

Achieving Flow

BY MICHELLE THEALL



I RECENTLY HAD THE PRIVILEGE of speaking at an event with Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, noted expert on happiness, optimism, creativity, and intrinsic motivation. Mihaly coined the term *flow* for describing the point at which we are most fulfilled and content. It's that place where the world's distractions fall away because we're completely focused on the task at hand.

Not surprisingly, Mihaly used quite a few athletes in his research: dancers, cyclists, and rock climbers. His other subjects included surgeons, famous writers and poets, and competitive chess players. He described an emergency room doctor who was so involved in saving a patient that he never realized until after he finished the surgery that the roof in the operating room had collapsed around him. The doc was in flow. Likewise many writers describe typing for hours as the words seem to fall from the sky and the writing is effortless. They lose track of time and forget where they are. It's magic and very personal. While a geologist in the flow could stare at a rock formation for hours, a dancer might take away everything she needed from the object in a single glance.

Flow has nothing to do with money or status. A surgeon who is just doing a job for the paycheck or because his parents wanted him to be a doctor can't achieve flow.

Most athletes and outdoor enthusiasts know flow. I've had this feeling while rock climbing. Nothing else is important except the next few moves. I forget about everything else. I'm in the flow.

What's interesting about Mihaly's research is that it challenges us to create flow rather than simply happen upon it at a miraculous fleeting moment. Dissecting and analyzing happiness, Mihaly found that we achieve flow when our skill level

closely matches the level of challenge for the activity. Let's use climbing as an example.

If I choose a climbing route or a situation that is over my head—a challenge too difficult for my skills—high anxiety and stress result. If I choose an easy route—one where my skills exceed the challenge—and spend my day repeating it over and over, I'll be bored. Eventually, I may even become apathetic. But put me on a challenging rock where I can work the problem, learn, adapt, and eventually succeed, and I'm hooked. Smitten with it. Enveloped. I find flow. But flow isn't permanent.

Once I learn the route and it becomes easy for me, I'll become bored. If no other climbs existed except the one I'd learned and someone forced me to work that route every single day, I'd come to dread it. That feeling reminds me of some jobs I've held before. Now I know why. And, according to Mihaly, I can fix it and make it better.

When you find yourself in a state of high anxiety and stress, stop and consider what you can do to raise your level of skill—or think about how you can change the activity to be a little less challenging.

When you find yourself bored or apathetic, try making the task more challenging—or change tasks.

Mihaly would challenge you to stop at various points during the day and check in with yourself to see if you're anxious, bored, content, or somewhere along the spectrum—and adjust accordingly. With a little mindfulness, perhaps we can live life in flow for more hours of the day and achieve happiness by reaching for the next strategically placed handhold. **W**