Flow

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Introduction

The intent of this book is to use some of the tools of modern psychology to explore this very ancient question: When do people feel most happy?

happiness is not something that happens.
It is not the result of good fortune or random chance. It is not something that money can buy or power command. It does not depend on outside events, but, rather, on how we interpret them.

I developed a theory of
optimal experience based on the concept of flow—the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.

Flow will examine the process of achieving happiness through control over one's inner life.

Everything we experience—
joy or pain, interest or boredom—is represented in the mind as information. If we are able to control this information, we can decide what our lives will be like.

The better route for avoiding chaos in consciousness, of course, is through habits that give control over mental processes to the individual, rather than to some external source of stimulation, such as the programs of network TV. To acquire such habits requires practice, however, and the kind of goals and rules that are inherent in flow activities. For instance, one of the simplest ways to use the mind is daydreaming: playing out some sequence of events as mental images.

When a person is able to organize his or her consciousness so as to experience flow as often as possible, the quality of life is inevitably going to improve, because, as in the case of Rico and Pam, even the usually boring routines of work become purposeful and enjoyable.

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

We grow up believing that what counts most in our lives is that which will occur in the future. Parents teach children that if they learn good habits now, they will be better off as adults. Teachers assure pupils that the boring classes will benefit them later, when the students are going to be looking for jobs.

In a complex society,
many powerful groups are involved in socializing, sometimes to seemingly contradictory goals. On the one hand, official institutions like schools, churches, and banks try to turn us into responsible citizens willing to work hard and save. On the other hand, we are constantly cajoled by merchants, manufacturers, and advertisers to spend our earnings on products that will produce the most profits for them. And, finally, the underground system of forbidden pleasures run by gamblers, pimps, and drug dealers, which is dialectically linked to the official institutions, promises its own rewards of easy dissipation—provided we pay. The messages are very different, but their outcome is essentially the same: they make us dependent on a social system that exploits our energies for its own purposes.

Enjoyment is characterized by this forward movement: by a sense of novelty, of accomplishment. Playing a close game of tennis that stretches one's ability is enjoyable, as is reading a book that reveals things in a new light, as is having a conversation that leads us to express ideas we didn't know we had. Closing a contested business deal, or any piece of work well done, is enjoyable. None of these experiences may be particularly pleasurable at the time they are taking place, but afterward we think back on them and say, "That really was fun" and wish they would happen again. After an enjoyable event we know that we have changed, that our self has grown: in some respect, we have become more complex as a result of it.

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

If you win these battles enough, that
battle against yourself, at least for a moment, it becomes easier to win the battles in the world.
The battle is not finally against the self, but against the entropy that brings disorder to consciousness. It is really a battle for the self; it is a struggle for establishing control over attention

Following a flow experience, the organization of the self is more complex than it had been before. It is by becoming increasingly complex that the self might be said to grow. Complexity is the result of two broad psychological processes: differentiation and integration. Differentiation implies a movement toward uniqueness, toward separating oneself from others. Integration entails unifying oneself in action with other people, with ideas and entities beyond the self. A complex self is one that succeeds in combining these opposite tendencies.

Changing external conditions might seem to work at first, but if a person is not in control of his consciousness, the old fears or desires will soon return, reviving previous anxieties.

When a person cannot control psychic energy, neither learning nor true enjoyment is possible.

Experiences that give pleasure can also give enjoyment, but the two sensations are quite different. For instance, everybody takes pleasure in eating. To enjoy food, however, is more difficult. A gourmet enjoys eating, as does anyone who pays enough attention to a meal so as to discriminate the various sensations provided by it. As this example suggests, we can experience pleasure without any investment of psychic energy, whereas enjoyment happens only as a result of unusual investments of attention. Pleasure is a kind of stimulation that is felt as a pleasant increase in his brain are electrically stimulated, or as a result of the chemical stimulation of drugs. But it is impossible to enjoy a tennis game, a book, or a conversation unless attention is fully concentrated on the activity.

A person who is constantly worried about how others will perceive her, who is afraid of creating the wrong impression, or of doing something inappropriate, is also condemned to permanent exclusion from enjoyment.
So are people who are excessively self-centered. A self-centered individual is usually not self-conscious, but instead evaluates every bit of information only in terms of how it relates to her desires.

When adversity threatens to paralyze us, we need to reassert control by finding a new direction in which to invest psychic energy, a direction that lies outside the reach of external forces. When every aspiration is frustrated, a person still must seek a meaningful goal around which to organize the self.

Elements of Flow

Clear Goals at a abstract and granular level

If one gets to be too complacent, feeling that psychic energy invested in new directions is wasted unless there is a good chance of reaping extrinsic rewards for it, one may end up no longer enjoying life, and pleasure becomes the only source of positive experience.

The reason it is possible to achieve such complete involvement in a flow experience is that goals are usually clear, and feedback immediate.

There is immediate reporting and feedback

Unless a person learns to set goals and to recognize and gauge feedback in such activities, she will not enjoy them.

In some creative activities, where goals are not clearly set in advance, a person must develop a strong personal sense of what she intends to do.

There is a balance between challenges and skills.

Competition is enjoyable
only when it is a means to perfect one's skills; when it becomes an end in itself, it ceases to be fun.

The overwhelming proportion of optimal experiences are reported to occur within sequences of activities that are goal-directed and bounded by rules—activities that require the investment of psychic energy, and that could not be done without the appropriate skills.

The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.

Action and awareness becomes one

Exercise a sense of control over their action

Acts with a deep but effortless involvement that removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life

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.
There is no excess psychic energy left over to process any information but that the activity offers. All the attention is concentrated on the relevant stimuli.
As a result, one of the most universal and distinctive features of optimal experience takes place: people become so involved in what they are doing that the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; they stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing.

When the information that keeps coming into awareness is congruent with goals, psychic energy flows effortlessly. There is no need to worry, no reason to question one's adequacy.

Distractions are excluded from consciousness.

Unless a person knows how to give order to his or her thoughts, attention will be attracted to whatever is most problematic at the moment: it will focus on pain or on imaginary gain, on recent grudges or long-term frustrations. Entropy is the natural state of consciousness—a condition that is neither useful nor enjoyable.

One of the most frequently mentioned dimensions of the flow experience is that, while it lasts, one is able to forget all the unpleasant aspects of life. This feature of flow is an important by-product of the fact that enjoyable activities require a complete focusing of attention on the task at hand—thus leaving no room in the mind for irrelevant information.

Fear of failure tapers away

The term "autotelic" derives from two Greek words, auto meaning self, and telos meaning goal. It refers to a self-contained activity, one that is done not with the expectation of some future benefit, but simply because the doing itself is the reward.

Self-consciousness disappears

In flow a person is challenged to do her best, and must constantly improve her skills. At the time, she doesn't have the opportunity to reflect on what this means in terms of the self—if she did allow herself to become self-conscious, the experience could not have been very deep.

concern for the self disappears, yet paradoxically the sense of self emerges stronger after the flow experience is over.

Distortion of time

One of the most common descriptions of optimal experience is that time no longer seems to pass the way it ordinarily does. The objective, external duration we measure with reference to outside events like night and day, or the orderly progression of clocks, is rendered irrelevant by the rhythms dictated by the activity. Often hours seem to pass by in minutes; in general, most people report that time seems to pass much faster. But occasionally the reverse occurs: Ballet dancers describe how a difficult turn that takes less than a second in real time stretches out for what seems like minutes

The activity and person becomes autotelic.

"An autotelic person needs few material possessions and little entertainment, comfort, power, or fame because so much of what he or she does is already rewarding. Because such persons enjoy almost all aspects of life, they are not easily disturbed by adversity. Even when alone with nothing to do, they are less dependent on the external rewards that keep others motivated to go on with a life composed of routines. They are more autonomous and independent because they cannot be as easily manipulated with threats or rewards from the outside. At the same time, they are more involved with everything around them because they are fully immersed in the current of life."

The key element of an optimal experience is that it is an end in itself. Even if initially undertaken for other reasons, the activity that consumes us becomes intrinsically rewarding.

The autotelic experience, or flow, lifts the course of life to a different level. Alienation gives way to involvement, enjoyment replaces boredom, helplessness turns into a feeling of control, and psychic energy works to reinforce the sense of self, instead of being lost in the service of external goals. When experience is intrinsically rewarding life is justified in the present, instead of being held hostage to a hypothetical future gain.

The traits that mark an autotelic personality are most clearly revealed by people who seem to enjoy situations that ordinary persons would find unbearable.

An acquaintance who worked in United States Air Force intelligence tells the story of a pilot who was imprisoned in North Vietnam for many years, and lost eighty pounds and much of his health in a jungle camp. When he was released, one of the first things he asked for was to play a game of golf. To the great astonishment of his fellow officers he played a superb game, despite his emaciated condition. To their inquiries he replied that every day of his imprisonment he imagined himself playing eighteen holes, carefully choosing his clubs and approach and systematically varying the course. This discipline not only helped preserve his sanity, but apparently also kept his physical skills well honed.