Book Review

**Review of the book** *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience, by M. Csikszentmihalyi*

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**Introduction**

Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is well known all over the world for his work, books, valuable ideas, and contributions to psychology. He is a professor of psychology and management at the Drucker School of Management, Claremont Graduate University, California. He is also the Director of the Quality-of-Life Research Center at the Drucker School of Management. He taught psychology and was a former chairman of the Department of Psychology at the University of Chicago. He has been involved in research related to flow for more than 35 years.

His book, *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience*, is a national bestseller which has sold millions of copies. The sequence of the chapters is well-organised to build up the development of the flow experience. It starts by clarifying the background of the concept, followed by the importance of flow to human behavior, before delving into its significant positive effect on our life, and finally, consolidating the major requirements to reach the optimal state of flow. Chapter 1 helps us recall and examine the reasons for unhappiness and the limiting role of human behavior and culture to help us understand how to create a more liberating and fulfilling quality of life. Chapter 2 thoroughly explains the importance of consciousness to assess what we experience from our senses to make appropriate responses. Chapter 3

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discusses the eight elements of enjoyment which may be used to help ourselves grow while Chapter 4 discusses the situations and factors that affect the flow experience. Chapters 5–9 explain how physical activity, our thoughts, work, solitude and socialisation, and coping with stress relate to the flow experience. Finally, Chapter 10 helps us understand that a unified purpose, the need to take action, and inner harmony are necessary for our mind and actions to be cohesive to experience flow.

**Summary**

The book provides a clear description of the flow experience. It reviews the reasons of unhappiness and how to control our consciousness to experience flow. This was further supported by detailed descriptions of how consciousness works, the elements of enjoyment, the conditions of flow, and the importance of flow in relation to other areas or aspects of life. The author emphasises that the integration of purpose, action, and harmony should work together to reach the optimal experience of flow. The understanding and application of these valuable ideas are informed by studies and most of those who have experienced flow claim to lead a more comfortable, convenient, and fulfilling life.

**Analysis and Evaluation**

The primary intent of the author in his book is to “examine the process of achieving happiness through control over one’s inner life” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, p. 6).

The book is significant in providing a deeper understanding of the major reasons of unhappiness, and in teaching how to put order or discipline in our consciousness or thoughts for self-growth, practise better use of time, and make more appropriate decisions.

It is an excellent idea for the author to allocate a chapter for each situation or factor that affects the flow experience in the book. It should be noted and realised that most of these situations or factors affecting the flow experience are part of our daily life which are often neglected or less understood.

For instance, Chapter 5 states that it is commonly observed and experienced that “physical activity contributes to optimal experience but should be stressed that the body does not produce flow only by its movements but the mind is also included.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, p. 95).

In Chapter 6, the author highlighted several interests and activities to experience flow. However, it is important and also surprising to learn that “reading is currently perhaps the most mentioned flow activity in the world” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, p. 117). Research on the effects of reading and studying in order to promote health and quality of life conclude that “reading is a dynamic act in which the reader is actively involved and has much relevance to thinking processes” (Kourlouta et al., 2018).
Chapter 7 confirms that there is truth to the common saying “we will not feel as we are working everyday if we enjoy what we are doing.” The author supports this by describing the experience of flow at work as “the more a job inherently resembles a game with variety, appropriate and flexible challenges, clear goals, and immediate feedback — the more enjoyable it will be regardless of the worker’s level of development” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, p. 152). Further, the author feels it is very important to stress on the relationship between work and free time to benefit anyone — “people who learn to enjoy their work, who do not waste their free time, end up feeling that their lives as a whole have become much more worthwhile,” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, p. 163).

One of the best parts of the book is highlighting the relevance, importance, and significance of the flow experience in our lives by giving excellent and helpful reasons for us to reflect and understand. This is particularly so, given the hype surrounding the much talked about trend or even researched topic (phenomenon) of Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO), or “the feeling or idea that you are missing out on something important or enjoyable that others are experiencing” (Guy-Evans, 2022). In this respect, Chapter 8 highlights several important reasons to help us realise and to prepare at a younger age, the ability to be alone, which is very crucial for self-growth.

According to Csikszentmihalyi, even the simplest jobs rely on written instructions, and more complex occupations require specialised knowledge that one must learn the hard way — alone. Csikszentmihalyi also mentioned that adolescents who never learn to control their consciousness grow up to be adults without a “discipline.” They lack the complex skills that will help them survive in a competitive, information-intensive environment. And more importantly, they never learn how to enjoy living. They do not acquire the habit of finding challenges that bring out hidden potential for growth. Finally, he clarified that the ability to take each new challenge as an opportunity for learning and improving skills is developed as a habit early in life, regardless of what is happening externally; then, one has learned how to shape one’s quality of life.

One of the most interesting ideas the author puts forth is how to experience flow despite tragedies or extreme handicap. To experience flow, the self with self-contained goals or autotelic self should set goals to strive for; become immersed in the activity to grow deeply involved in whatever the person is doing; pay attention to what is happening by concentrating to be involved in the activity; and learn to enjoy immediate experiences such as learning to set goals, developing skills, being sensitive to feedback, and knowing how to concentrate and getting involved (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, pp. 209–213).

Another major and important idea from the book is the integration of purpose, resolve, and harmony to experience flow. This is made possible by giving emphasis
and extricating or disentangling the concepts or ideas of purpose, resolve, and harmony to carry meaning and context or in other words, how concepts or ideas can be understood and used by the individual to help fully experience flow. The concept of purpose needs self-reflection and personal assessment to develop the individual’s goals while resolve is the drive for the individual to commit and take action towards completing one’s goals. Finally, harmony is when the individual’s actions work as one towards the attainment of the goals. It is suggested that the individual’s personal traits, values, beliefs, and principles should be included in the context or idea of “purpose” which are important factors in determining one’s goals. In the end, the integration of these three concepts or ideas results in the flow experience, despite any challenges faced outside of the individual or the external environment.

It is recommended that future research focus on how to revive the experience of flow after goals or self-actualisation is achieved (Cherry, 2022). Additionally, future research can explore on how to revive the experience of flow after retirement. The findings of these future studies are significant for policy-making related to the well-being of an ageing global population (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2019).

**Conclusion**

The author clearly explains ideas on the experience of flow to better understand this less known topic related to the process of achieving happiness. He smoothly translates and communicates technical concepts from the discipline of psychology in layman’s terms regarding the beneficial experiences from flow based on studies and experiences. The book is an excellent read to supplement some of the lessons learned on how we can view and make choices based on certain conditions or situations in life. Finally, the book is highly recommended for anyone keen to acquire “tools”, gain additional insights, and relive the idea of flow experience in psychology which has not received much attention, despite its importance to the well-being of individuals or quality of life.

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**References**


