
APPENDIX 18.1: Conceptual Resource—Clarifying Common Misconceptions About Flow

This resource provides brief descriptions of the nine dimensions of flow experience and clarifies common misconceptions often associated with them to aid in your small-group discussion. The nine dimensions of flow experiences are categorized below as conditions and characteristics. Whereas the conditions are necessary, but not sufficient, in order for a flow experience to occur and continue, the characteristics describe the subjective state during the ongoing flow experience. In general, it may be more fruitful to target and modify the conditions to make an activity more conducive to flow rather than attempting to modify or control the experiential characteristics of flow experiences themselves.

DIMENSIONS OF FLOW

Conditions

Challenge–Skill Balance

The balance between levels of perceived challenge and perceived skills is a central condition of a flow experience (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2021). When the perceived level of challenge is below a person's skill level, they are likely to feel bored and disengaged. When the perceived level of challenge is well above a person's level of skill, they are likely to feel anxious. The balance between the two, with challenges very slightly stretching a person's perceived skills, is most conducive to experiencing flow. Note that levels of challenge and skill, and their balance, are not determined by objective criteria associated with an activity. Rather, both levels of challenge and skill are those perceived by the individual themselves.

Clear and Emergent Goals

The experience of flow occurs within a system of dynamic and open motivation. Clear goals in the context of flow experience refer to goals that emerge in a person's awareness as their subjective experience unfolds, and do not create ambiguity about what to do next (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2021). The immediate and momentary nature of emergent goals is in contrast to broader, more general goals that a person may have in mind while engaging in daily tasks. For example, a student may set a goal to finish a written assignment in a given amount of time. However, such goals do not represent clear and emergent goals in the case of flow. Rather, goals that emerge once a student begins writing their assignment, such as selecting an idea to start their draft with, brainstorming about their response, drafting an outline, elaborating on specific points they wish to highlight in their response, reviewing their draft for logical consistency, even just completing one sentence and assessing whether it links logically with the next, are more representative of a flow experience. In other words, clear goals during flow emerge in the moment within a person's subjective awareness as opposed to being set before the activity even begins.

Immediate Feedback

Immediate and continuous feedback about how well one is doing helps sustain flow and can be thought of as an ongoing condition of a flow experience operating alongside clear and emergent goals (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2021). Similar to the balance between challenge and skill levels as well as clear emergent goals, feedback, as immediately received in the present moment, is subjectively perceived and assessed by the person themselves. This is in contrast to external feedback that a person may receive later about their performance in an activity, such as that received from another person (e.g., a letter grade or score assigned to a student's assignment).

Characteristics

Focused Concentration

Completely focused concentration representative of deep absorption in the task at hand is a key characteristic of flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2021). However, unlike deliberate regulation of attention to concentrate on a particular stimulus, focused concentration in the case of flow experience emerges as a function of the flow conditions being satisfied. Focused attention within flow experience is often reported as feeling effortless, in contrast to effortful focus that may characterize other experiences of focused attention (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2010). In other words, flow states are unlikely to occur simply because one has chosen to intentionally and effortfully concentrate. Instead, complete concentration is more often the product of a situation in which the perceived levels of challenge and skill are balanced and emergent goals and feedback are clear.

Merging of Action and Awareness

The merging of action and awareness within flow experience represents the subjective perception of feeling at one with the activity. During flow, the distinction between the individual and the activity is not at the forefront of awareness. Many accounts of the flow state describe an experience in which one action flows into the next without pausing for conscious evaluation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a, 1990). In other words, many people report that during flow, one action seamlessly follows the next because the action and the awareness of that action tend to merge into one unified experience.

Sense of Control

People often report feeling in control of their actions when experiencing flow. For example, a rock climber may report feeling in control of where to place their hand next as they climb up the face of a mountain. Although a flow experience is often accompanied by a sense of control, it is contextualized against the backdrop of feeling that control may be lost at any given moment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In this sense, perceptions of control that emerge during flow experiences can be distinguished from feelings of complete control that may be more characteristic of relaxation or actions that have become automatic.

The sense of control that accompanies flow experiences exhibits a paradoxical nature (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Logan, 1988); many people report feeling completely in control, yet a true feeling of complete control is at odds with one's skills being stretched by an attainable challenge. To be completely in control would imply that one is not actually being challenged or that one might not fall out of control at any given moment if concentration is not maintained.

The allure of flow, however, is in the satisfaction of exercising control in normally difficult-to-control situations or experiencing the possibility, rather than the actuality, of control (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Importantly, like the balance of challenge and skills, the sense of control during flow is an individual's subjective perception of control rather than an objective assessment.

Time Distortion

As attention is fully focused on the task or activity at hand during flow, spare attentional resources are not available to keep track of the passage of time. As a result, people often report completely losing track of time during flow. Once the flow experience ends, the passage of time tends to feel different than normal, and the perception of time having passed by very quickly or rather slowly during the flow experience is a common occurrence (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Loss of Self-Consciousness

Attention is fully focused on the present moment during flow. Similar to losing track of time passing, spare attention is not available during flow experiences to consciously view oneself as a social actor engaged in a task or activity. Rather, a person simply acts without thinking self-consciously about themselves or how others will perceive their actions. In other words, during flow, attention is fully focused on what one is doing rather than being invested in consciously monitoring the self.

Note that the loss of self-consciousness does not mean the loss of consciousness altogether, as in the case of fainting, for instance. In addition, the loss of self-consciousness does not represent a complete lack of control and regulation of one's behavior. In fact, a person is fully conscious of their actions during flow, as in the case of rock climbing, but simply not conscious of themselves as a separate participant in their subjective experience.

Autotelic Experience

Flow experience is autotelic in that it is pursued for its own sake. The term autotelic is derived from the Greek words *auto* (i.e., self) and *telos* (i.e., goal). In other words, experiences of flow are ends in themselves rather than simply serving as a means to another end. Although flow is associated with beneficial outcomes such as positive mood and higher performance, such outcomes are not generally why people want to replicate flow once they experience it in a particular activity. Such benefits may best be seen as by-products of flow rather than the primary reason to pursue such an experience.

Furthermore, while one could begin a potential flow activity with an external goal in mind (e.g., rehearsing for a future performance or competition, completing an assignment), the experience during flow makes the activity a worthwhile end in itself, regardless of the final outcome. With that said, skill development is often associated with flow since the enjoyable nature of flow itself motivates people to seek a similar quality of experience in the future. With each subsequent flow experience, skills tend to gradually improve, leading one to seek out greater challenges in order to maintain an optimal balance of challenge and skills (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2021).

APPENDIX 18.2: Activity Worksheet

1. Please read the following quotes:¹

“My mind isn’t wandering. I am totally involved in what I am doing and I am not thinking of anything else. My body feels good . . . the world seems to be cut off from me . . . I am less aware of myself and my problems.”

“My concentration is like breathing . . . I never think of it . . . When I start, I really do shut out the world.”

“I am so involved in what I am doing . . . I don’t see myself as separate from what I am doing.”

2. Have you ever had similar experiences as described in the above quotes?

- Yes
- No

3. If yes, what activities were you engaged in when you had such experiences?

4. How often do you carry out the activities identified above?

Please indicate the frequency of each activity (daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, rare events).

5. Of the activities you identified, now please think about which one best represents the experience described in the three quotations (from Step 1)—in other words, the activity where you feel this experience with the highest intensity.

Then, please record the activity you have chosen here:

¹ Note. Quotations are adapted from the Flow Questionnaire originally developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and published in “Toward a Psychology of Optimal Experience,” by M. Csikszentmihalyi, in L. Wheeler (Ed.), *Review of Personality and Social Psychology* (Vol. 3, p. 23), 1982, Sage Publications. Copyright 1982 by Sage Publications. Adapted with permission.

6. Next, please answer the following questions in relation to your experience while you are participating in your chosen activity. Think about how often you experience each of these during your activity, then select the number that best matches your experience. You may experience these thoughts and feelings some of the time, all of the time, or none of the time. There are no right or wrong answers.

In general, when I take part in _____ (your main activity)²:

- I feel I am competent enough to meet the demands of the situation.

Never		Frequently		Always
1	2	3	4	5

- I do things spontaneously and automatically without having to think.

Never		Frequently		Always
1	2	3	4	5

- I have a strong sense of what I want to do.

Never		Frequently		Always
1	2	3	4	5

- I have a good idea about how well I am doing while I am involved in the task/activity.

Never		Frequently		Always
1	2	3	4	5

- I am completely focused on the task at hand.

Never		Frequently		Always
1	2	3	4	5

- I have a feeling of total control over what I am doing.

Never		Frequently		Always
1	2	3	4	5

- I am not worried about what others may be thinking of me.

Never		Frequently		Always
1	2	3	4	5

² Note. Flow Short Scale: Adapted from "Brief Approaches to Assessing Task Absorption and Enhanced Subjective Experience: Examining 'Short' and 'Core' Flow in Diverse Performance Domains," by A. J. Martin and S. A. Jackson, 2008, *Motivation and Emotion*, 32(3), p. 155 (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-008-9094-0>). Copyright 2008 by Springer. Adapted with permission.

- The way time passes seems to be different from normal.

Never		Frequently		Always
1	2	3	4	5

- The experience is extremely rewarding.

Never		Frequently		Always
1	2	3	4	5

7. Now, please calculate your total and average score for Question 6. Your total score will be in the range of 9 to 45. Your average score will range between 1 and 5. You are welcome to use a calculator for this step of the activity.

Total score (sum of scores on Questions 6a–6i): _____

Average score (total score divided by 9): _____

8. What could you do to experience flow more often in this activity (your main activity)?

APPENDIX 18.3: Prompt for Optional Assignment

DO

Spend a couple of days noticing some activities you must regularly do but dislike doing. Choose one of these activities to focus on for this exercise. Spend the rest of the week tweaking the activity so that you are more likely to experience flow while doing it.

WRITE

In one to two pages:

Describe the activity you focused on: what you did to make it more like a flow activity, and why this made sense based on the implications of theory from the readings. In what ways did your intervention work? In what ways did it not work? If you subsequently made adjustments to your initial intervention, why did you do so (referencing theory) and what effect did it have? What are the implications of this for other unengaging activities that you undertake on a regular basis?

Note. If it is not feasible for the assignment to include an experiential component, students may be asked to write what they would or could do (based on flow theory) to make flow more likely in an unengaging activity.