

Flow Study Guide

Flow by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi

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Plot Summary

Flow, The Psychology of Optimal Experience, is a much-celebrated study of harmonious existence presented by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a world-renowned psychologist and creator of "Flow." In this book, Csikszentmihalyi presents many concepts surrounding the development of flow, including the history of the consciousness. Along with extensive supporting material and case studies, Csikszentmihalyi seeks to define optimal experience and detail how the reader may achieve it through setting a series of goals and working toward those goals with a strong resolve.

Controlling the consciousness may seem like a daunting task, if it is possible at all. The author claims that reordering thoughts and actions through a series of steps is possible and gives examples on how one might achieve flow. Although it is clear that the consciousness is something more complex than most people can imagine, there are ways to focus desires and needs to achieve the ultimate in personal and professional satisfaction.

As an academic, Csikszentmihalyi presents clear examples of his theories. There may be some excessive reference to case studies, which muddy the point. The back of the book contains many notes and references for additional research if the reader so chooses.

The author understands that there are many factors that may or may not interfere with the pursuit of happiness. Into each life, adversity will fall; no one is immune. Each life will also receive its share of happiness. It is the method by which one deals with the internal and external forces that will determine the amount of joy present in one's life.

Flow is not a how-to book or simple formula to changing one's life. Rather, it is a guide to explain to the reader what factors are present in determining joy, and how one may change or accept those factors to achieve great benefits.

All in all, Flow, The Psychology of Optimal Experience presents a grand psychological theory that may make one realize that peace, harmony and happiness are within easy reach. There are many factors to take into consideration, but perhaps all the childhood teachings were really much more important than we realized. If one sets an ultimate goal, focuses and moves forward with great resolve, anything is possible.



Chapter 1, Happiness Revisited

Chapter 1, Happiness Revisited Summary and Analysis

Happiness has been a focus of human philosophy since the time of Aristotle, and perhaps even before. While humans have progressed in an infinite number of ways, modern psychologists and philosophers are no closer to finding the answer to the age old question of "what is happiness?" Because of the continued failure of many philosophers, theologians and academics to answer this question, the author wonders if humans are ever going to be able to figure out a concept of happiness and perhaps more importantly, how it can be attained.

The definition of happiness doesn't really matter in the big picture. It may not even be something that one can define well enough to encompass all feelings that are involved. One person may believe that love is happiness; another may find happiness in work or wealth; yet another may discover true joy through religion or service. None of these is wrong; they are just different from each other. So how is it possible that one can take so many different views and variables and present a clear answer?

Put aside the thought that material objects can cause happiness. Many believe that happiness is not defined by ownership. Happiness may be found when the result of certain events meet or exceed expectations. One must ask oneself how those expectations are formed and realize that the outcome is solely a subjective experience. So, it's not about the outcome of events, but rather how events are interpreted. By the same token, happiness is not something that can be attained or sought; it is an "unintended" side effect of living a life dedicated to one's purpose.

Csikszentmihaly believes happiness is not an elusive goal. Rather, happiness can be achieved through control of the consciousness. The consciousness, although an enigma, will allow itself to be controlled to a certain degree. Flow can teach a person how to exert the control and thereby steer the consciousness in the direction of joy and harmony.

Many people believe that either they are meant to be happy or they are not. A person's attitude is often affected unbeknown to that person. People's perceptions are influenced by their surroundings and forces beyond their control. While the person's perceptions are being manipulated or controlled, there is not a real sense of self within that person. He or she has simply been programmed.

It is true that there will always be external forces that demand our attention and cause stress. A person cannot control genetics or war. No one can cause the boss to give everyone in the office a 50% raise or persuade the government to abolish taxes. Every person must deal with certain issues. There are even philosophies that promote the



notion that these outside forces are completely removed from us, that our lives are pre-ordained and largely beyond our control.

The author has discovered, through many years of study, that there are times when a person feels in control of his actions. The enjoyment that "optimal experience" brings is not brought about by external forces. Those times when one has an optimal experience are landmarks of how life can be and should be. These experiences can be created.

Csikszentmihalyi spent a great deal of time with hundreds of experts, from artists to chess masters to surgeons to athletes, who know firsthand the value of the optimal experience. Through the study of these people, the author discovered the concept of "Flow"—the state in which one is so immersed that nothing else seems to matter.

Through extensive research involving thousands of participants, Csikszentmihaly discovered that flow was perceived the same way by all involved, regardless of age, ethnicity or social/economic rank. Since this is true, it is safe to say that flow has been used to enrich virtually every facet of human existence, from religious experience to business training and product design. Flow has altered the course of geriatric care, juvenile rehabilitation programs and occupational therapy.

Overview

There are countless books that focus on obtaining happiness. Flow is not one of those typical "how to" books in the general sense, since it focuses on the ability to achieve happiness through the control of an individual's consciousness. This can be accomplished through learning the scientific aspects of knowing the mind. Two things to be considered are how consciousness works and how it is controlled. If one can understand and control the subjective states of the mind, one can choose the course of one's life and determine the amount of happiness obtained.

The most enjoyable time in a person's life often occurs when psychic energy or attention is focused and invested in specific activities; when skill meets opportunity. Examples of this can be seen in Olympic athletes and professional musicians.

In order to fully understand flow, one must be aware of obstacles to personal fulfillment. Some of the obstacles are caused by the nature and chaos of the universe, such as desire and expectation. One may also be caught up in culture myth or blind faith, believing everything that one was taught as a young person must be true. The culture may teach that it is blasphemous to question tradition or religion. One will eventually have to choose what to believe and which path would bring the most fulfillment and personal truth. Regardless of the reason, the path will never be completely smooth. Eventually a person will face one or more obstacles that may increase discontent.

Discontent increases as people age. One may become jaded with the job, the spouse or rising debt. After years of fighting the system, it is easy for one to become tired and frustrated. Therefore, there is a choice to be made. When questioning, "Is this all there is?" one can fight back. It is possible to retrain the mind to see things in a new light and

to take a new course of action. The other alternative may be to give up—to fall into oblivion or malaise.



Chapter 2, The Anatomy of Consciousness

Chapter 2, The Anatomy of Consciousness Summary and Analysis

Contrary to popular belief, the consciousness is not a mystical thing. Rather, it is a biological process even though it is able to override genetics to become self-directed. The author states that without consciousness, a person would only be able to react instinctively to all circumstances. With a consciousness, a person is able to weight information according to a variety of circumstances and act upon the accumulated information. The consciousness also allows a person to invent information, create lies and envision works of art. It also allows one to determine happiness or misery despite outside influences. However, Csikszentmihalyi believes that those who claim to have an advanced consciousness or extra sensory perception, even in the smallest amount, is self-deluded. Most fakirs and practitioners of other mental disciplines do not hold up to scrutiny. Those who do are most likely able to do so through specialized training. It leaves one to wonder where the line is between awareness and delusion.

Limits of Consciousness

Being able to expand the consciousness infinitely would render humans godlike. However, the nervous system does not allow the consciousness such ability. The nature of the nervous system requires the mind to take each event as it is happening and put it into an order with other events. One event must follow another, in an orderly fashion, so that the brain may make sense of the events. Otherwise, the brain would not be able to understand the events, which would result in confusion. Csikszentmihalyi states that the consciousness, regardless of other activity, will always allow random thoughts and events to creep in, even if one is engaged in a completely different task.

There are events that may escape a person's consciousness. Rather, the event may be noticed but not recognized. Csikszentmihalyi uses the example of cars on a highway. While the consciousness may recognize hundreds of various cars speeding by, it will only register a few in its memory. If one sees a car that is unusual in some way or is breaking the law, that car will be noticed. In a fraction of a second, the brain can identify, categorize and evaluate the information regarding the car. No matter how simple the process seems, this action requires the attention, or psychic energy, of the person and at the same time takes away the ability to fully focus on other things.

Csikszentmihalyi states that the self is a large part of consciousness. It contains everything a person has seen and experienced. More importantly, through experience, the self builds and recognizes a hierarchy of goals.



The self is often related to the body, although this is a small part of the whole. The self also gives a person insight into one's deepest character and reveals to that person alone the true nature of the consciousness. Others may see and perceive information about a person's consciousness, but it will never be the same as the person's view of self.

Csikszentmihalyi believes that the final analysis of the linear order of the consciousness is incomplete. Some believe that the self directs the attention, and yet attention determines self. There is more research to be done.

The author analyzes the effect conflicting information has upon the consciousness. When information or events clash with a person's sense of self, psychic entropy occurs. Basically, a person will become unfocused and ineffective because something has upset the apple cart of the mind. This information, that event, can wreak havoc until the self accepts or rejects appropriate behaviors and attitudes. Until that moment, the psychic energy goes haywire. Once one can process the conflicting information, things return to normal or will improve, exponentially. For this reason, psychic entropy is the direct opposite of optimal experience.



Chapter 3, Enjoyment and the Quality of Life

Chapter 3, Enjoyment and the Quality of Life Summary and Analysis

Csikszentmihalyi believes that there are two main strategies in improving the quality of life. They are: 1. Changing external conditions 2. Changing reactions to those external conditions. One must be able to recognize which of these strategies applies to a particular situation and from that point, there are steps that can be taken to improve the outcome.

There are cases when one is able to change external conditions, although those cases are fewer than the second option, that of changing reactions. One cannot fight against genetics or war. Those things just are. Certainly one can be as proactive as possible to prevent disaster but by and large those issues are out of one's hands.

The second strategy seems to be more common and perhaps more effective in nearly any situation. To have happiness, to find flow, one must realize that changing one's reactions is simpler and more effective.

For example: A manager of a company finds out that he has been passed over for a promotion in favor of a colleague. He is understandably angry. What choices does he have in dealing with the situation? According to the strategies, the man can do one of two things.

If the man uses the first strategy, he will attempt to control the situation. The man could march into the boss' office and pitch a fit to his superiors, arguing against their reasoning for his colleague's promotion. This situation would undoubtedly cause the employers to reconsider the man's stability and commitment. Perhaps it could even damage the man's chances for a promotion in the future. Also, the man who rages may end up putting himself into serious hot water by alienating his new boss.

If the man uses the second strategy, he may find the result to be very different. Perhaps the man can somehow change his attitude about the colleague's promotion by looking at the situation more objectively. In the end, the colleague may have been more qualified because of a particular skill. If the man wants to attempt to find flow, he may realize that the situation was not his to decide. He may then approach the colleague, congratulate him on the promotion and offer his assistance to make the new manager's job easier. The latter, while not as satisfying as receiving a promotion, will undoubtedly make the work place more harmonious for all involved. It may also serve the man well in the future when other promotional opportunities arise.



While it may be difficult if not impossible to define happiness, it is easier to distinguish between pleasure and enjoyment. There is a misconception that pleasure and enjoyment is the same thing. Not true. While many events may contain both elements, pleasure is the realization of goals met, while enjoyment is when the goals have been exceeded. Pleasure may arise when one eats a well-planned meal; enjoyment may arise when a weekend trip to the casino nets an unexpected windfall.

The author asserts that a large portion of enjoyable acts often involve challenge. Many performers or athletes experience flow on a regular basis and often attribute their fulfillment to a challenge well met. This also applies to merging action with awareness. Merging action, such as physical activity, with awareness increases flow. For example: a rock climber may be immersed in the challenge of a particularly difficult climb. But when he begins to notice the unusual feel of the rock beneath his hand or the spectacular view from atop a cliff, his perception begins to change.

Floating through life is fine for some. However, there are people who have definite desires and needs that they want to fulfill. Setting goals and receiving feedback, particularly positive feedback, are crucial elements to achieving enjoyment. Csikszentmihalyi believes that without feedback, one cannot measure success and therefore one's enjoyment will not be complete.

In challenging oneself, many believe that the excitement of the challenge comes from being in control of a particular situation. However, it is important to realize that many challenges are actually comprised of the practice of exercising control, rather than being in control. Rock climbing is an excellent example. When one is climbing, one is exercising control over every movement. One is not in control of the mountain, however. Yet, "conquering" the mountain still brings about great joy.

In every day life, we are limited to experiencing complete joy because of our own preconceived notions. One large obstacle to joy and fulfillment is the act of feeling self-conscious. Self-consciousness is caused by feeling threatened in some way. When one experiences flow, such as the rock climber does when he reaches the top of the mountain, self-consciousness leaves and is replaced with fulfillment.



Chapter 4, The Conditions of Flow; Chapter 5, The Body in Flow

Chapter 4, The Conditions of Flow; Chapter 5, The Body in Flow Summary and Analysis

One condition of flow is the way in which it occurs. Flow may be either spontaneous or structured. There will be times when an event that is completely unplanned brings tremendous joy. At other times, a well-planned event may exceed one's expectations to such a degree as to cause one to be ecstatic. While having an optimal experience is possible at any given moment, flow tends to occur more often in a structured atmosphere. In a structured atmosphere, it is easier to measure optimal experience through a planned activity. For example: if a person thoroughly enjoys dance, then the planned activity of a ballroom competition is almost certain to bring pleasure. There is expectation as well, but one almost experiences flow before the event because of the love of the art.

Another condition of flow is how the culture affects a person's goals and desires. If there is a cultural aspect that does not match a person's desires, flow is less likely to occur. For example, if a culture or government has a law against dancing, a dancer is not going to experience flow in that environment. This situation will require a change in desire or a change in culture in order for the dancer to be fulfilled.

In studying various cultures, the author believes that it is nearly impossible to put a value on the culture's effect on its people. There is no measurable way to determine if the Swedish have more joy than the French; if Catholics are more fulfilled than Muslims.

Csikszentmihalyi coined the term "autotelic" to describe people who are internally driven to find flow. These people are driven by beliefs and sense of purpose, rather than the accumulation of wealth or public achievement. While the autotelic person seems to be grounded and inspired, there are obstacles that can prevent flow from occurring, such as over inclusion, the inability to concentrate or excessive self-consciousness. If a person can overcome these obstacles, the potential for optimal experience is very likely to be achieved and maintained.

The author states that flow may be genetic and through an "autotelic family context," may be transferable through generations. A child's parents obviously have a great deal to do with the temperament of the child. Parents may also take responsibility for how a child will view certain events and opportunities.

There are five key factors in assuring that a child may have optimal experience. 1. Clarity - if a child is presented with clarity of goals, achievement is likely. 2. Centering - A child will react positively if he or she knows that the parent is interested in his/her activities and is taking an active part in the child's life. 3. Choice - The child should have



the ability to make choices, even if they are not sound. 4. Commitment - The child must trust that there is a commitment by the parents, to allow him/her to feel safe. 5. Challenge - Parents should provide complex challenges for the child that are appropriate for age and ability, increasing as the child builds skill.

The author reiterates that physical activity is a great contributor to achieving flow. However, the mind must be involved if maximum enjoyment can be experienced. The author states that every physical activity can be enjoyable if it includes goals and sub-goals; benchmarks for assessment; an ongoing focus and refinement of the goals and sub-goals; the opportunity to match skill levels to opportunities, and the opportunity to compete for increasingly difficult stakes.

The author continues to use dance as an example of a physical activity, since it is easy to measure. Sex is another form of physical activity that relies on rhythmic movement to produce flow. As with dance, sex is proven to be most enjoyable when there is a psychological factor added. Yoga is another form of physical activity that requires rigorous mental discipline along with physical skill.

Finally, senses are a key factor in achieving flow. As a person hones his senses, the awareness and enjoyment of one's surroundings will increase, heightening the total experience. Paintings begin to become more vivid; food takes on a whole new facet. A pizza may have always been a favorite food, but with honed senses, the diner may begin to notice subtleties such as the presence of garlic or the sweetness of the marinara sauce.



Chapter 6, The Flow of Thought

Chapter 6, The Flow of Thought Summary and Analysis

While there has been a great deal of exploration of flow as it pertains to physical activity, one must be aware that flow can easily be generated through the mind. Some of the most enjoyable experiences a person can have are those that are born in the brain. Because mental and physical processes go hand in hand and tend to follow one another without a great deal of thought, one may not realize the extent of the mind's involvement. Also, one may not realize how little control one has over the mind and its abilities.

If the body is not involved in a physical activity, the mind will reveal itself. With no real demands for attention, the mind will tend to wander, often landing on the most problematic thoughts that currently reside within the person. People take great lengths to avoid this situation. If one consistently force feeds information into the brain, then it is difficult for the mind to address problems and worries. One of the most popular ways a person will force feed information is by watching television. The act of watching television is often mindless and not always enjoyable. Many people admit to taking up residence on the couch to defeat boredom or to keep from thinking about a particularly unpleasant event. One only has to think about how much television one has watched over the past week. Was every minute of the experience enjoyable? If not, why?

A more compelling way to occupy the mind is to daydream. Children are often discouraged from daydreaming as it seems like a waste of time. This is not true. While daydreaming may take focus away from a task at hand, it encourages the dreamer to strengthen mental pursuits and expand the consciousness.

Memory is also an excellent way to expand the consciousness and increase mental skill. Memory is an important part of every culture and is required to move ahead in any educational system. In pre-literate days, memory was indispensable as a method of transferring information. Stories of ancestors and cultural traditions were all relayed through the oral tradition and memorized to relay to the next generation. If memory were not a part of these societies, the historical nature of many cultures would have been lost. One of the most fascinating examples of memory as a mental skill involves the "Windtalkers". The Windtalkers were Marine code breakers used in World War II. The Marines used the unwritten Navajo code in order to relay sensitive information so the Japanese could not become aware of the United States' plans. Because the Navajo language was never written down, it was impossible for the code to be broken.

Memory may also be used in maintaining sanity in otherwise horrific conditions. There are many stories of people in concentration camps who survived through events stored in memory as well as using memory to relay poetry or music.



Memorization can be highly enjoyable, as long as the items to be memorized hold one's interest. It is useless to memorize items that will never be used, as one will not retain the knowledge. However, when memorizing facts and figures that are interesting to a person, memorization can be great fun. One may also find that it is easier to memorize items of interest, such as Civil War facts, baseball statistics or a favorite poem. It is also easier if the items to be memorized follow a pattern. One example of a pattern is the memorization of the colors of the rainbow: ROY G. BIV.

Philosophy and the sciences were created through the joy of thinking and memory. Throughout the centuries, each practitioner utilized memory to build upon the last great discovery and formulate new thoughts and ideals. Scientists and philosophers from Newton to Plato experienced flow through the use of the mind.

Sadly, many people choose not to continue learning and memorizing after they are through with school. Schooling may have created unpleasant experiences or difficulties, preventing the graduate from increasing knowledge and experiencing flow. For those who sacrifice knowledge for comfort are never truly free and are often subject to living life through the opinions and forces of others.



Chapter 7, Work as Flow

Chapter 7, Work as Flow Summary and Analysis

In order to survive, it is imperative that a person works. Like it or not, the world is a hostile place when one has no money. Many people work simply to put a roof over their heads and food on the table. Others may choose to work when it is not necessary, for the sheer challenge or enjoyment of it.

As with many things, entire civilizations have been built around specific forms of work. One can still see those influences today by a person's surname, such as Mason, Cooper or Smith. There are thousands of jobs that are passed from father to son, creating a great sense of familial pride. Regardless of the history or meaning, work is an integral part of every person's life, either directly or indirectly.

Despite the chosen occupation, there are many similarities on how society views the work ethic. There is no rule written in stone about how much a person should work, rather, it all depends upon the person's needs. It is clear that a person who has desires for material things such as a home, car or the latest gadget will work more than a nomad who has no responsibilities or material desires. Neither of these attitudes are wrong. Each person must decide for himself the level of his needs.

Sigmund Freud was a brilliant psychoanalyst well known for his many theories on the human mind. In regards to happiness, Freud stated that the recipe for happiness was "love and work." The desire for love is obvious. The desire for work may be a bit more complex. No matter what the chosen profession, one who works has the option to select a career. Those choices may be dictated by society, culture or education. Regardless, a person can decide to love or hate the work. To experience optimal flow, one must find a purpose in the work and attempt to achieve all that can be achieved.

There are some people who find little to no distinction between work and leisure time. As the economy demands more of a person's time at work, leisure time may become rare or a distant memory. There are those, however, who enjoy their work more than anything else in their lives. The author uses several examples of retired people who still perform the same duties they did when at work. All in all, the person's routine does not change even after retirement. Somehow, the feeling about those duties changed or perhaps the retiree simply found a way to carry the enjoyment over into a new phase of life. This is especially true when one's job is considered to be a calling of sorts. Many charity workers continue to give service to the needy long after the time clock has gone silent. Many doctors volunteer at clinics one day a week to give back to the community. Those are the people who most likely experience flow in regards to their work.

There are also examples of people who do not strive for the top rung of the ladder but are happy in their positions, whether it is as a cook or laborer. There are hundreds of stories about a person who turned down a significant promotion to remain in his old job



because it made him happy. Coworkers may think the man crazy, but perhaps he is wise when one takes into account the amount of responsibility and stress that may have been inflicted on him if the promotion had been accepted.

Optimal flow does not present rigid conditions on where it may reside. Those who can experience flow in these circumstances are said to have autotelic personalities; they can find joy in nearly any situation through mental stimulation and attitude.

One might think that if a job was structured to mirror a game, that more people would be enthusiastic and therefore enjoy their jobs. This is not true. There are people who have a preconceived notion that work is supposed to be hard, and its only goal is to provide that night's dinner. Although a "fun" type of structure may not be the answer, a person should seek to form his/her job in such a way that it resembles a flow activity, such as weaving or hunting. The act of doing a job that one loves while incorporating skill and goals would almost guarantee a sense of flow. Management would also benefit from this shift, since happy people make happy employees.

In general, people admit to feeling the most fulfilled, challenged and happy at work. It is at the job that skills are tested, the mind is expanded, and flow may occur. It is true that there may be conflict and stress, but the sense of accomplishment may not be found elsewhere in a person's life. This may be part of the reason so many people decline in physical and mental health upon retirement. The sense of achievement and the push to expand abilities has fallen by the wayside.

There are many people who profess to "work for the weekend." Even though one looks forward to sleeping in, watching football or taking the kids to the park, there tends to be less satisfaction than one would have during the working week. During leisure time, people tend to experience less flow, if any. When left to one's own devices, there is often a void of activity and purpose. In those instances, people tend to be sad, dissatisfied and unhappy. So why do people say that they would like to have more leisure time?

Regardless of profession or choice of leisure activities, the key to experiencing flow in both personal and professional arenas is to cultivate balance. Modern times allow for more leisure time than ever before. If people want to experience flow in all areas, one should learn to find challenging activities outside the workplace and integrate them with activities that do not challenge or interest the mind.



Chapter 8, Enjoying Solitude and Other People

Chapter 8, Enjoying Solitude and Other People Summary and Analysis

There is a vast difference in the way people interpret solitude and relationships. Solitude is a great thing when one wants to solve a problem or master a creation. It can give one the opportunity to release stress, refocus or simply relax. It can, however, be an intimidating thing if one is forced into solitude. It may also cause undue stress or anxiety for those who do not like to be alone for whatever reason.

There are cultures where solitude is sought. Meditation is a very large part of some cultures and is typically not a group activity. Monks, for example, may spend years in solitude to meditate, reflect and pray. There are others who choose to live in areas so remote that people are a scarce commodity. For those people, solitude is a key factor in happiness and flow.

More often than not, however, cultures embrace socialization. People, by nature, are social animals who rely on others for enjoyment and survival. In some societies, being forced into solitude is a shameful thing. One must only think of the Amish whose propensity to "shun" one who misbehaves or breaks the law. Those who are shunned are often traumatized because their social value has been diminished. There have been countless stories of people who have been forced out of their communities, never to return or perhaps become so despondent that there is no saving them from themselves.

One of the most rewarding and complex relationships one will ever deal with is that of family. Family relationships can be greatly rewarding and yet can cause a great deal of stress and grief if they are not functioning in the way the participants would like. Philosophers have studied the family dynamic for thousands of years and have never been able to find anything that can compare.

There was a time when people were parts of a family because the culture required it. Men and women often married because it was the thing to do and it was expected, whether or not they loved one another. This can be seen in the act of arranged marriages, where a child may have been betrothed at birth to ensure wealth or political advantage. Many children were born to carry on a family name or to serve a parent's biological need. Today, those factors aren't as prevalent, but they still exist. Unlike the generations before, people today tend to divorce if the marriage isn't working out in their best interest.

The way people relate to other members of their family is telling of their mental condition. Many programs teach the concept of changing one's own actions and reactions, since changing another person is virtually impossible. This may be the wisest



advice. When attempting to change another person, it is likely that one will be met with resistance or resentment, anger or hostility. Rarely does such a confrontation strengthen the relationship.

Aside from the basic recipes for successful human relations, one must take into consideration that families are complex units that are completely surrounded with generations of behaviors and varied emotions. No two families are exactly alike in their dynamic, the same way no two people are exactly alike in their beliefs and actions.

Friendships are a crucial way to develop social skills outside the family. It is believed that outside family, friendships are the strongest ties a person can have. Perhaps that is why so many optimal experiences take place with friends. There will always be circumstances, personally or professionally, where a person is rejected for lack of skill or an errant opinion, but with true friends, the relationship is unconditional. Being with friends is probably the most relaxed a person can be and not fear showing true colors.

As a child, one develops friends easily and spontaneously. There are many people who have cultivated and maintained friendships for decades and across thousands of miles. Many of those friendships started when the participants were children, perhaps before they could even walk or talk. There is something special and binding about growing up with another person. Together, two people learn hundreds of new things, experience untold emotions and bond in a way that adults generally do not. As adults, those childhood friends may not have anything in common any more, but the bond forged as children is unbreakable and long lasting.

As one grows older, friendships tend to become something more than a combination of childhood experiences. As behaviors and tastes develop, one is likely to seek out and befriend someone who has the same interests and goals. As an adult, one has more opportunities to seek out and develop relationships with people who suit them in some way. There is no way to put a value on various types of friendships, but it is obvious that they are important for a person's growth.

Csikszentmihalyi revisits solitude as opposed to friendship. For those who choose to live in solitude, there are ups and downs, including isolation and loneliness. The author relates a story about a woman who chooses to live alone in the wilderness. Although she does not see people for several months at a time, the woman manages her solitude in such a way that she isn't constantly lacking or feeling lonely. Every day, the woman maintains a strict schedule, which includes daily chores. Beginning at five in the morning, the woman sets about her list of activities for the day, such as preparing food and sewing. The woman says it is important to have the schedule to give her life structure and keep her occupied in the long months when she is isolated. The author believes that it is imperative for one who experiences so much solitude to develop some sort of activity to keep the mind strong.

When dealing with the public at large, a person may experience a great deal of conflict. In politics, for example, many people are out to further their own causes without much concern for the welfare of the public as a whole. The author refers to many great minds



who have repeatedly stated that in order to do the highest good, one must search for the things that will most benefit the people. However, if one tries to change another's platform or campaign, little to no good will come of it. If one wishes to change the world, one must begin with the person in the mirror.



Chapter 9, Cheating Chaos

Chapter 9, Cheating Chaos Summary and Analysis

Despite all the study and conjecture, there are many people who still believe that it is possible to be happy as long as one is rich, handsome or famous. For the one who struggles every day simply to make ends meet and keep a roof over his head, analyzing and striving for flow may seem like a frivolous luxury. The author disagrees, believing that everyone deserves to have optimal experience, regardless of their needs or desires. Flow goes much deeper than the quest for riches; in fact, material possessions are merely the icing on the cake.

There are countless stories of people who have overcome adversity. Not only did these people survive, but they thrived and have gone on to lead successful and happy lives. If material possessions were the benchmark for happiness, how could this be possible? The only reasonable answer is that those people learned to control the consciousness in such a way that living the optimal experience became not only possible but a reality.

It would be naïve to believe that any adversity can be handled or overcome through control of the consciousness. Life throws many curve balls, and there will undoubtedly be situations that are out of a person's control or fall outside one's skill set. The author quotes several experts who assert that regardless of the circumstances or the level of adversity, a person is able to adjust and eventually will be able to find flow once more. Of the case studies presented, handicapped persons, including paraplegics, are highlighted, as are homeless souls who somehow manage to fill their lives with joy despite horrific living conditions and lack of material possessions. There are also examples of people who have been diagnosed with terminal diseases and through their illness have found a sense of purpose and peace.

Stress is certainly responsible for causing grief in a person's life. When faced with a large amount of stress, people tend to fall into one of two categories. The first group will crumble under the pressure, unable to cope. This can happen to anyone, regardless of ability or education. The second group will become focused and clear in the face of the problem, bent on finding a way to overcome the new challenge. The author claims that there are myriad levels of stress. For example, getting a speeding ticket may be stressful, but it is minute compared to the death of a spouse. While one person may become miserable and despondent over a particular stress inducer, another may rise to the challenge of coping with the obstacle.

When analyzing coping ability, one has three basic things to rely upon in order to cope. First is the presence of an external support system. External support, such as family support or outside professional assistance, may be a crucial item in coping with stress. Secondly, one may tap into a variety of psychological abilities to deal with the situation. These abilities may include education or intelligence. Third, a person may rely on simple coping strategies to get through the ordeal.



The ability to persevere and rise above a difficult and stressful situation is a rare gift. Survivors are seen as a type of hero and are often the recipients of admiration by their peers. Such admiration may inspire others to utilize the same type of coping skills when faced with their own adversity.

Contrary to popular opinion, health and wealth are not cures for adversity. A rich person has the same opportunity to experience flow as does a poor person; the healthy are no better equipped than the sick. By the same token, no one is immune from adversity. No one has a pass on facing difficult situations, regardless of social standing or education. It is for that reason that courage, perseverance, resilience and strength are precious commodities that many people seek to emulate.

Coping skills tend to reach their formation in the late adolescent years. Young teens will rely on their social network to get a sense of worth, so when things go awry in that area, the teens tend to feel as if their world has all but crumbled. By the seventeenth or eighteenth year, however, a stronger sense of self has been formed and the teens are less likely to be as severely affected by minor setbacks. The transformation is complete when a person has a strong enough sense of self that external forces do not diminish or destroy one's sense of worth.

The author poses this question: "Why are some people weakened by stress, while others gain strength from it?" The answer lies in three main steps utilized in personal transformation.

1. Un-selfconscious self-assurance. This skill is obtained when a person is not in opposition to his environment; he realizes that forcing his will upon external situations is often fruitless. In practicing unselfconscious self-assurance, one must have faith in oneself, one's environment and how one fits into the environment. One must realize and embrace one's role in the situation.
2. Focusing attention on the world. Stress often requires a person to focus only on internal goings on rather than on the world as a whole. By focusing attention on the world, a person is aware of the external events and is better able to understand the underlying cause of the stress. Even though flow is controlling consciousness, which is internal, concentrating on the external will allow for clarity and oneness with the psychic energy one needs to conquer the problem.
3. The discovery of new solutions. There are two basic methods to overcoming an obstacle. One way is to focus on one's goals and how best to remove the obstacle that causes the stress. The second method is to analyze the entire situation in the broadest sense, opening oneself up to new possibilities.

Every situation presents a learning experience. The author gives examples of situations that have used each method to varying degrees of success.

The summarization of the chapter points out more guidelines that may be used in coping with stress. They are: Setting goals, becoming immersed in the activity, paying attention to what is happening and learning to enjoy the immediate experience.



Chapter 10, The Making of Meaning

Chapter 10, The Making of Meaning Summary and Analysis

Despite all efforts to obtain optimal experience in our lives, there will be instances when it is not possible to maintain flow. While a person may be experiencing flow at the workplace, companies close or retirement looms. Family relationships, while optimal today, may change tomorrow when the children grow up or there is a divorce or death.

The author approaches flow as a unified thread that runs between these individual experiences in order to create a synergy among all areas of life. It is possible to obtain and maintain flow if certain steps are followed.

One may obtain unified flow if there is an ultimate goal in mind. As one develops the skills to accomplish the goal and all its sub-goals, all aspects of life will begin to work together in a harmonious fashion. Through this formula, one is able to give an overall meaning to one's life.

Csikszentmihalyi refers to great philosophers who proclaim that there is no overall meaning to life. If life is, in fact, meaningless, is it also impossible to create a meaning for one's life. The author believes that it is possible if one can find a goal on which to focus the psychic energy. There are some cultures, on the other hand, who believe that their lives are pre-ordained, and meaning may be outside the realm of their understanding.

The author attempts to define "meaning" in its various forms. The final word is that creating meaning is "to bring order to the contents of the mind by integrating one's actions into a unified flow experience." Those who classify their lives as meaningful are those who have established a sense of purpose and direction. The type of purpose, or its object, is not as important as the ability to develop and maintain focus to achieve the goal. Famous people with clearcut goals include Napoleon, whose purpose was the pursuit of power and Mother Teresa, whose purpose was the healing of the sick.

Meaning also requires resolution and effort. It is one thing to have a goal, it is another entirely to have a plan of action and be able to execute it. The execution and meeting of the goal is how one can achieve optimal experience. Once one has resolution and focus, other goals fall into line, creating harmony. Harmony is the final step in realizing flow.

The process of developing a goal has been a controversial subject for many centuries. Each culture has its own ideas and ideals about cultivating goals, yet none has presented a clearcut formula for choosing an appropriate goal for each person. Deciding one's own purpose is obviously a subjective choice. These choices may be made with many different outcomes in mind. Some may develop a goal based on religious belief;



others may choose based upon self preservation or material gain; still others may devote their lives to improving the existences of their descendants.

Pitrim Sorokin developed three types of goal systems based on various epochs in Western civilization. These are titled sensate, ideational, and idealistic. The sensate culture is focused on developing goals designed to satisfy the senses. Although the culture is not necessarily materialistic, goals tend to revolve around concrete ideals that bring pleasure. The ideational culture is the opposite of the sensate in that it frowns upon tangible goals. Instead, it focuses on non-material things and celebrates the abstract. The idealistic culture takes the best of the sensate and ideational cultures and combines them while managing to neutralize the negative components of each. The author uses several examples to demonstrate each culture and its affects on its participants.

Setting a goal is one thing, forging the resolve to see it through is another thing entirely. However, in order to achieve flow, one must find a balance between the goal and the resolve which it requires. Lacking resolve does not mean lacking in ability or courage. Many feats have been accomplished against overwhelming odds. What is it that prevents people from reaching their goals and achieving the optimal experience?

For one thing, society today has more options for goal choices than ever before. With so many choices, it is easy for one to experience uncertainty, confusion or distraction. That is not to say that returning to the old ways is the answer. Even if it was possible, and the author asserts that it is not, resolve would still be an issue. With no one person or oracle available to tell one what the ultimate goal should be, many will procrastinate or avoid making a choice for fear of making the wrong one. The answer to this dilemma is simple. The oracle at Delphi portrayed infinite wisdom when it advised one to "Know thyself." Only through self knowledge can one determine which goal may be the most appropriate.

Two ways one can approach this dilemma is through a course of action or a course of reflection. Many great people chose to find their purpose through conquering innumerable external challenges; while others chose to pray, meditate and reflect to find the answer within. Neither is a sure way to find the right answer. The author recommends a balance between the two in order to be the most effective.

Once upon a time, man experienced an innate sense of peace and harmony. The only times this harmony was interrupted was when biological needs interfered. For example, harmony may have been interrupted when one became hungry, tired or sick. When those immediate goals were met, harmony returned. Throughout the evolution of humankind, psychic entropy ensued, making it more difficult to return to that innate sense of harmony. As society evolved, humans were plagued with more choices, more distractions and more desires; all of which muddied the waters of inner peace. Many surmise that less choice and fewer goals would ensure inner peace and harmony. This is only one more area in which one must exercise focus and resolve.



There is a great challenge for humans to develop an ultimate goal based on reason and choice. In developing an ultimate goal and appropriate sub-goals, one is also developing a "life theme." Executing this life theme is what gives a person the opportunity to experience flow and give meaning to one's existence. There are authentic life themes, those which are based on personal experience and inauthentic life themes, which are based on duty or obligation. While each has its advantages, each also has disadvantages. Regardless of the goal, it can work well if accepted by society. If not accepted, the life theme can create a series of perverted goals, much like those accomplished by Adolph Hitler.

Why is it that some people choose to live an ordered and meaningful life, while others choose to float along without goals? There is no simple answer. It can only be said that the human mind is a complex thing and each is formed by internal and external forces that may be impossible to detect or record.

The task facing the generations to come is simple. While it is important to understand that humans have differentiated themselves from other life forms, it is crucial to realize that humans are not completely separate from nature and the universe. Ultimate flow may come in marrying the two thoughts and executing them to the best of the mind's ability.



Characters

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is a world-renowned psychologist, Senior Fulbright Fellow and member of the National Academy of Leisure Sciences and the National Academy of Education. Csikszentmihalyi received his PhD in Psychology at the University of Chicago in 1965. Since that time, the author has dedicated his life to promoting his theories regarding optimal experience and how everyone has the ability to control the consciousness in order to experience happiness and fulfillment.

The author has performed extensive studies on a diverse group of subjects, detailing how each acts and reacts to various circumstances. The negative responses are easy to gauge and happen most often when a person has an internal conflict or attempts to control external forces and situations. However, when a person is in harmony with body and mind, one can experience flow which leads to a heightened awareness and sense of joy.

The book, *Flow, The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, is only one of the author's works, designed to explain his theory of flow, or how to achieve optimal experience in every day life. The author's other works involving flow are the best selling books: "Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life", "Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention," plus a DVD series and numerous appearances on PBS and other television programs.

The author continues his research through various writings, lectures and work as the director of the Quality of Life Research Center.

Chuang Tzu

Chuang Tzu was a minor government official in China in the third or fourth century BCE. Rather than take a higher political office when it was offered to him, Chuang Tzu chose to record his personal philosophies in the *Chuang Tzu*, of which 33 chapters still remain. The teachings were an expansion of Lao Tzu's *Tao*, which outlined the specific ways in which man could improve his life. The work was controversial in that it went against the ideas of Mo Tzu and the infamous Confucius.

Unlike many philosophical teachers, Chuang Tzu believed in self-reliance and obtaining knowledge through self. Flow is based greatly on these same teachings, and the author makes reference to Chuang Tzu and his work. The premise of that work is that the mind and the body are limited, yet the mind alone is not. Through the use of compassion, humility and moderation, joy and fulfillment can be found, regardless of one's circumstances. Chuang Tzu also believed in action and reaction, stating that at times, doing nothing at all was better than doing something, as both would create an equal reaction.



The mind and body connection, as taught in Chuang Tzu's writings, has influenced many paths over the past two thousand years. Not only is Flow based upon many of the same thoughts and philosophies, many holistic medical treatments such as qi gong and acupressure have been developed based on those same philosophies.

As with Flow, Chuang Tzu believed that the most good could be accomplished when an worked with nature rather than trying to control nature. When one learns to avoid controlling external forces, harmony abounds.

Professor Heinz Maier-Leibnitz

Professor Heinz Maier-Leibnitz (1911-2000) was a German professor emeritus of physics.

King Midas

King Midas was a Greek mythological person who discovered that there is more to life than wealth when everything he touched turned to gold.

Nicolas Copernicus

Nicolas Copernicus (1473-1543) was a controversial Polish scientist and mathematician who proved that the sun was the center of the universe.

Saint Thomas Aquinas

Saint Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274) was an Italian philosopher and theologian. Considered to be the most revered Catholic priest in history.

Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), was an Austrian psychiatrist who is considered to be the founder of psychoanalysis.

Aristotle

Aristotle (384 BC - 322 BC) was a Greek philosopher and a student of Plato, thought to be one of the fathers of modern philosophy.



Study Participants

The author utilized study participants from a wide variety of sources, from the University of Chicago to professional athletes, businessmen and artists.

Autotelic Personalities

The author refers a great deal to autotelic personalities, or those who are driven internally to accomplish goals.



Objects/Places

University of Chicago

The University of Chicago is the site used by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as a launching pad for his studies in flow, achieving the optimal experience. Through extensive research performed at the private university, the author was able to develop and refine his theories on controlled consciousness. The work began as part of the author's doctoral dissertation.

A great number of study participants were in attendance at the University, as were the largest part of Csikszentmihalyi's research team. While the author's research has also continued outside the University, Csikszentmihalyi credits the institution for its great contributions to the science of psychology.

Hierarchy of needs

Csikszentmihalyi states that the hierarchy of needs is the biggest determining factor in happiness.

Control of consciousness

Control of consciousness is the basis on which the flow principle is formed.

Concentration camps

Location of Jewish prisoners held by Hitler in World War II.

Nature

Nature is considered to be a great obstacle to flow if one attempts to control it rather than co-exist with it.

Olympic Games

The Olympic games are an excellent example of flow, since they marry physical activity with mental ability.



Flow

The ability to achieve optimal experience through goal setting and action, both physical and mental.

China

Home to ancient philosophers Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, whose teachings support the author's research.

America

The location where most of the author's research on Flow took place.

India

Home to fakirs, one of the few groups who may possess ESP.



Themes

Optimal Experience

Flow is based entirely on achieving what the author refers to as "optimal experience." The concept behind optimal experience is that each person has the ability to control his or her consciousness to the degree that each experience will be felt to the highest degree, with each generating a sense of well being.

That is not to say that through this practice one will cease to have problems. Each life is destined to have both ups and downs, and experiencing flow will not change that. However, what will change is the way those problems are dealt with in the context of one's life. One will no longer stress as much over things that are beyond personal control. On the opposite end, enjoyable experiences will increase infinitely and pleasure will rise to a new level.

Many examples of optimal experience are referred to throughout the book. One of the most prevalent, and perhaps the most understandable, is that of dance. The author illustrates that dancers are a disciplined lot, who have married their physical abilities to their mental skills in order to express the ultimate experience. When one dances, everything else in the universe ceases to exist. There is a sense of oneness with the dance; the only thing that matters is the dance. The flow is accentuated by accomplishing new goals and stretching oneself both physically and mentally.

There are many misconceptions about happiness - that it only pertains to the rich and famous; that serious people have better things to do than to walk around whistling all day; that there are too many obligations in life to be overly concerned with cultivating joy. The author details how each person can achieve the optimal experience through small changes in behavior and thought, thereby enriching one's entire life and the lives of others.

Personal Choice

Much of a person's happiness or discontent is achieved through personal choice. Every day people make choices that affect them both internally and externally. One person may choose to go to work while another decides that he's fed up and stays home. One person may train for a marathon, while another plans a bank robbery. With all judgments aside, personal choices can determine the level of happiness one experiences. Continued personal choices, good or bad, may be shape a person's life in a way one never could have imagined. Flow shows how a person may rethink personal choice in order to make the decision that is most likely to bring joy and fulfillment.

Personal choice may be formed utilizing a great number of factors and influences. People make choices every day based upon the opinions of others, whether it's family, friends or society. Some choices are dictated by culture or ethnicity. Other goals may be



chosen because of obligation or adversity. Regardless of the reason, each person owes it to oneself to be sure that one's personal choices are the best possible choices. Although external forces may have a strong impact on a person's choices, flow cannot be achieved if a person's ultimate goal does not serve either one's desires or needs.

Through the practice of flow, one will be able to have a greater understanding of personal options and will see more clearly how one's choices affect everything one touches. Much like the ripple in the pond, a person's actions will continue to spread and affect everything with which it comes in contact.

Once a person is able to understand the concept of optimal experience, life takes on an entirely new meaning and a new outlook is developed.

Adversity

Adversity is a part of everyday life; no one is immune. It is how one handles adversity that reveals strength of character.

Adversity is something that each person must face in order to get through life. Adversity can be something as simple as a flat tire on the way to work to cancer to a devastating flood or fire. Each person handles adversity differently, but people ultimately end up in one of two groups when faced with life's challenges.

The first group prefers to hide its head in the sand rather than face the challenge at hand. One may claim to lack the skills necessary to overcome the problem, while another will refuse to ask for help. This group includes those who crumble in the face of adversity and also those who are content to walk through life with a "woe is me" attitude.

The second group finds a way to overcome adversity. While the first group lives in the problem, the second group lives in the solution. Some people in this group subscribe to the idea that "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." In fact, many who overcome adversity have gone on to rise above the adversity and find that their lives have improved dramatically.

Regardless of the group, the author asserts that all people are able to overcome adversity and find flow.



Style

Perspective

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has had decades of experience in his field as a psychologist. As a Senior Fulbright Fellow and member of the National Academy of Leisure Sciences and the National Academy of Education, Csikszentmihalyi has had the opportunity to teach myriad colleagues and students the theory surrounding "flow," a concept which Csikszentmihalyi developed.

As an expert in his field, the author has performed extensive research on the consciousness and its capabilities. Although the author freely admits that much of consciousness remains a mystery to psychologists, philosophers and medical practitioners, there are methods by which one can control the consciousness in order to achieve a sense of well being.

The author debunks many myths surrounding the pursuit of happiness, from antiquated physiology to cultural myth. The work is clearly explained and further demonstrated through the use of extensive case studies, students and volunteers.

Flow has become Csikszentmihalyi's ultimate goal. The author's commitment to his work is admirable and will surely continue throughout the balance of his career.

Tone

The tone of *Flow, The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, is that of an academic and teacher. The basis for Csikszentmihalyi's theories is clearly explained without becoming tedious or difficult for the average reader to understand.

The author takes great care to present each idea individually, making sure that it can be understood and evaluated on its own merit before moving on to the next concept. Eventually, several of the concepts may be married together to present a unified front and a complete explanation of the process and how one might utilize the information to achieve flow.

At times, the author's enthusiasm and desire to present a clear explanation can get the better of him. In some cases, there are too many case studies used to illustrate a simple point when it is obvious that one study or anecdote would suffice.

In the beginning of the book, Csikszentmihalyi states the purpose for including such a detailed section of notes and references. Although it is customary, particularly in academic treatises, to include footnotes and references along with the text, Csikszentmihalyi believes that the additions would make the text too complex and confusing for the reader. This was an excellent choice.



The overall tone of *Flow* is that of an older sibling explaining the ways of life to a younger child, who already has great understanding. The facts are imparted in an informative, but not condescending way, with each item building toward the main point. Any reader who is interested in finding the best way to promote inner happiness would find great wisdom and comfort in this book.

Structure

Flow is comprised of 140 pages, divided into ten chapters. The average length of a chapter is 24 pages; the longest contains 35 pages, while the shortest contains 20 pages. The chapters build upon one another in order to come to a crescendo and summation of the author's theories.

Within each chapter is a smaller section, with each presenting a separate, but related subject. These subdivisions are an excellent device. The content in the chapters could easily run together without the divisions, and the separation of topics makes it much easier for the reader to return to a specific section to recapture a thought or reiterate an idea. Without the chapter divisions, the information could easily become too overwhelming and confusing to the reader.

Some concepts are revisited in similar ways throughout the book. For example, cultural issues may be mentioned in one chapter than addressed once again in a later chapter. The repetition seems somewhat unnecessary. The same can be said of revisiting the topics of autotelic personalities and the effects, both positive and negative, of familial relationships.

Aside from the repetition, the author does a fairly good job of keeping the information on track and as concise as possible without having to include a companion volume.



Quotes

"The optimal state of inner experience is where there is order in consciousness."
Pg. 6

"Though evidence suggests that most people are caught up on this frustrating treadmill of rising expectations, many individuals have found ways to escape it."
Pg. 10

"In making us work for its goals, society is assisted by some powerful allies; our biological needs and our genetic conditioning."
Pg. 17

"The simple truth - that the control of consciousness determines the quality of life - has been known for a long time; in fact, for as long as human records exist."
Pg. 20

"Perhaps in time we shall discover hidden powers of the mind that will allow it to make the sort of quantum leaps that we now can only dream about."
Pg. 25

"The myth of King Midas well illustrates the point that controlling external conditions does not necessarily improve existence."
Pg. 43-44

"When all a person's relevant skills are needed to cope with the challenges of a situation, that person's attention is completely absorbed by the activity."
Pg. 53

"Preoccupation with the self consumes psychic energy because in every day life we often feel threatened."
Pg. 63

"The flow experience, like everything else, is not 'good' in an absolute sense."
Pg. 70

"Although average Americans have plenty of free time, and ample access to leisure activities, they do not, as a result, experience flow often."
Pg. 83

"We don't usually notice how little control we have over the mind, because habits channel psychic energy so well that thoughts seem to follow each other by themselves without a hitch."
Pg. 119



"It is easier to understand the way work affects the quality of life when we take the long view, and compare ourselves with people from different times and cultures."

Pg. 157

"The peak in the development of coping skills is reached when a young man or woman has achieved a strong enough sense of self, based on personally selected goals, that no external disappointment can entirely undermine who he or she is."

Pg. 203



Topics for Discussion

What are the differences between achieving flow through physical and mental activities? Which are more enjoyable?

Do the guidelines for experiencing flow through memory assist in creating optimal experience in your life? Explain.

What other methods have you used to ensure enjoyment in a particular situation?

Discuss the feelings associated with a specific activity that caused flow in your life.

How has memory been important in every day life?

Which type of activity, physical or mental, is more likely to create flow? Explain.

How can flow be achieved in the workplace?

Which is easier - changing external conditions or altering one's reactions to unpleasant circumstances? Explain.

Which methods of achieving flow did your parents use? Were they effective?

How will the quest for flow change your behavior in personal matters? Professional matters?

What was the most surprising element involved in achieving optimal experience?