



Flow

Peak experiences

Psychological and neurological correlates



“The happiest people spend much time in a state 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.”

– Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

What is flow?

State of optimal experience denoted by smooth and accurate performance with a **complete absorption in the task** to the point of time dissociation and dissociative tendencies

Effortless, spontaneous,
“automatic” action → FLOW



4. Flow

A state of effortless absorption



2. Attentional processes

Top-down control
Higher-order planning
Reduced self-referential processing
Reduced attentional conflict
External focus
Automated action control

3. Experiential components

(from Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)

Concentration
Reduced self-awareness
Transformation of time
Action-awareness merging
Sense of control
Autotelicity

Hyperfocus

Altered state of consciousness

Timelessness, transcendence

Serenity

Enjoyment, fulfillment



1. Antecedents

Task dimensions: Challenge-skill balance
Immediate feedback
Clear goals
Psychological factors: e.g., Engagement
Optimal arousal

Knowing the task is doable
Inner clarity



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1. How often do you experience "flow"?



19

19 responses

I do not recall experiencing it.



0%

Less than monthly



31.58%

Regularly (>1/month)



36.84%

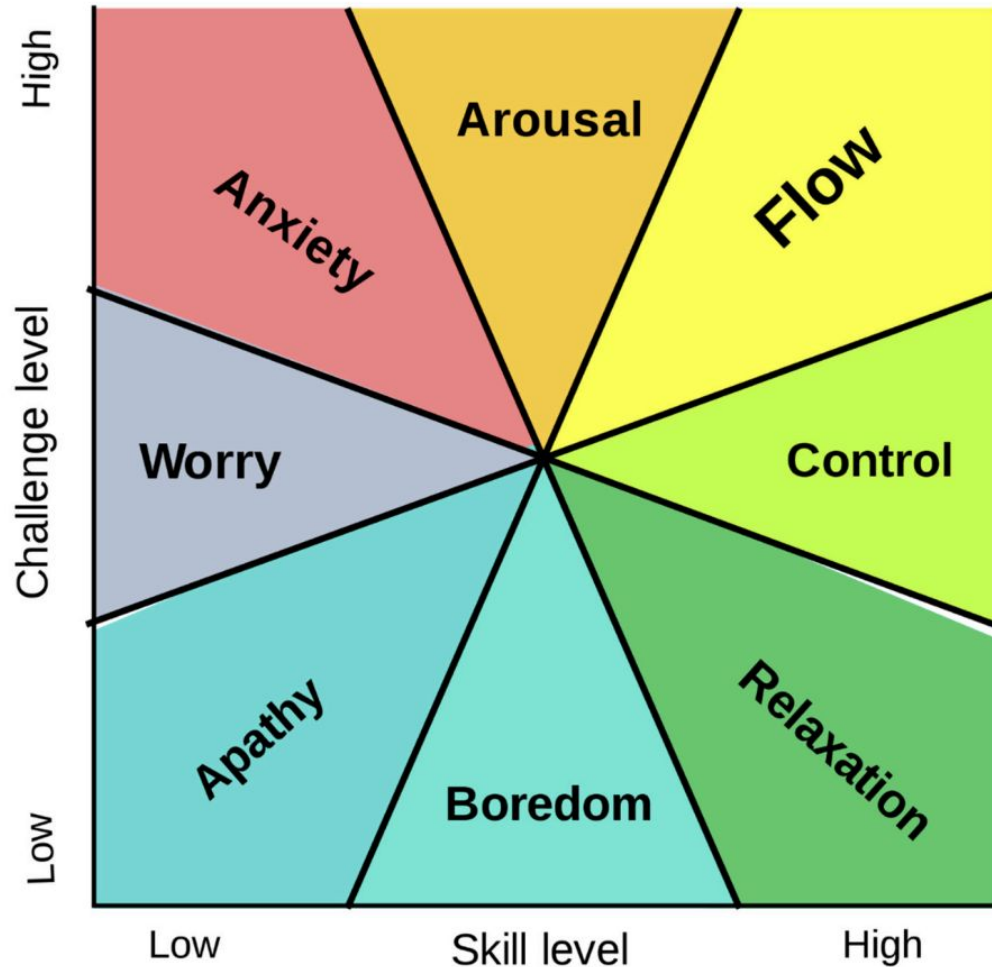
Quite often (>3 /week)



31.58%

Allowed selections: 1

Poll in the meeting on 13th Feb 2026



Skill-challenge match
“Golden rule” of flow

“Enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the person’s capacity to act.”

The flow cycle: 1 - Struggle

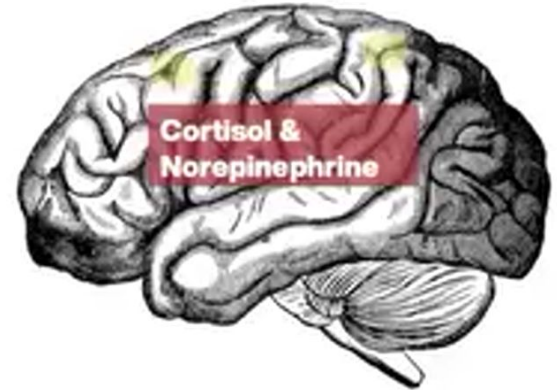


Adapted from Kotler (2014)

Overloading The Brain

Release of stress neurochemicals

Cortisol
Norepinephrine

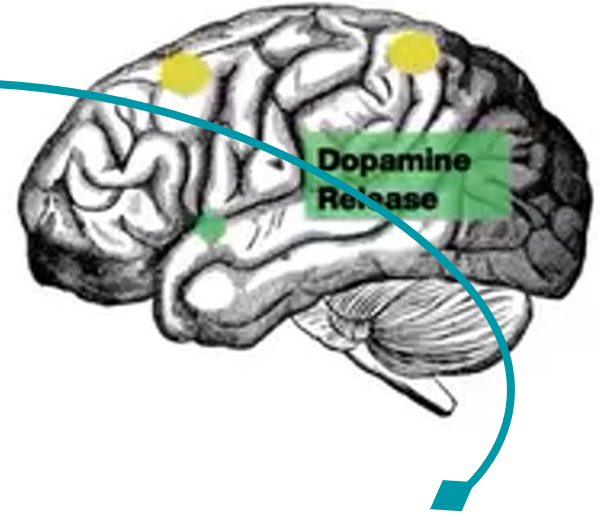


The flow cycle: 2 - Release

- Self-talk / Reframe
- Task focusing
- Diaphragmatic breathing



Adapted from Kotler (2014)



Let Go of Outcomes
Surge of feel good neurochemicals

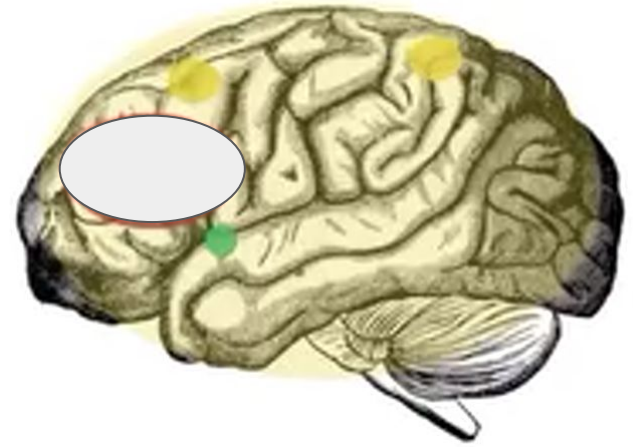
The flow cycle: 3 - Flow



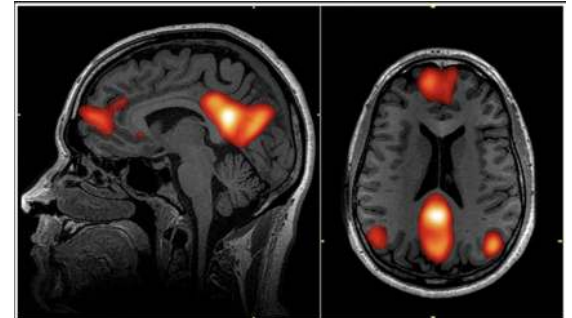
Present in the Process

Heightened awareness and efficient action

Adapted from Kotler (2014)

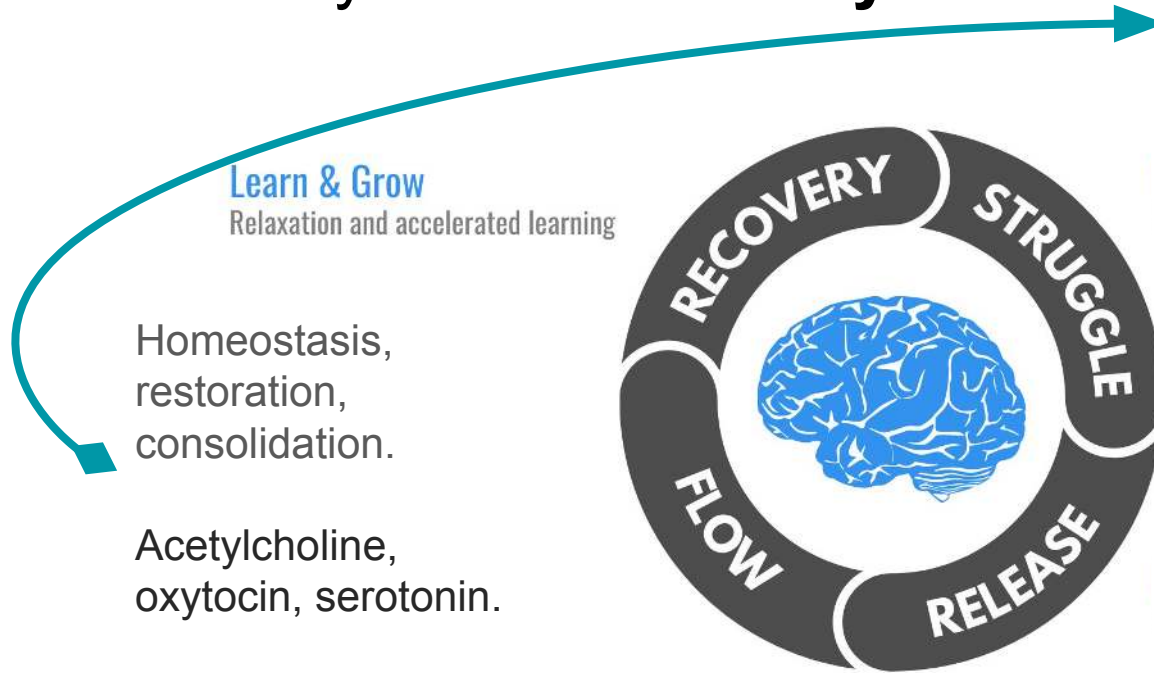


Endorphins



The flow cycle: 4 - Recovery

- Sleep / Nutrition
- Diaphragmatic breathing
- Mind wandering / Mindfulness



Learn & Grow

Relaxation and accelerated learning

Homeostasis,
restoration,
consolidation.

Acetylcholine,
oxytocin, serotonin.

Adapted from Kotler (2014)

Building flow

1. Goal clarity
2. Immediate feedback
 - a. Eg. video games, improv theater
3. Skill-challenge balance
 - a. Failure once every 3-4 attempts

"Some individuals have developed such strong internal standards that they no longer need the opinion of others to judge whether they have performed a task well or not. The ability to give objective feedback to oneself is in fact the mark of the expert."

Building flow

"The most important step in emancipating oneself from social controls is the ability to find rewards in the events of each moment."

Autotelic personality

- Intrinsic motivation
- Persistence
- Low self-centeredness
- Resilience
- Disinterested interest

☒ Exotelic (extrinsically motivated)

Intrinsic motivators: **curiosity, passion, purpose, autonomy, mastery**

More flow triggers

- Concentration
- Dopamine&attention triggers:
 - Novelty
 - Unpredictability
 - Complexity
 - Awe
 - Risk taking
 - Competition
- Separation from everyday reality

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2. In which settings do you experience flow?



23

On my own, doing creative or intellectual in-depth tasks

95.65%

Around people, interacting, cooperating or performing

43.48%

In intense, stimulating and adrenaline-driven physical activities

34.78%

In activities with consistent, endurance or rhythmic movement (eg. surf, yoga)

43.48%

Allowed selections: 4

Poll in the meeting on 13th Feb 2026

Flow profiles



DEEP THINKER



HARD CHARGER



FLOW GOER

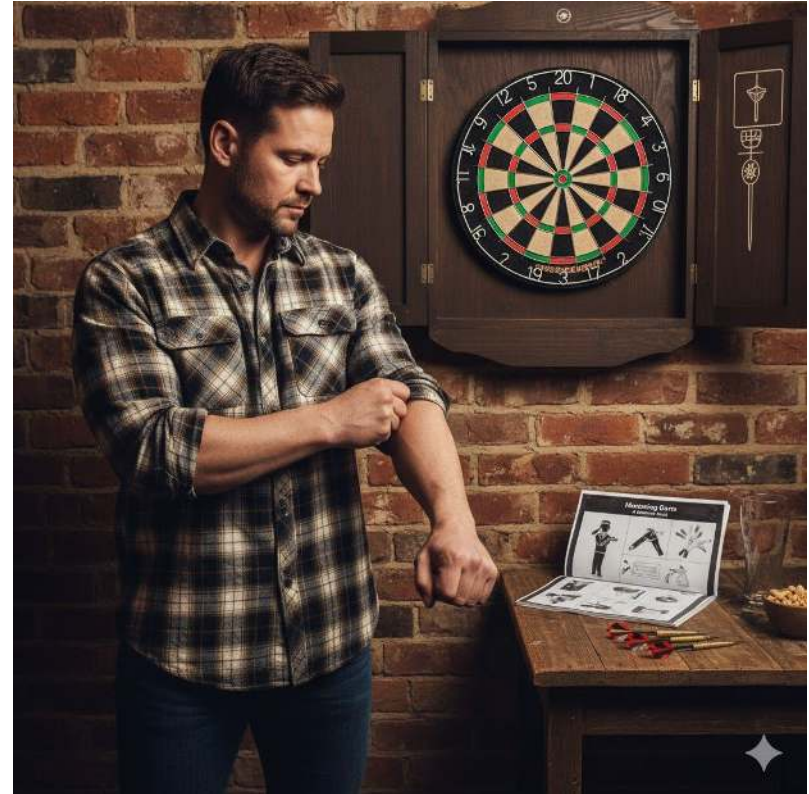


CROWD PLEASER

<https://www.flowgenomeproject.com/flow-profile>

How to cultivate flow

1. Set a **clear goal**
 - a. know exactly what to focus on (why)
 - b. Find what you like / care about
2. Fine tune your challenge
 - a. **Match activity to skill level** - challenging but not too difficult
 - b. Progressive overload
3. Flow ritual
 - a. Deep breathing, a song, a clean workspace, warm up task...
 - b. Instrumental music/white noise
 - c. **Separate from everyday life**



How to cultivate flow

5. Commit to min. 15 min of deep work
6. Enhance flow
 - a. Give yourself objective feedback
 - b. Curiosity
 - c. Competition / gamification
 - d. Hope for success
7. Avoid flow killers
 - a. Eliminate distractions
 - b. Overthinking / doubting
 - c. Perfectionism / the right moment
 - d. Conversations / Lyrics in songs
 - e. Fatigue, hunger/thirst
 - f. Fear of failure



Possible downside of flow state

- Neglecting oneself
- Neglecting responsibilities
- Post-flow crash / purposelessness
- Addiction
- Detachment from other aspects of life
- Doing without thinking



- Eat / sleep
- Timers / breaks
- Meaningful goals
- Accept boredom / arousal / frustration
- Thinking about doing



“Repeatedly we question the necessity of our actions and evaluate critically the reasons for carrying them out. But in flow there is no need to reflect, because the action carries us forward as if by magic.”

Take home message

- Happiness isn't a matter of luck but something that can be cultivated
- Flow happens in the right gear, right now

“One cannot lead a life that is truly excellent without feeling that one belongs to something greater and more permanent than oneself.”

– Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Topics for discussion

1. What is your personal experience with flow?
 - a. In which contexts /activities do you experience flow?
 - b. What are your flow triggers/enhancers and your flow “kryptonites”?
 - c. How do you optimize for flow at work / in leisure time?
2. What do you think about the dichotomy between
 - a. deep work/deliberate practice as a necessary struggle vs.
 - b. pursuit of flow /automatic action as means to well-being/happiness?
3. How do you see the balance between benefits and downsides of pursuing and experiencing flow?

References

- Book “Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement With Everyday Life.” by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi
- Gold J et Ciorciari J: “A Review on the Role of the Neuroscience of Flow States in the Modern World.” Behav Sci (Basel). 2020 Sep 9;10(9):137. doi: [10.3390/bs10090137](https://doi.org/10.3390/bs10090137)
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7551835/>
- Harris D, Vine, Samuel JV, Wilson MR: “Neurocognitive mechanisms of the flow state” Prog Brain Res. 2017;234:221-243. doi: 10.1016/bs.pbr.2017.06.012.
- Book “The Rise of Superman, by Steven Kotler, 2014
- TED Talk “Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: Flow, the secret to happiness” -
<https://youtu.be/fXleFJCgsPs?si=kxGnHcFLitsto-CH>
- This presentation was also inspired by a talk by Rico Alokuzay - Achieving flow states, Psychology and active development