

Flow State Summary

This is a summary and cheatsheet on the Flow Mindstate, by Lucas Habersaat, 1.9.2023

Disclaimer

*My primary source is **Rian Doris** and the **Flow Research Collective**. This document focuses on actionable methods, and many concepts are only mentioned. To learn more, check the end for a list of resources.*

Being In Flow

Flow is a mental state where one is totally immersed in an activity, that makes work feel effortless. It is characterised by being fully absorbed and performing peak cognitive performance while enjoying it.

Research shows that being in flow increases skills like learning, creativity and productivity. In general, people perform better, enjoy it more, improve their skills, and more likely reach their goals.

Flow Cycle

Flow is not binary, but undergoes a cycle and to access flow repeatedly no phase can be skipped. ([Source](#))

1. **Struggle:** Overloading the brain
The discomfort when starting a task, almost frustrating, the mind loads up all the required information.
2. **Release:** Let go of outcomes.
Stepping back the moment before flow, switch to more unconscious thinking. Have a boring break.
3. **Flow:** Present in the process.
Actual peak performance phase, effortless working and optimal cognitive state.
4. **Recover:** Learn and grow.
Recuperate after spending energy, unload cognitive load, recharge for the next session.

Get Into Flow

Following a list of **techniques** to increase chances to reach flow consistently. These methods try to remove things that prevent you from flow, make yourself more prone to flow or trigger flow. These techniques are in no particular order.

Tip

Pick what you want to try and experiment. There is no general recipe, only what works for you.

Wake Up In Flow

Try to begin your most important work within 90 seconds of waking up. Do not look at your phone or any other distractions, but **get to work immediately**. Prepare in detail in advance, so you can mindlessly start. ([Source](#))

The body is in a flow-friendly state, there are no distractions from the world and your cognitive load is low. Do your recharging morning routine after the first work session.

Intra-day Temporal Landmarks

Chop your day into dedicated flow sessions and define temporal landmarks within the day, e.g. waking up, begin of flow, break, lunch, hit the bed. Create calendar events, set alarms, or whatever you need to not forget them. ([Source](#))

This will inhabit the [Fresh Start Effect](#) each time, motivate you, and help you be on track with your daily routine.

Domino Habit

A **domino habit** is a habit, that makes all other behaviour happen automatically. It is a keystone behaviour, that triggers and auto-corrects the rest of your day. It might be getting up early, meditating, or a gym session. ([Source](#))

Identify your domino habit and make sure it sticks and if needed, focus primarily on that. Engineer back what is required in your 24h day cycle to guarantee doing it and set temporal landmarks for every requirement.

Master Friction

Friction are all the little things that are in the way between you and a certain activity, e.g. plugging in your laptop, updating software, etc. They seem trivial, but accumulate and siphon away your energy. ([Source](#))

Become **superfluid** and make positive behaviour frictionless, by automating things, preparing, and setting up in advance. You want to be able to start working in 10 seconds.

Remove Distractions

Get rid of **all distractions**. Put away your phone, no music, no notifications, reserve enough time, make it clear to people around you and reduce all interruptions.

Distractions of most kind pull us out of flow, increase friction, increase cognitive load, foster multi-tasking, desensitise us to dopamine, and on and on. Make it an importance to minimise distractions.

Cognitive Load

Relieve your mind and give room for the vital thinking by offloading the less important. The less the brain has to worry about at the same time, the better it can focus on one thing.

Ways to do that are

- **Automate** less important things as much as possible.
- Avoid **multitasking**
- Simplify **decision-making** in your daily life, make decision in advance
- Use Intra-day **temporal** landmarks

Resensitise To Dopamine

Have your dopamine sensitivity at a low level to drop the bar of what bores you to the bottom. You want boring things to excite you. ([Source](#))

- Avoid high dopamine kicks.
- Take boring breaks.
- Avoid **multitasking**.

Task Preconditions

Get the preconditions of your tasks right to drive you into flow. There are three key levers. ([Source](#))

- **Clear Goals:** Have crystal clear objectives and direct next steps to achieve it.

- **Immediate Feedback:** Be able to instantly respond and take action on feedback.
- **Challenge / Skill Balance:** Set the difficulty just right, not too easy to bore you and not too difficult to overwhelm you. 4% more difficult than your current skill level seems optimal.

Environment Shapes Stamina

Your body reacts to environment change as it signals presence of potential resources like food. Make use of that by **moving around**, changing perspective and position often. Set up your work place for sitting, standing and walking. A motion board and a stability ball work wonders. Further, have **multiple work environments** set up and change between if possible. ([Source](#))

Against intuition, changing environments often does not disrupt concentration, quite the contrary. As long as each environment gets a couple of hours of deep work.

Work Compression

Work expands to fill the time available, states [Parkinson's Law](#). Use the inversion of it and limit the number of hours you work. **Compress your work** in less time. Force yourself to be more productive and delegate, prioritise, eliminate, and focus on the vital part of your work. ([Source](#))

It feels very counterintuitive due to the [Linearity Bias](#).

Avoid Multitasking

The mind is not made for **multi-tasking**, but today's world is full of it. To stop the addiction to novelty and have more focus and better flow, try to **do everything one thing at a time**.

It also helps with reducing cognitive load and dopamine sensitivity.

Caffeine Consumption

Caffeine can be a boost and help flow, if used correctly. Following some tips to avoid the negative sides of coffee. ([Source 1](#), [Source 2](#))

- No caffeine until around an hour after waking up.
- No caffeine 10 hours before sleeping.
- Always accompany with good amount of water.
- Abstain sporadically to resensitise your body. (e.g. one day a week and one week per quarter)
- Experiment with the dosage and find what has the right effect on you.
- Take before working and make use of classical conditioning to trigger and help flow.

Recovery

Being in **flow** consumes energy and the body has to recharge after. The flow cycle is central and recovery is absolutely required to access flow again. ([Source](#))

When doing recovery right, the brain triggers the parasympathetic nervous system, rest & digest, counteracts the stress response and clears [Allostatic Load](#). This load can accumulate over time if not cleared and lead to decreasing energy and even deteriorating health.

Active Recovery Protocols

Do active recovery protocols on a regular basis that recharge and rejuvenate the body and the mind. Careful, this is not the same thing as relaxation. Sitting on the couch and browsing social media will not have recovering effects.

Some good active recovery protocols are:

- Sleep
- Exercise
- Breath work
- Cold therapy (ice bath)
- Heat therapy (sauna)
- Massage (e.g. foam rollers)
- Meditation
- Yoga
- Journaling
- Hiking, spending time in nature

A sign that you are actively recovering is, when your **heart rate variability** increases, or when it subjectively feels like vacation.

Periods

A recommended suggestion for the frequency of recovery is:

- 1 hour a day
- 1 day a week
- 3 days a month
- 10 days a quarter
- 2 weeks a year

Live Like A Lion

A lion is either sleeping with the pack, or sprinting for a kill, nothing in between. Similarly, you want to **oscillate** between flow and recovery. You move between exertion and recovery rhythmically.

Sources

- [Rian Doris \(youtube\)](#)
- [Flow Research Collective \(company\)](#)
- [Atomic Habits, James Clear \(book\)](#)
- [Deep Work, Cal Newport \(book\)](#)
- Flow, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (book)
- Finding Flow, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (book)
- [Huberman Lab \(youtube\)](#)

On a personal note ...

Certain techniques have been complete game changer for me. For instance working immediately after waking up. I get out of bed easier, don't waste time, and at 8 o'clock I already feel like I have done something for the day. Also, scheduling my work sessions and having a fresh start each time helped tremendously making sure I don't slack off.

Further, I love the emphasis on **recovery**. It is far from a grinding over-working philosophy. Quite the contrary, Rian knows of the importance of resting and even suggests to compress work.

However, on the other hands it's very much about squeezing every inch of productivity out of your life, even with active recovery, which feels **extreme** at times.