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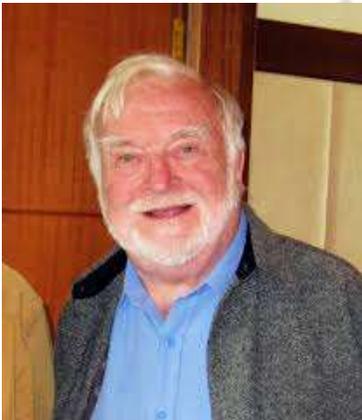
## 1. Learning Outcomes

After studying this module, you shall be able to

- Know about the concept of flow
- Identify the characteristics of the flow state
- Learn about the current and future directions of research on flow and
- Understand the interventions to enhance the flow state

## 2. The Concept of Flow

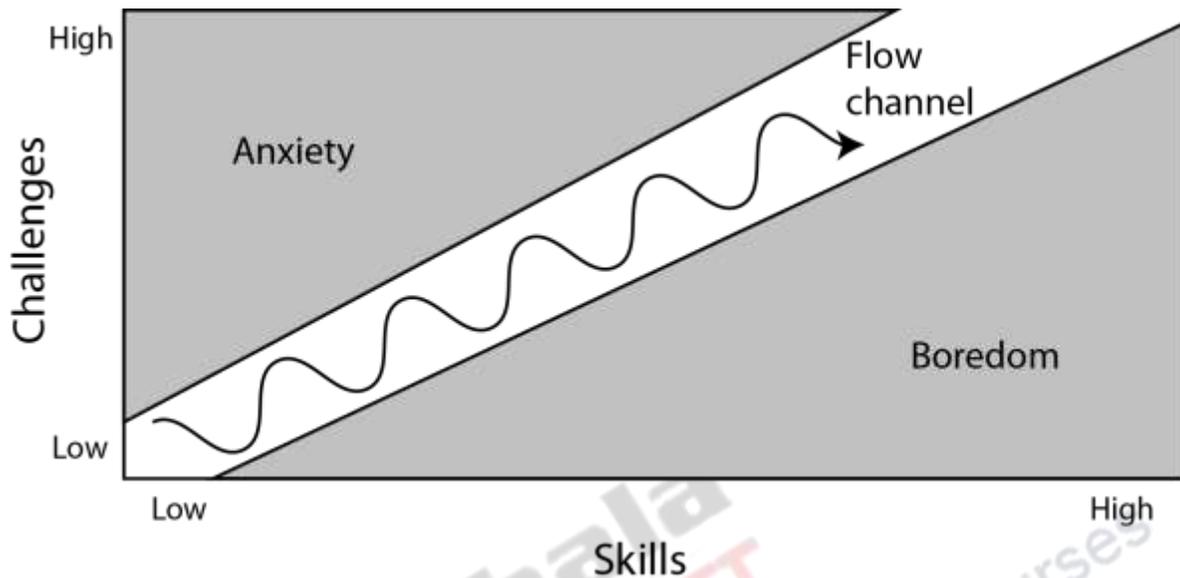
In the 1960s while studying the creative process, Csikszentmihalyi noticed the fact that while working on a painting, the artist worked on it with full concentration, ignoring hunger, fatigue, and discomfort. But once the creation was completed the artist lost interest in it. Flow research and theory aims to understand the intrinsically motivated, or autotelic, activity. Hence, this perspective describes a good life as one that is characterized by complete absorption in what one does.



**Csikszentmihalyi**

Significant research had been conducted on intrinsic motivation by that time. Csikszentmihalyi (1975/2000) investigated the flow state by interviewing rock climbers, dancers etc who emphasized that the main reason for pursuing these activities was enjoyment.

Flow experiences occur when we are engaged in controllable yet challenging activities that require considerable skill and are intrinsically motivating (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997). Flow experiences occur when we have a good chance of completing these tasks and when there are clear goals and immediate feedback. These tasks require full concentration so we become deeply involved in them, and forget the hassles of everyday life. When involved in these tasks the sense of self disappears and emerges as strengthened after the completion of the task. The perception of time is altered during flow experiences. Reading, sailing, chess, rock climbing, dancing, writing and gang motorcycling are some of the examples of activities where flow experiences have been reported. Activities that lead to flow experiences can become an end in themselves.



The above diagram depicts three regions of experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975/2000): a flow channel; a region of boredom; and a region of anxiety. The Milan group defined flow as the balance of challenges and skills.

### 3. Characteristics of the state of flow

A state of flow is characterized by:-

- **Focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment:** Because tasks that lead to flow experiences involve working towards clear goals and receiving immediate feedback about movement towards these goals, a deep level of concentration on the task is essential
- **Merging of action and awareness:** Since the person's full concentration is on the task there is a loss of awareness of the self.
- **Loss of reflective self-consciousness**
- **A sense that one can control one's actions**
- **Distortion of temporal experience:** When we are involved in flow experiences our perception of time is distorted.
- **Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding:** Activities that lead to flow experiences are said to be 'autotelic'. Autotelic comes from the Greek words self (auto) and goal (telos). Autotelic experiences are those that arise from activities which are not done for some benefit but because the activity is intrinsically rewarding in itself.
- **Challenging activities that require skill:** The tasks which lead to flow experiences must demand that we use our skills almost to their limits and that the task is one that can

be completed. In flow experiences the ratio of the challenge involved in an activity and the skill required for the activity is close to 1:1.

- **Clear goals and immediate feedback:** Tasks that lead to flow experiences have clear goals and feedback about movement towards these goals is immediate.
- **Dynamic equilibrium:** In the state of flow, the individual operates at full capacity which is a state of dynamic equilibrium. There is a balance between perceived action capacities and perceived action opportunities which is a state of optimal arousal.

#### Following are the conditions of flow:

- A sense that one is engaging in challenges at a level which is appropriate to one's capacities.
- There are clear proximal goals and immediate feedback about the progress being made.
- Certain cultures and types of families are conducive to flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). All cultures have certain goals which citizens aspire for. They also specify social norms, roles, rules and rituals in accordance with which these goals may be achieved. Cultures in which the goals, norms, roles, rules and rituals closely match the skills of the population are more suitable for occurrence of flow experiences.

Work-based flow experiences are more common in cultures that permit people to have work roles that are neither boring nor overly challenging. Flow experiences are more common in cultures where religious rituals involve dance, singing or meditation etc. Flow experiences are more common in cultures where skilled games against well-matched competitors are widely practiced.

#### 4. Flow, Attention, and the Self

According to Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988), to understand flow experiences, we need to understand it through consciousness and the self. Consciousness is made up by subjective experience. The state of self emerges when consciousness becomes aware of itself. Attention plays a crucial role in entering and staying in flow.

Intense and focused concentration implies that attention is fully invested in the present activity. With the loss of self-consciousness in flow there is a fading of the 'me' from awareness. Staying in flow requires that attention is invested fully on the task at hand.

#### 5. The Autotelic Personality

Csikszentmihalyi (1975/2000) talks about an autotelic person as one who enjoys life, and does things for their own sake. This kind of personality possesses several meta-skills such as a general curiosity and interest in life, persistence, and low self-centeredness.

Autotelics have been found to be least happy and motivated in low-challenge, low-skill situations.

### Autotelic Families

From an Experience Sampling Method study of talented adolescents Rathunde (1988) found that autotelic personality develops in a complex family environment which also provides support and challenge.

## 6. Intrinsic Motivation

With extrinsic motivation, those activities are undertaken which will result in pleasure or help in avoiding unpleasant events. Self-determination theory was developed by Professors Richard Ryan and Edward Deci at Rochester University to explain conditions that foster intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Ryan and Deci, 2000). They conceptualize intrinsic motivation as the inclination we have towards spontaneous interest, exploration and mastery of new information, skills and experiences. According to this theory, when our needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy are satisfied, intrinsic motivation occurs, but self-motivation is less likely when these needs are thwarted.

Intrinsically motivated individuals show more interest, excitement and confidence in the tasks at hand and also show enhanced performance, persistence and creativity concerning these tasks. These individuals report higher self-esteem and subjective well-being. However, these benefits occur even though people with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation have the same levels of perceived competence and self-efficacy (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Intrinsic motivation is weakened by punishment, and by imposing goals, deadlines and directives. Intrinsic motivation is also weakened by giving people rewards for completing interesting tasks, particularly if these rewards are perceived as controlling (Deci et al., 1999).

Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination continuum, distinctions are made between four different extrinsic motivation regulatory styles.

1. Externally regulated behaviour
2. Interjected regulation of behaviour
3. Regulation through identification
4. Integrated Regulation

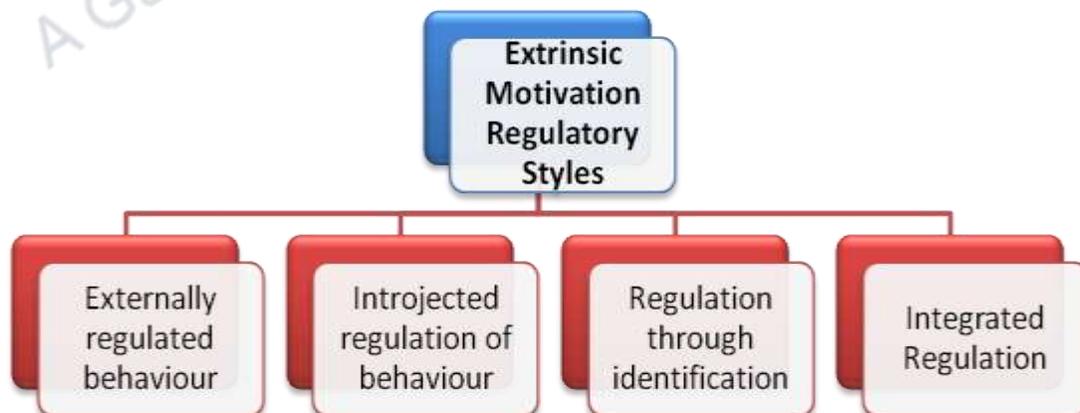


Figure showing the four types of extrinsic motivation regulatory styles

Certain conditions promote the development of intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000). For instance, children whose needs for relatedness, competency and autonomy are met in infancy and childhood show more intrinsic motivation.

The further along the continuum of self-determination we are, the greater the level of autonomy we experience in regulating our actions.

Intrinsic motivation is developed for activities that are: (1) moderately challenging; (2) that we feel we can do well; and (3) that give us satisfaction (Bandura, 1997). Intrinsic motivation is mediated partially by self-efficacy.

## 7. Meta-motivational States and Reversal Theory

We may observe that sometimes we oscillate between being intrinsically motivated and extrinsically motivated doing the same activity. Reversal theory offers a framework for understanding these apparent motivational paradoxes (Apter, 2001).

It is assumed that our motivation may be characterized by our status with respect to pairs of meta-motivational states. In terms of intrinsic motivation and flow experiences, the main area of concern is the means-ends domain. That is, when extrinsically motivated to do a task we are focused on achieving a goal in a planned and serious way. This type of experience characterizes being in a telic state. In contrast, when we are intrinsically motivated, primarily focused on doing the activity in a spontaneous way, with least regard for the goal of the activity. This defines the paratelic state. In the telic state we focus on doing an activity to achieve a goal, but in the paratelic state we carry out activities primarily for their own sake. The telic state is associated with seriousness and achievement, while the paratelic state is associated with playfulness and fun.

## 8. Directions in Flow Research

The flow state has been studied in many domains like art and science, aesthetic experience, sport, literary writing and other activities.

Flow research was conducted during the 1980s and 1990s by Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues in Italy.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the flow concept was also studied by researchers studying optimal experience. In the 1980s, the work on flow was also incorporated within the humanistic tradition in psychology. It was also part of the empirical literature on intrinsic motivation.

Flow research focuses on the dynamic system composed of person and environment, and the interactions between the person and the environment. Proximal goals arise out of the interaction. Activities that provide goal and feedback structures make flow more likely.

### Consequences of Flow

In many studies, flow was found to be associated with commitment and achievement during. Studies have shown that a relationship exists between quality of experience and persistence in an activity. A longitudinal study was conducted on students talented in mathematics (Heine, 1996)

and it was found that those who experienced flow in the first part of a course performed better in the second half. Many researchers also state that the time spent in flow may predict self-esteem.

Mastering challenges in daily life may protect against negative outcomes and flow may also have consequences for physical health. The flow state is an end in itself. Evidence for deep flow has been found in activities as diverse as elite and non-elite sport; social activism; and aesthetic experience.

It was found that for normal American adolescents, motivation (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 1989) and happiness (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1993) were greater in low-challenge, high-skill situations as compared to when challenges and skills were simultaneously high.

## 9. Measuring Flow and Autotelic Personality

Many techniques are employed to study and assess flow. They are as follows:

### **Interview**

Qualitative interviews can be undertaken to understand the nature of the experience of flow. The semi-structured interview yields a comprehensive account of the flow experience in real-life context. The interview leads to the generation of in-depth detailed information about the flow experience.

### **Questionnaire**

Paper-and-pencil measures have also been used to measure dimensions of the flow experience like the Flow Questionnaire (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

### **The Experience Sampling Method**

Subjects are given pagers, programmable watches etc which signal the participants, at preprogrammed times, to complete a questionnaire describing the moment at which they were messaged.

## 10. Interventions to Foster Flow

The relevance of the flow concept has been found in many applied settings, such as schools and occupational therapy.

Two types of interventions made in terms of flow can be distinguished: (a) those seeking to shape activity structures and environments so that they foster flow and (b) those attempting to assist individuals in finding flow.

Educational settings are one of the most important areas for application of the findings of flow research. One such important experiment is the 13-year-old Key School in Indianapolis (Whalen, 1999).

### **Creating flow in relationships with our children**

Certain types of families have been found in a study by Rathunde (1988) to promote the experience of flow. Adolescents in families characterized by optimal levels of clarity, centering, choice, commitment and challenge reported more frequent flow experiences.

### **How to create flow in physical activities**

Flow in physical activities can be developed in the following way:

- Setting an overall goal and breaking this down into a number of sub goals.
- Deciding on a way of measuring progress towards the goals that one has chosen.
- Concentrating on doing the activity as well as noting how well how one is achieving sub goals.
- Gradually increasing the difficulty of the sub goals so that the challenge matches the level of the growing skill.

## **11. Directions for Future Research**

In the future flow research can be undertaken in the following areas:

### **Autotelic Personality**

Research may be conducted on the attentional processes and meaningful goals involved in the task at hand.

### **Forms of Flow**

No research has addressed the category of micro flow activities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975/2000). Fewer studies have identified forms of what might be called shared flow. Hence, these areas can be undertaken for future research on flow.

## **12. Summary**

- The flow perspective describes a good life as one that is characterized by complete absorption in what one does.
- A state of flow involves focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment, merging of action and awareness, loss of reflective self-consciousness, distortion of temporal experience, experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding etc.
- According to Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988), to understand flow experiences, we need to understand it through consciousness and the self.
- Csikszentmihalyi (1975/2000) talks about an autotelic personality.
- Intrinsically motivated individuals show more interest, excitement and confidence in the tasks at hand and also show enhanced performance, persistence and creativity concerning these tasks.
- Sometimes we oscillate between being intrinsically motivated and extrinsically motivated doing the same activity.
- The flow state has been studied in many domains like art and science, aesthetic experience, sport, literary writing, and other activities.

- Many techniques are employed to study and assess flow such as interview, questionnaire, experience sampling method etc.
- Many kinds of interventions can be made to induce and enhance flow.

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