

Try a "Magnificent Obsession"

How "Flow" Can Enrich Your Life

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REMEMBER TIMES WHEN you were *so* involved with something you were doing that you were completely unaware of the passage of time? All of a sudden, as the activity wound down, you realized you had been at it for hours. And after the fact, you were left with a satisfied feeling: "That was good!"

THE NATURE OF THIS EXPERIENCE has been a major focus of study by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* (Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience; New York, Harper & Row, 1990). Dr. Csikszentmihalyi says that, although in our free time we all love to "chill out", we also occasionally like to do something *active* that, for us as individuals, is inherently pleasurable. Something we like to do *for its own sake*, not for some extrinsic reward, like pay or praise. It could be running, playing with your pet, polishing the car, whatever. The activity attracts you because you have to stretch yourself just enough to do it well, and you have a pretty good expectation that you will succeed, and therefore be pleased with yourself! As a consequence, that particular activity, whatever it is, according to (let's just call him "Dr. C"), creates "an almost automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness" as you repeatedly risk, act, succeed, and allow yourself to just gloat over it a little!

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS of the "flow" experience? Here is what Dr. C found:

- You have a clear goal.
- You get immediate feedback from the activity itself about how well you are doing it.
- There's a really nice balance between risk and reward. The activity holds a challenge, but not an overwhelming one. Each successive "win" hones one of your skills just a little bit more—so you go for another one!
- You focus—your brain and your muscles unite into creating one continuous motion, naturally and skillfully blending your ideas and your skillful energies.
- Worries can wait. Life's other concerns don't intrude during those precious moments, which can actually stretch unknowingly into hours.
- You don't fear that you will fail, because success is within reach of your skills, if you push yourself a bit.
- You're not self-conscious. You're not trying to impress anyone. It's just you and your enjoyable activity. You're probably not even aware of whether anyone is watching.
- Time flies. You don't watch the clock because you are so absorbed.
- The action is it. What we do is not "a means to an end". It's something we do for its own sake.

WHY TRY FOR *FLOW*? Well, for one thing, it surely makes that time much more enjoyable. But, perhaps even more importantly, those *flow* experiences can greatly enrich your life. The residual effects include:

- Pleasurable anticipations of future *flow* experiences.
- Good feelings about just being alive.
- Respect for yourself, that you can enjoy stretching yourself, sharpening your skills, deepening your interest and achievement—growing.
- Inner peace that can help you tolerate the parts of life that are less clear, more conflicted, and less rewarding.

THE MORE YOU EXPERIENCE *FLOW*, the more pleasurable your life will be. Believe it or not, you can actually take some activity which, in the past, you didn't particularly enjoy, and see whether you can convert it into a *flow* activity by figuring out a way to make it challenge your skills. You can then discover how expertly and elegantly you can do it.

* Can't figure out how to pronounce that name? You have lots of company! Try this approximation: "Me highly; cheek sent me highly."