

NOTES FROM: *Flow*, by Mihaly Csikzscentmihalyi

SUMMARY: *Flow* is one of those *foundational* psychology books, revolutionary at the time, that holds the key to understanding everything from creativity, productivity, happiness, meaning, *and* purpose. Flow states are associated with *all* of those things, and this book is about how to bring more of this genuinely satisfying state of consciousness into your life.

Csikzscentmihalyi (and you will *not* spell his name right until approximately your 100th try) was an academic researcher, and so much of the book is fairly technical, but it's also thoughtful, deep, extraordinarily practical, and applicable to virtually everyone on earth. He's not *just* writing for other academics; he's more or less uncovered one of the secrets of sustained happiness and purpose, and his joy in sharing it comes across really well throughout the book. It's not the *most* epic page-turner I've ever read, but he makes at least an in-good-faith attempt to make it entertaining and accessible.

"Flow states," those times when we are fully and completely engaged in what we're doing, lose track of time, and experience a near-total immersion in the moment as it unfolds, don't just "happen." There are preconditions that must be met, prerequisites that need to be present in order to *enter* a flow state. Or make entering a flow state more *likely*. These include: engaging in an activity with a clear purpose, one that's meaningful and/or interesting to you, and one that's *near* the limit of your abilities, without exceeding them. Too *challenging* and you get frustrated (no flow), too *easy* and you get bored (no flow).

Retiring from all work, never struggling to achieve anything worthwhile, and letting your skills and abilities atrophy from lack of use is psychological *death* to human beings. Sitting on a beach for forty years with nothing to do is likely a fate *worse* than death. No, you want *effortful striving; a goal; something that challenges you*, that calls upon the very *best* that's within you. *That's* where the majority of meaning can be found on this earth.

You'll also find that *what you pay attention to becomes your life*. Shaping and controlling the contents of consciousness is the key to a meaningful life, and *Flow* teaches you how to do just that. But again, it's not just going to "happen." You have to, well, *consciously* direct your attention and give your absolute *best effort* to something that lights you up. Take care of *that*, and flow generally ends up taking care of itself.

"The best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times - although such experiences can also be enjoyable, if we have worked hard to attain them. The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something that we *make happen*. For a child, it could be placing with trembling fingers the last block on a tower she has built, higher than any she has built so far; for a swimmer, it could be trying to beat his own record; for a violinist, mastering an intricate musical passage. For each person, there are thousands of opportunities, challenges to expand ourselves."

“Every other goal is valued only because we believe that it will make us happy.”

“Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so.”

“Happiness comes from feeling that you have participated in life.”

“Attention is like energy, in that without it, no work can be done, and in doing work it is dissipated. We create ourselves by how we use this energy. Memories, thoughts and feelings are all shaped by how you use it. And it is an energy under control, to do with as we please; hence, attention is our most important tool in the task of improving the quality of experience.”

“Control of consciousness determines the quality of life.”

“Of all the virtues we can learn, no trait is more useful, more essential for survival, and more likely to improve the quality of life than the ability to transform adversity into an enjoyable challenge.”

“The universe was not designed with the comfort of human beings in mind.”

“A thoroughly socialized person reacts strongly to only those rewards that society tells him that he should want.”

“Most enjoyable activities are not natural; they demand an effort that initially one is reluctant to make. But once the interaction starts to provide feedback to the person's skills, it usually begins to be intrinsically rewarding.”

“The shape and content of life depends on how attention has been used.”

“We create ourselves by how we use attention.”

“When we choose a goal and invest ourselves in it to the limits of our concentration, whatever we do will be enjoyable.”

“To overcome the anxieties and depressions of contemporary life, individuals must become independent of the social environment to the degree that they no longer respond exclusively in terms of its rewards and punishments. To achieve such autonomy, a person has to learn to provide rewards to herself. She has to develop the ability to find enjoyment and purpose regardless of external circumstances.”

“The waiting rooms of psychiatrists are filled with rich and successful people who thought that wealth was the answer to every question.”

“Money and success can be genuine blessings if they make us feel better.”

“Pleasure is a feeling of contentment that one achieves whenever information in consciousness says that expectations set by biological programs or social conditioning have been met.”

“Sleep, rest, food, and sex provide restorative homeostatic experiences that return consciousness to order after the needs of the body intrude and cause psychic entropy to occur. But they do not produce psychological growth.”

Flow Conditions:

- *We confront tasks that we have a chance of completing.
- *We are able to concentrate on what we are doing.
- *The task has clear goals and immediate feedback.
- *We have a sense of control over our actions.
- *The sense of duration of time is altered.
- *Concern for the self disappears, but re-emerges stronger when the flow experience is over.
- *We act with a deep but effortless involvement that removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life.

“In flow, we don't ask whether we should be doing something else.”

“To experience flow, you have to see that you are achieving your goal.”

“It is difficult to ignore challenges once one is aware that they exist.”

“The human body can do thousands of things, and to each of these belongs a potential flow experience.”

“Only through freely chosen discipline can life be enjoyed.”

“If we don't have a rich inner life, we can be exploited by those who claim to have all the answers.”

“Having an autotelic personality means to have the ability to create flow experiences in the most barren environments.”

“People tend to have more flow experiences at work than in their spare time, yet they respond to the cultural suggestion of what work is *supposed* to feel like, and wish they had more free time.”

“Stress exists only if we experience it.”

“Each year we are wasting millions of years of human consciousness.”

“Unless a person takes charge of them, work and free time are likely to be disappointing.”

“We need to provide young people with challenges and opportunities as relevant to their skills and interests as delinquent behavior is to them when challenges and opportunities are absent.”

“The lion can only catch gazelles one at a time.”

“The overarching goal is to increase mental complexity and foster complexity in consciousness.”

“A life goal that is to provide meaning needs to have clear objectives, clear rules for action, and a way to concentrate and become involved.”

“The meaning of life *is* meaning: a unified purpose gives meaning to life.”

“Inner conflict is the result of competing claims on attention.”

“Animals are most likely in flow most of the time.”

“Animals other than man are never the cause of their own suffering.”

“The psychic entropy peculiar to humans can only exist when we let more than one goal or task into our minds at one time.”

“The problem of meaning will be resolved as the individual's purpose merges with the universal flow.”

“The solution is to gradually become free of societal rewards and learn how to substitute for them rewards that are under one's own powers.”

“The mark of a person who is in control of consciousness is the ability to focus attention at will, to be oblivious to distractions, to concentrate for as long as it takes to achieve a goal, and not longer. And the person who can do this usually enjoys the normal course of everyday life.”

“It is when we act freely, for the sake of the action itself rather than for ulterior motives, that we learn to become more than what we were. When we choose a goal and invest ourselves in it to the limits of concentration, whatever we do will be enjoyable. And once we have tasted this joy, we will redouble our efforts to taste it again. This is the way the self grows.”