and skill. The task or experience has to be at just the right level of challenge for your existing skills or abilities. It must require you make good use of the skills you have, and perhaps to stretch them just *a little bit further further, just enough to make it interesting*. That little bit of stretch is central to our sense of satisfaction in anything – and if the amount of stretch is doable, yet still challenging, we derive an enormous amount of satisfaction from it, and a good dose of confidence to boot. If the task is too easy for your level of skill or ability, you'll feel under-stimulated, bored and lose interest; if the task is too hard or difficult for your level of skill or ability, you'll feel frustrated, lack confidence and potentially disengage. So a large part of flow is about the fit between the activity, and your personal levels of interest and ability.
- vi) The sixth characteristic is about what happens when that fit is present; once you're in flow and actively engaged in something that requires your skills and abilities as well as your interest, something really interesting happens to your consciousness and inner world. *Your actions and awareness merge* – that is, your attention is fully directed to the activity, engaging a large proportion of your cognitive capacity; and that experience is really at the heart of flow, it means you let go of most other conscious levels of processing (such as self-conscious rumination or repetitive rehearsal of inner thoughts and emotions) in order to fully focus on the task. So just as this characteristic really defines flow – it also defines what isn't flow. Anything that fully immerses your attention but takes up most or all of the processing space in your consciousness – like binge watching a series on Netflix or tracking through a podcast series like you may be now – isn't flow. They're not necessarily good or bad, and these things can be entirely engaging, but they're not really flow.
- vii) Which takes us to the seventh characteristic. Flow is also defined by a sense of control and personal agency. A flow experience requires your conscious engagement and control over the task, where your actions have an effect on the task, which is not the case when you're immersed in your favourite Netflix show; and is more likely to be the case when you're immersed in an activity requiring action on your part, such as cooking your favourite meal, painting a picture or wall, or writing a podcast 😊
- viii) Lastly, the eighth characteristic of flow is that overarching sense of effortlessness and ease. We talked earlier about that balance between effort and skill – so by effortlessness we really mean enjoyable effort or that the effort feels worthwhile and the skill we need to deploy is deployed with relative ease.

So there are the eight defining characteristics of FLOW. It's useful to note that flow is highly individualistic; different experience put different people into flow; and the those experiences that put you into flow at a particular point in time may change over time (as your skills, experiences and interests change).

What's interesting is that experiences of flow do wonderful things for our mental well-being and physiological states. Neuroscientific analysis of being in 'flow' shows that a flow state temporarily regulates parts of our prefrontal lobe switching down the often negative inner

critic or our predispositions to rehearse worries and rumination; and a few hours without those worries can be very uplifting! Flow also amplifies our body's dopamine reward circuitry – so we get shot of the feel good hormones that are so vital to subjective well-being.

*How can we create opportunities to be in flow?*

The research tells us FIVE really interesting things about finding flow, and those things point to FIVE key strategies for building flow in your own life:

- i) One - Mindset/personality type – certain personality types or frames of mind are more conducive to flow. If you're the kind of person who really enjoys doing things for their own sake, have high levels of interest in life, high levels of persistence, and low self-centredness; then you're more easily engaged into flow states. That's not to say the rest of us can't increase our capacity for flow. To do that, put yourself into an intentional frame of mind that commits to positivity and being conscientiously engaged in what you do with your attention and your energy; Related to this, develop a mindset that sees challenge as an opportunity for mastery – there are many opportunities for flow in the workplace and beyond, but most will require an explicit intention to see challenge (or anything new or initially difficult) as an opportunity to master new skills or abilities; that of course means you'll need to take time to break things down into bite size pieces and connect to the broader goal of mastery as you go. But that mindset is a precondition for flow.
- ii) Two – Minimise worry and rumination. If you're deeply engaged in an interesting activity, but you spend the entire time running problems and worries over and over in your head, then you won't manage to fall into flow. So using some of those strategies that minimise negative self talk that we unpacked in the 'stories we tell ourselves' podcast will come in handy here. Managing anxiety and stress, and in particular, being willing to set that kind of negative rumination aside for a while will be an important precondition for finding flow.
- iii) Three - Minimise distractions – including the potentially distracting nature of your own personal attention span; the capacity to engage deeply in something with the right intention, with minimal distractions, is central to achieving flow. You'll remember in the podcast on mindfulness we shared some exercises that can really build and expand your capacity for sustaining attention. But it pays to look at your immediate surroundings, what can you do to minimise potential distractions from your external environment? Perhaps that's why headphones are becoming so popular in open office environments; minimising distractions is a vital precondition for flow.
- iv) Number four is a fun one - *Find some friends to flow with!* There's great research to show that flowing with friends or family can be very rewarding – particularly in settings where group members can interact informally whilst being engaged in the same activity. So by this we mean working in a group where each member of the group is engaged in the same or similar task, and can interact with each other about that task. Think about art workshops for example, where folks work side by side on their individual projects, but can talk to each other about that process and their projects as they go along – finding flow in groups of people working side by side with equal degrees of focus and engagement can be particularly joyful.

- v) Lastly, strategy five - Keep an eye on the big picture of your flow experience; what is your personal intention, what do you value ultimately about this experience? How does it fit into the more overarching aspirations that you have for yourself and your life? Practising scales on your instrument for hours can put you into flow for a *while* if you enjoy the musicality of it; but eventually you'll need to touch base with a bigger kind of purpose, such as the potential opportunity to express your musicality in live performances or playing with other musicians - as a way of maintaining the flow experience.

And that brings us to the end of our podcast on Flow. We've outlined what is meant by flow, explored the 8 characteristics of a flow experience, and touched on 5 research-informed strategies for finding flow more frequently in your life. Remember that flow – the experience of being completely and joyfully immersed in an activity that engages both your skills and your interest with ease and is intrinsically rewarding – should be an experience we seek in every aspect of our lives: work, play and pleasure. Researchers now argue that regular experiences of flow play a central role in sustaining our wellbeing and, in time, facilitate self-actualisation. So I wish you many, *many* flow experiences ahead; and if you're not sure where to start in finding flow, look to your areas of personal strengths and interests – some of which you might find have been out of action a while.

Speaking of strengths, please join me for our next podcast as we explore the intriguing role that strengths can play in building and sustaining positivity in our lives, especially in the face of challenge or adversity.

I'm Mia O'Brien and you can contact me on email via: [mia.obrien@griffith.edu.au](mailto:mia.obrien@griffith.edu.au) I look forward to your company in our next episode of Positive on Purpose: no magical thinking required.



