

INTRODUCTION

In my August article on happiness, I examined how income, until a certain point, relates positively to happiness. In subsequent articles I have addressed a further question: *what factors other than income contribute to happiness?* My September article shared data clearly showing the value of good relationships to happiness. In my October article, I introduced readers to the work of Abraham Maslow who emphasized the importance of “being true to oneself”.

In this article I continue to explore factors that contribute to happiness and will share the perspectives of a psychologist whose name is as impossible to pronounce

as his ideas regarding happiness are interesting: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi! I will refer to him in this article as M.C.

Have you ever experienced the feeling that “everything goes by itself” or that “all falls into place without doing anything” whether at work or in a leisure activity? If you have, you know what M.C. is addressing. His lifetime work has been dedicated to the study of this experience and its consequences for happiness.

He gave a name to this experience and called it “flow”. M.C. has been referred to as the leading researcher on positive psychology ⁽¹⁾.

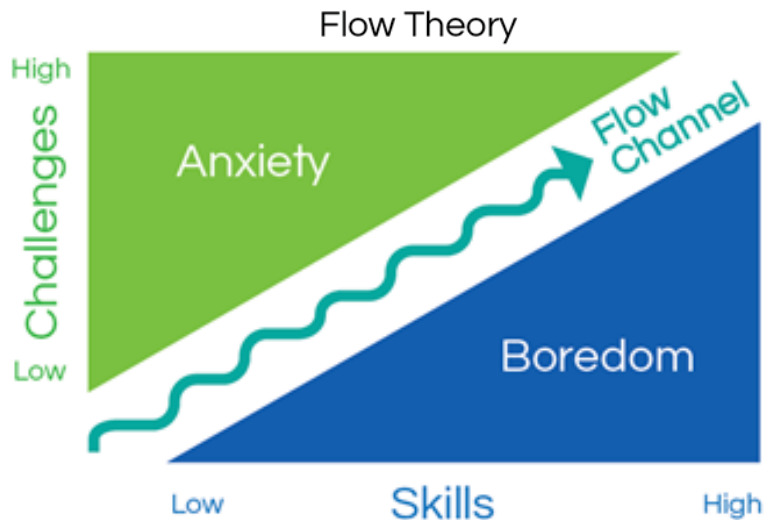


ABOUT M.C.

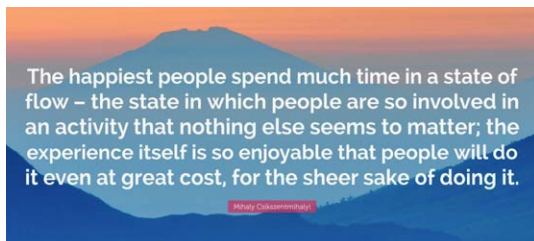
M.C., born in Rijeka (now Slovenia) in 1934, moved to the US at age 22 and studied psychology at the University of Chicago ⁽²⁾. In his young life he faced considerable challenges: he lost family members in World War II and then experienced the oppression of a communist regime (his family living in Hungary). Witnessing the negative effects on happiness of people surviving World War II, he developed a keen interest in the workings of the mind ⁽³⁾. His lifelong mission became to focus on what we can do to set our minds up for positive experiences. Studying numerous “samples” of the population in different cultures, he came to the concept of “flow”, believing it to be an essential ingredient to happiness ⁽⁴⁾.

FLOW THEORY

M.C. defines “flow” as: **“a state of concentration or complete absorption with the activity at hand and the situation”** ⁽⁶⁾. It is a state in which people are so involved that nothing else seems to matter. A good description M.C. gave is this one: “Being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows, inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you are using skills to the utmost” ⁽⁷⁾.



FLOW and USING SKILLS: IMPORTANT!



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M.C.’s studies show that true happiness has to do with using our capabilities to the utmost. He is clear that leisurely enjoyments such as “the cocktail drink, enjoyed on a nice lounge on a sunny beach” have their place. However, “flow” tends to occur when we are fully engaged in a challenging task; skill level and challenge level must be matched and high ⁽⁹⁾. M.C. also states that when we experience “flow”, it positively affects our sense of self, our confidence and our happiness. The experience of “flow” also enables our mind to handle more complex tasks and, according to M.C., an engaged mind, set to keep learning, produces happiness ⁽¹⁰⁾.

1), 2), 3), 4), 6), 7), 9), 10) “Flow. The classic work on how to achieve happiness” by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Rider 2002

5) From: www.positivepsychology.com

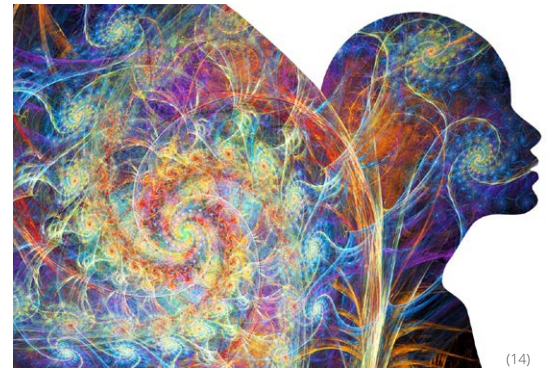
11) From: www.quote fancy.com

8) From: www.elearningindustry.com

FLOW and the WORKINGS OF THE MIND

M.C. postulates the notion that **“the content of a mind left by itself can turn into a shapeless jumble.”**⁽¹²⁾ So, the perspective, underlying his theory about “flow”, is that the mind needs order and discipline and that each of us can (in fact: needs) to provide this. This is where intentions, planning and goals come into the picture, whether it is about our daily activities or long-term goals.

Where meditation practice aims to “quiet” the mind, M.C.’s theory focusses on giving the mind tasks which are challenging so “flow” can be experienced. In fact, studies show that doing this can provide resilience to manage very tough conditions and situations⁽¹³⁾.



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The challenge of being alone with our mind

How challenging it can be for people to be alone with their mind is shown by the results of studies conducted at the University of Virginia by professor Timothy Wilson in 2014⁽¹⁵⁾. Participants in a test aiming to see how people handle being alone with their own thoughts, were given the option of spending 6 to 15 minutes with their thoughts or self-administered shocks; a large number of participants preferred to give themselves electric shocks rather than being with their own thoughts!

HOW TO INDUCE “FLOW”

M.C. refrains from giving any advice on “how to be happy”. He states that it is different for each person⁽¹⁶⁾. However, he does say, that to experience “flow”, one needs to first recognize that it happens in the first place. The paradox in M.C.’s theory is that by nature “flow happens by itself”, yet we still can influence its occurrence. Perhaps best said: “we can set the scene”. Setting the scene is a conscious decision. This can be done by setting tasks where skill level and challenge level are matched and high⁽¹⁷⁾.

FLOW: WORD OF CAUTION

M.C. also signals that there can be dangers around the corner when it comes to “flow” experiences⁽¹⁸⁾. Firstly, the activities in which “flow” is found can be morally good or bad. Further as he says: “Nothing in life is entirely positive”⁽¹⁹⁾. The experience of “flow” can become addictive and overtake one’s life. In M.C.’s own words *“the self becomes captive of a certain kind of order, and is then unwilling to cope with the ambiguities of life.”*⁽²⁰⁾

FLOW: INTRINSICALLY REWARDING

What is critical is that the motivation for “flow” be intrinsically rewarding⁽²¹⁾. Goals should be set, not to meet an external expectation (family, friends, authorities) but to expectations which are truly our own.

Think of Rafa Nadal who has continued to engage himself in increasing his skills year-in-year out, resulting in a 13th Roland Garros Grand Slam win, just a few weeks ago; possibly one of the biggest sporting achievements ever. In the final, Rafa was “flowing”, for sure. Interviewed after the win he said, when asked about how he felt having equaled Roger Federer’s Grand Slam wins: *“You can’t be always unhappy because your neighbors have a bigger house than you or a bigger boat or have a better phone. You have to live your personal life, no? Personally, that’s the things that I did during all my career. Just try to follow my road, try my best every single day”.*⁽²²⁾

In another interview on the same subject (number of Grand Slam wins): **“I follow my own path”.**⁽²³⁾



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FLOW AND TAKE-AWAY FOR HAPPINESS

The key take-away from M.C.’s concept of “flow” on happiness is the importance of having enough experiences in work and leisure, where we can challenge our skills and continue to put ourselves in situations where we can learn! And of course, an invitation to recognize “flow” in the first place...

12), 13), 16), 18), 19), 20), 21) “Flow. The classic work on how to achieve happiness” by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Rider 2002

14) From: “The internal flow triggers – Master your mind to master flow states” by Troy Erstling, 11 July 2019

15) “The Happiness Track” by Emma Seppalala, Piatkus 2017

17) Wikipedia: “Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi”

22) “At the French Open, players look to the Tao of Rafael Nadal” by Karen Crouse, The New York Times, 11 Oct 2020

23) From: www.rolandgarros.com/en-us – post Roland Garros 2020 interview

24) From: www.as.com – “Rafa Nadal ya tiene la foto con la Torre Eiffel em Paris” 20 Oct 2020

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