

## ***Happiness Strategy #8: Increasing Flow Experiences***



*Image by Clark Little*

***Flow*** = a state of intense absorption and involvement with the present moment.

*The term 'flow' was coined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (chick-SENT-me-hi) in the 1960's when he was conducting research on the creative process. When you are in 'flow' you are totally immersed in what you're doing, fully concentrating, and unaware of yourself. The activity you are performing is challenging and engrossing, stretching your skills and expertise. When in 'flow', people report feeling strong and efficacious, at the peak of their abilities, alert, in control, and completely unselfconscious. They do the activity for the sheer sake of doing it.*

*The key to creating 'flow' is to establish a balance between skills and challenges. Lyubomirsky claims that if we train ourselves to obtain flow in as many circumstances as possible, we will live happier lives.*

### ***The Benefits of Flow***

- *Flow is inherently pleasurable and fulfilling, and the enjoyment you obtain is generally of the type that is lasting and reinforcing. Provides a natural high.*
- *Flow states are intrinsically rewarding, we naturally want to repeat them. However, to maintain flow, we continually have to test ourselves in ever more challenging activities. We have to apply focused mental discipline or strenuous physical exertion. We have to stretch our skills or find novel opportunities to use them. This is wonderful, because it means that we are constantly striving, growing, learning, and becoming more competent, expert, and complex. Csikszentmihalyi says: "There is no inherent problem in our desire to escalate our goals, as long as we enjoy the struggle along the way."*
- *The experience of flow:*
  - *Leads us to be involved in life rather than to be alienated from it*
  - *To enjoy activities rather than to find them dreary*

- *To have a sense of control rather than helplessness*
- *To feel a strong sense of self rather than unworthiness*

### ***How To Increase Flow Experiences***

*Finding flow involves the ability to expand your mind and body to its limits, to strive to accomplish something difficult, novel, or worthwhile, and to discover rewards in the process of each moment, indeed in life itself. Choose at least one recommendation below, and adopt it into your day-to-day life.*

#### **Control Attention**

*To increase the frequency and length of flow experiences in your daily life, you need to become fully engaged and involved. The secret is attention. William James, the “father” of psychology (and brother to Henry James), once wrote, “My experience is what I agree to attend to.” This is a revolutionary thought. What you notice and what you pay attention to is your experience; it is your life.*

*To enter the state of flow, attention needs to be directed fully to the task at hand. When you’re intensely concentrating on doing something, you’re essentially directing your attention to the task as opposed to other things.*

*Maintaining the state of flow also involves the control of your attention. If the challenge is too low and you become bored or apathetic, your attention drifts elsewhere. If the challenge is too high and you become tense or stressed, your attention shifts to yourself and your limitations, making you self-conscious. Your aim is to gain control over what you pay attention to – in a sense, to gain control over the contents of your consciousness moment by moment.*

#### **Adopt New Values**

*Happy people have the capacity to enjoy their lives even when their material conditions are lacking and even when many of their goals have not been reached. How do they do it? By using the following values as their guide: (1) be open to new and different experiences, and (2) learn until the day you die. Try to imitate the rapt concentration on the face of a small child, who is learning wonderful new things every day.*

#### **Learn What Flows**

*One study found that while at work (relative to home/leisure), individuals spend a great deal more time in high-challenge, high-skill situations (the situations that foster flow) and less*

*time in low-skill, low-challenge situations. Indeed, they were inclined to experience a sense of efficacy and self-confidence during work hours but to experience apathy at home.*

*Many of us may not recognize when we experience flow. Thus one of your steps in applying this strategy is to establish the precise time periods and activities during which you find yourself in flow...and multiply them.*

### *Transform Routine Tasks*

*Even seemingly boring and tedious activities can be transformed into something more meaningful and stimulating. What you need to do is to create microflow activities with specific goals and rules. For example, you could solve puzzles in your head, draw cartoon characters, tap melodies to favorite songs, or compose funny limericks. So, while you sit in a doctor's waiting room, your goal might be to draw an intricate design, and a rule might be that all lines must be symmetrical. Here is an example of a microflow activity:*

*Professor Heinz Maier-Leibnitz, a German experimental physicist, suffers from an occupational handicap common to academics: having to sit through endless, often boring, conferences. To alleviate this burden, he invented a private activity that provides just enough challenges for him not to be completely bored during a dull lecture, but is so automated that it leaves enough attention free so that if something interesting is being said, it will register his awareness. What he does is this: whenever a speaker begins to get tedious, he starts to tap his right thumb once, then the third finger of the right hand, then the index finger, then the fourth finger, then the third finger again, and then the little finger of the right hand. Then he moves to the left hand and taps the little finger, the middle finger, the fourth finger, the index, and the middle finger again, and ends with the thumb on the left hand. Then the right hand reverses the sequence of the tapping, followed by the reverse of the left hand's sequence. It turns out that by introducing full and half stops at regular intervals, there are 888 combinations one can move through without repeating the same pattern (Csikszentmihalyi 1990).*

*Retrieved from the internet October 24, 2009*

*<http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/creatingflowactivity.htm>*

*Microflow activities bring enjoyment to otherwise low-skill and low-challenge activities. Examples of other, less complicated microflow experiences may include doodling or humming a tune.*

### *Flow in Conversation*

*During your next conversation, whether by phone or face-to-face, focus your attention as intensely as possible on what the other person is saying and your reactions to her words. Don't be too quick to respond; rather, give her the space to expand on her thoughts, and*

*prompt her with brief follow-up questions. One way to smooth this process is to give yourself the goal of learning more about the speaker.*

### *Smart Work*

*Work can be rewarding, gratifying and enjoyable if you're lucky and if you make it be. One fascinating study of workers found that people tend to see their work in one of three ways, as a job, a career, or as a calling.*

- *A job is needed to support them*
- *A career is essentially a job with advancement*
- *Those who see their work as a calling report enjoying working and find what they do to be fulfilling and socially useful.*

*Researchers have found that people are remarkably adept at crafting their jobs to derive maximum engagement and meaning. For example, interviews with twenty-eight members of a hospital cleaning crew revealed that some disliked cleaning, felt that it entailed low-level skills and did the minimum amount of work required. Others in contrast, transformed the job into something grander and more significant. They described their job as bettering the daily lives of patients, visitors and nurses. They engaged in a great deal of social interaction, reported liking cleaning and judged the work as highly skilled. They found flow in their work and saw themselves as part of a larger, integrated whole. It's worth considering how your own job could benefit from a new perspective.*

*All of the above information comes from "The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want" by Sonja Lyubomirsky.*