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the psychology of
optimal experience

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Flow

The Psychology of Optimal Experience

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

 HarperCollins e-books

For Isabella, and Mark and Christopher

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PREFACE

THIS BOOK SUMMARIZES, for a general audience, decades of research on the positive aspects of human experience—joy, creativity, the process of total involvement with life I call *flow*. To take this step is somewhat dangerous, because as soon as one strays from the stylized constraints of academic prose, it is easy to become careless or overly enthusiastic about such a topic. What follows, however, is not a popular book that gives insider tips about how to be happy. To do so would be impossible in any case, since a joyful life is an individual creation that cannot be copied from a recipe. This book tries instead to present general *principles*, along with concrete examples of how some people have used these principles, to transform boring and meaningless lives into ones full of enjoyment. There is no promise of easy short-cuts in these pages. But for readers who care about such things, there should be enough information to make possible the transition from theory to practice.

In order to make the book as direct and user-friendly as possible, I have avoided footnotes, references, and other tools scholars usually employ in their technical writing. I have tried to present the results of psychological research, and the ideas derived from the interpretation of such research, in a

way that any educated reader can evaluate and apply to his or her own life, regardless of specialized background knowledge.

However, for those readers who are curious enough to pursue the scholarly sources on which my conclusions are based, I have included extensive notes at the end of the volume. They are not keyed to specific references, but to the page number in the text where a given issue is discussed. For example, happiness is mentioned on the very first page. The reader interested in knowing what works I base my assertions on can turn to the notes section beginning and, by looking under the reference, find a lead to Aristotle's view of happiness as well as to contemporary research on this topic, with the appropriate citations. The notes can be read as a second, highly compressed, and more technical shadow version of the original text.

At the beginning of any book, it is appropriate to acknowledge those who have influenced its development. In the present case this is impossible, since the list of names would have to be almost as long as the book itself. However, I owe special gratitude to a few people, whom I wish to take this opportunity to thank. First of all, Isabella, who as wife and friend has enriched my life for over twenty-five years, and whose editorial judgment has helped shape this work. Mark and Christopher, our sons, from whom I have learned perhaps as much as they have learned from me. Jacob Getzels, my once and future mentor. Among friends and colleagues I should like to single out Donald Campbell, Howard Gardner, Jean Hamilton, Philip Hefner, Hiroaki Imamura, David Kipper, Doug Kleiber, George Klein, Fausto Massimini, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, Jerome Singer, James Stigler, and Brian Sutton-Smith—all of whom, in one way or another, have been generous with their help, inspiration, or encouragement.

Of my former students and collaborators Ronald Graef, Robert Kubey, Reed Larson, Jean Nakamura, Kevin Rathunde, Rick Robinson, Ikuya Sato, Sam Whalen, and Maria Wong have made the greatest contributions to the

research underlying the ideas developed in these pages. John Brockman and Richard P. Kot have given their skillful professional support to this project and have helped it along from start to finish. Last but not least, indispensable over the past decade has been the funding generously provided by the Spencer Foundation to collect and analyze the data. I am especially grateful to its former president, H. Thomas James, to its present one, Lawrence A. Cremin, and to Marion Faldet, vice-president of the foundation. Of course, none of those mentioned above are responsible for what might be unsound in the book—that is exclusively my own doing.

Chicago, March 1990

HAPPINESS REVISITED

INTRODUCTION

TWENTY-THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO Aristotle concluded that, more than anything else, men and women seek happiness. While happiness itself is sought for its own sake, every other goal—health, beauty, money, or power—is valued only because we expect that it will make us happy. Much has changed since Aristotle's time. Our understanding of the worlds of stars and of atoms has expanded beyond belief. The gods of the Greeks were like helpless children compared to humankind today and the powers we now wield. And yet on this most important issue very little has changed in the intervening centuries. We do not understand what happiness is any better than Aristotle did, and as for learning how to attain that blessed condition, one could argue that we have made no progress at all.

Despite the fact that we are now healthier and grow to be older, despite the fact that even the least affluent among us are surrounded by material luxuries undreamed of even a few decades ago (there were few bathrooms in the palace of the Sun King, chairs were rare even in the richest medieval houses, and no Roman emperor could turn on a TV set when he was bored), and regardless of all the stupendous scientific knowledge we can summon at will, people often end up feeling that their lives have been wasted, that instead of being filled with happiness their years were spent in anxiety and boredom.

Is this because it is the destiny of mankind to remain unfulfilled, each person always wanting more than he or she can have? Or is the pervasive malaise that often sours even our most precious moments the result of our

seeking happiness in the wrong places? 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? If we can begin to find an answer to it, perhaps we shall eventually be able to order life so that happiness will play a larger part in it.

Twenty-five years before I began to write these lines, I made a discovery that took all the intervening time for me to realize I had made. To call it a “discovery” is perhaps misleading, for people have been aware of it since the dawn of time. Yet the word is appropriate, because even though my finding itself was well known, it had not been described or theoretically explained by the relevant branch of scholarship, which in this case happens to be psychology. So I spent the next quarter-century investigating this elusive phenomenon.

What I “discovered” was that 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. Happiness, in fact, is a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated, and defended privately by each person. People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can come to being happy.

Yet we cannot reach happiness by consciously searching for it. “Ask yourself whether you are happy,” said J. S. Mill, “and you cease to be so.” It is by being fully involved with every detail of our lives, whether good or bad, that we find happiness, not by trying to look for it directly. Viktor Frankl, the Austrian psychologist, summarized it beautifully in the preface to his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*: “Don’t aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like

happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue...as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a course greater than oneself."

So how can we reach this elusive goal that cannot be attained by a direct route? My studies of the past quarter-century have convinced me that there is a way. It is a circuitous path that begins with achieving control over the contents of our consciousness.

Our perceptions about our lives are the outcome of many forces that shape experience, each having an impact on whether we feel good or bad. Most of these forces are outside our control. There is not much we can do about our looks, our temperament, or our constitution. We cannot decide—at least so far—how tall we will grow, how smart we will get. We can choose neither parents nor time of birth, and it is not in your power or mine to decide whether there will be a war or a depression. The instructions contained in our genes, the pull of gravity, the pollen in the air, the historical period into which we are born—these and innumerable other conditions determine what we see, how we feel, what we do. It is not surprising that we should believe that our fate is primarily ordained by outside agencies.

Yet we have all experienced times when, instead of being buffeted by anonymous forces, we do feel in control of our actions, masters of our own fate. On the rare occasions that it happens, we feel a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished and that becomes a landmark in memory for what life should be like.

This is what we mean by *optimal experience*. It is what the sailor holding a tight course feels when the wind whips through her hair, when the boat lunges through the waves like a colt—sails, hull, wind, and sea humming a harmony that vibrates in the sailor's veins. It is what a painter feels when the colors on the canvas begin to set up a magnetic tension with each other, and a new *thing*, a living form, takes shape in front of the astonished creator. Or

it is the feeling a father has when his child for the first time responds to his smile. Such events do not occur only when the external conditions are favorable, however: people who have survived concentration camps or who have lived through near-fatal physical dangers often recall that in the midst of their ordeal they experienced extraordinarily rich epiphanies in response to such simple events as hearing the song of a bird in the forest, completing a hard task, or sharing a crust of bread with a friend.

Contrary to what we usually believe, moments like these, the best moments in our lives, are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times—although such experiences can also be enjoyable, if we have worked hard to attain them. 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. Optimal experience is thus something that we *make* happen. For a child, it could be placing with trembling fingers the last block on a tower she has built, higher than any she has built so far; for a swimmer, it could be trying to beat his own record; for a violinist, mastering an intricate musical passage. For each person there are thousands of opportunities, challenges to expand ourselves.

Such experiences are not necessarily pleasant at the time they occur. The swimmer's muscles might have ached during his most memorable race, his lungs might have felt like exploding, and he might have been dizzy with fatigue—yet these could have been the best moments of his life. Getting control of life is never easy, and sometimes it can be definitely painful. But in the long run optimal experiences add up to a sense of mastery—or perhaps better, a sense of *participation* in determining the content of life—that comes as close to what is usually meant by happiness as anything else we can conceivably imagine.

In the course of my studies I tried to understand as exactly as possible how people felt when they most enjoyed themselves, and why. My first

studies involved a few hundred “experts”—artists, athletes, musicians, chess masters, and surgeons—in other words, people who seemed to spend their time in precisely those activities they preferred. From their accounts of what it felt like to do what they were doing, 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.

With the help of this theoretical model my research team at the University of Chicago and, afterward, colleagues around the world interviewed thousands of individuals from many different walks of life. These studies suggested that optimal experiences were described in the same way by men and women, by young people and old, regardless of cultural differences. The flow experience was not just a peculiarity of affluent, industrialized elites. It was reported in essentially the same words by old women from Korea, by adults in Thailand and India, by teenagers in Tokyo, by Navajo shepherds, by farmers in the Italian Alps, and by workers on the assembly line in Chicago.

In the beginning our data consisted of interviews and questionnaires. To achieve greater precision we developed with time a new method for measuring the quality of subjective experience. This technique, called the Experience Sampling Method, involves asking people to wear an electronic paging device for a week and to write down how they feel and what they are thinking about whenever the pager signals. The pager is activated by a radio transmitter about eight times each day, at random intervals. At the end of the week, each respondent provides what amounts to a running record, a written film clip of his or her life, made up of selections from its representative moments. By now over a hundred thousand such cross sections of experience have been collected from different parts of the world. The conclusions of this volume are based on that body of data.

The study of flow I began at the University of Chicago has now spread worldwide. Researchers in Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Australia have taken up its investigation. At present the most extensive collection of data outside of Chicago is at the Institute of Psychology of the Medical School, the University of Milan, Italy. The concept of flow has been found useful by psychologists who study happiness, life satisfaction, and intrinsic motivation; by sociologists who see in it the opposite of anomie and alienation; by anthropologists who are interested in the phenomena of collective effervescence and rituals. Some have extended the implications of flow to attempts to understand the evolution of mankind, others to illuminate religious experience.

But flow is not just an academic subject. Only a few years after it was first published, the theory began to be applied to a variety of practical issues. Whenever the goal is to improve the quality of life, the flow theory can point the way. It has inspired the creation of experimental school curricula, the training of business executives, the design of leisure products and services. Flow is being used to generate ideas and practices in clinical psychotherapy, the rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents, the organization of activities in old people's homes, the design of museum exhibits, and occupational therapy with the handicapped. All this has happened within a dozen years after the first articles on flow appeared in scholarly journals, and the indications are that the impact of the theory is going to be even stronger in the years to come.

OVERVIEW

Although many articles and books on flow have been written for the specialist, this is the first time that the research on optimal experience is being presented to the general reader and its implications for individual lives discussed. But what follows is not going to be a “how-to” book. There are literally thousands of such volumes in print or on the remainder shelves of book-stores, explaining how to get rich, powerful, loved, or slim. Like cookbooks, they tell you how to accomplish a specific, limited goal on which few people actually follow through. Yet even if their advice were to work, what would be the result afterward in the unlikely event that one did turn into a slim, well-loved, powerful millionaire? Usually what happens is that the person finds himself back at square one, with a new list of wishes, just as dissatisfied as before. What would really satisfy people is not getting slim or rich, but feeling good about their lives. In the quest for happiness, partial solutions don’t work.

However well-intentioned, books cannot give recipes for how to be happy. Because optimal experience depends on the ability to control what happens in consciousness moment by moment, each person has to achieve it on the basis of his own individual efforts and creativity. What a book can do, however, and what this one will try to accomplish, is to present examples of how life can be made more enjoyable, ordered in the framework of a theory, for readers to reflect upon and from which they may then draw their own conclusions.

Rather than presenting a list of dos and don’ts, this book intends to be a voyage through the realms of the mind, charted with the tools of science. Like all adventures worth having it will not be an easy one. Without some

intellectual effort, a commitment to reflect and think hard about your own experience, you will not gain much from what follows.

Flow will examine the process of achieving happiness through control over one's inner life. We shall begin by considering *how consciousness works, and how it is controlled* (chapter 2), because only if we understand the way subjective states are shaped can we master them. 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 optimal state of inner experience is one in which there is *order in consciousness*. This happens when psychic energy—or attention—is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action. The pursuit of a goal brings order in awareness because a person must concentrate attention on the task at hand and momentarily forget everything else. These periods of struggling to overcome challenges are what people find to be the most enjoyable times of their lives (chapter 3). A person who has achieved control over psychic energy and has invested it in consciously chosen goals cannot help but grow into a more complex being. By stretching skills, by reaching toward higher challenges, such a person becomes an increasingly extraordinary individual.

To understand why some things we do are more enjoyable than others, we shall review the *conditions of the flow experience* (chapter 4). “Flow” is the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake. In reviewing some of the activities that consistently produce flow—such as sports, games, art, and hobbies—it becomes easier to understand what makes people happy.