



Thoughts from Linda:

Flow
The Psychology of Optimal Experiences

by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
1990

‘Gross National Happiness’—what an idea, I thought, in 2006 when I had the honor of sitting next to the Minister of Happiness of Bhutan at a global conference in Bali, Indonesia. As he explained at the time, the country of 500,000 completed a survey every other year that identified just how ‘happy’ they were, on the scale of ‘unhappy, moderately happy, extremely happy.’ This approach was how they chose to indicate the success of their country, in contrast to the ‘Gross National Product’ and other financial metrics so standard in the West.

The results in Bhutan were firmly in the “I am extremely and moderately happy” category, and they earned the title of one of the happiest countries in the world—which they continue to hold today, with 88% of their population answering in the positive to this question in their last census. Others have adopted the concept, and the United Nations General Assembly in July 2011 adopted a resolution called “*Happiness: Towards a Holistic Definition of Development.*” This resolution invited other nations to consider the measurement, and the Prime Minister of Bhutan, Jigmi Thinley, assisted with this work.

Thanks to these efforts, 150 countries are now ranked annually by the United Nations in collaboration with the Gallup World Happiness Studies. While Bhutan is still in the top few, Finland has emerged in first place for seven years, while the United States ranks 16th.

This concept of ‘happiness’ is in the news often today, with numerous podcasts and Ted Talks. The new book by Marc Schulz & Robert Waldinger, *The Good Life*, released in 2022, tells the story of the 75-year Harvard study of longevity and happiness in America, which is the most extended scientific study of happiness ever conducted.

So, it seems like a good time to examine an earlier 'theory of the case' study by the renowned Hungarian psychologist and prolific writer with the almost incomprehensibly spelled name Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. In this most-interesting 1990 book, he contributed the pioneering work on how we understand happiness, creativity, human fulfillment, and the concept of "flow"—which he described as the deep state of heightened focus and immersion—something he calls the "optimal experience." He describes flow as "a 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." He theorizes that being *in flow* is the secret to happiness.

Csikszentmihalyi points out early in his introduction to this work that it is not a 'self-help' or 'how to' book but rather one written to the general reader that will require hard work. As he notes, "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." While I appreciate his disclaimer and warning, I found the book organized and intriguingly practical. He uses simple examples for his theoretical explanations and carefully takes us through his analytics, one step at a time. It does call for focus and reflection.

He begins by taking us through consciousness, examining how it works and is controlled. He theorizes that the optimal state of inner experience is one in which there is order in consciousness. This treatment of the concept alone is worth the read.

He moves on to the flow experience itself. As he explains, "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." Examples include everything from sailing to music to yoga to relationships to the field of work itself.

In Chapter Seven, he reflects on how one can learn "to transform jobs into flow-producing activities" and to think of ways of making relations with parents, spouses, children, and friends more enjoyable. His final chapters deal with describing how people can manage to meld all experiences into a meaningful pattern. He says, "when this accomplishment happens, and a person feels in control of life and feels that it makes sense, there is nothing left to desire. The fact that one is not slim, rich, or

powerful no longer matters. The tide of rising expectations is stilled; unfulfilled needs no longer trouble the mind. Even the most humdrum experiences become enjoyable.”

The book, *Flow*, explores what is required to reach these aims. It is dense with content and has ten Chapters: Happiness Revisited, The Anatomy of Consciousness, Enjoyment and the Quality of Life, The Conditions of Flow, The Body in Flow, The Flow of Thought, Work As Flow, Enjoying Solitude and Other People, Cheating Chaos, and The Making of Meaning.

Csikszentmihalyi’s background is interesting because he was born in an area that was to become Italy, and his family name derives from his birth village in Transylvania. His father was a career diplomat representing Hungary. His two older brothers died while he was young; one was killed in the siege of Budapest, and the other was sent to a labor camp in Siberia by the Soviets. After the war, his father resigned rather than work for the Communist regime in Hungary, and in 1949, the family moved to Rome, where Mihaly worked for the family restaurant.

As he describes it, his entrance into the world of psychology was, in many ways, “an accident.” That journey began when he was a poor young man, had dropped out of school to help the family, and was in Zurich, Switzerland, searching for better working opportunities. He says that he did not have money for the theater but saw that a talk was being given at a local auditorium on the topic of ‘flying saucers.’ He attended the talk as it was free. This experience surprised him greatly, but not because it was about flying saucers. In fact, it was a speech by Carl Jung on the psychology of WWII survivors and the psychology of trauma that plays out with people projecting in unusual ways. And it changed his life.

He was already quite interested in the lives of WWII survivors and their conditions and mental states of mind, noting especially that so many were struggling. He was interested in what contributed to a life worth living. After this experience in Zurich with Jung, he emigrated to the United States at age 22 and entered the University of Chicago, working nights to support himself. He received a BA there in 1959 and, in 1965, earned a Ph.D. in psychology. He went on to teach at Lake Forest College before becoming a professor at the University of Chicago in 1969. He has written 23 books and numerous articles in professional journals. He has been called “the world’s leading researcher on positive psychology” by the American Psychological Association.

He was awarded the Clifton Strength Prize in 2009 and the Grand Cross Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary in 2014. He was a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts

and Sciences and a member of the National Academy of Education and the Academy of Leisure Sciences.

This book is the result of 25 years of study on his part, including research conducted first in the United States while at the University of Chicago and later on a global basis. From the early study of a few hundred individuals, he developed his theory of optimal experience based on the concept of flow. He tried to understand as precisely as possible how people felt when they most enjoyed themselves and why.

With this theoretical model, he amassed a team that ultimately interviewed thousands of individuals from many walks of life. The studies suggested that optimal experiences were described similarly by women and men, young and old, regardless of cultural differences. Using an approach called "the experience sampling method" he and his team collected over one hundred thousand cross-sections of experiences, and the book tells the story of what he learned. It is remarkable in its depth and brilliant integration of thoughts and emotions. He has made a significant contribution to the field with this seminal work. References and further readings are available at the end of the book for those who wish to learn even more.

In addition to being of great interest, the book is beautifully conceived and written. This book is a must-read for all.