

Module 2.3: The experience of FLOW

- Activity:

Think of an activity or experience in which you become totally absorbed & lose yourself in the moment. At the same time, you are highly effective in expressing your skills & don't have to think about what you are doing. In fact, once you start to think & analyze, the whole experience ends & you are back to your everyday state of mind.



SOMAIYA
VIDYAVIHAR

K J Somaiya College of Arts & Commerce



- Be natural, let go, thinking too much can ruin your activity.
- When someone is in FLOW, s/he is 'also with unconsciously there', 'in the zone'.
- You don't have to be a star to experience flow!
- Ordinary people described same kind of experience, that many referred to as “flow” (case of Joe).

- Rock climbers, dancers, players, musicians, painters often got lost in the moment of creativity or performance-doing their best.
- They engaged in flow-producing activities for the intrinsic enjoyment those activities yielded. The simple *doing* of the activity was its own reward. They also described the exhilaration (excitement/elation) they felt during or after such flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi).

What is FLOW?

- Flow is what we feel; when we are fully alive.
- Involved with what we do, & in harmony with the environment around us.
- It is something that happens around us.
- It is something that happens most easily, when we sing, dance, do sports-but it can happen when we work, read a good book, or have a good conversation.

The experience

- The experience of flow can be contrasted with our more typical state of mind (8-5 mind). The one that goes to work, balances checkbooks, analyzes what, when, how-& tackles various daily tasks. This is not to say that people cannot experience flow at work. In fact most satisfying & productive work involves a level of challenge appropriate to our skills that actively engages our talents, is deeply meaningful, & produces a sense of “vital engagement” and flow.

- So contrast of flow with 8-5 mindset is not meant to be a work-vs-play distinction, since some people have good fortune to combine the two.
- Rather, it points to the fact that flow is less common than our “normal” state of consciousness. In this regard, we might consider flow as a naturally occurring altered state of consciousness when compared to the more frequently experienced 8-to-5 mindset.

- In Flow, we are “out of our minds” in the sense of breaking through the dominance of normal consciousness. Thus, when “normal mind” intrudes, flow is lost.
- FLOW is a state of optimal experience or feeling “in the zone”. Flow activities are done for their own sake & not for extrinsic rewards.

Normal Mind Vs. Flow

Normal (8-5 mind)

1. Duality
2. Self-control
3. Attention wanders
4. Time conscious
5. Internal talk
6. Confusion
7. Negative emotions
8. Stress accumulates

Flow

1. Oneness
2. Loss of self
3. Total absorption
4. Time flies-frozen
5. Talk destroys it
6. Clarity of action
7. Exhilaration
8. Discharges stress

- Duality means to be aware of yourself & the environment as two separate objects. In flow, we don't find ourselves different from what we attend to..."You r That".
- Self-control means consciously directing our actions (now I'm doing this, next I will do that).
- We consciously monitor our actions related to a task or activity. It doesn't mean that we literally loose ourselves. It means we don't have to think in a self-reflective way about what we are doing. It just flows-seems to happen by itself. Ex. You just flow effortlessly because it's so well-learned.

- Attention & Time-consciousness are frequent problems in our 8-to-5 minds. We daydream at work & in class; we have trouble focusing on the task at hand; we watch the clock & can't believe how time drags. Of course, this assumes that one's job or class is not overwhelmingly interesting or challenging.
- In flow, attention is never a problem because we are totally absorbed in the activity. Neither is time an issue, because it seems to fly or stand still. An hour can go by in what feels like a moment.

- In our 8-to-5 minds, we are often confused & concerned about our performance & what other people think of us. We also carry on conversations with ourselves (self-talk/internal talk) in which we analyze, ruminate about the future or past, & consider what is going on around us.
- In flow, there is utter clarity of actions. We know exactly what we are doing & we get ongoing & immediate feedback from the environment. In sports, music,& writing, you see & hear the results of your efforts as they occur.

Benefits of FLOW

- Research participants reported discharge of stress & the feelings of leaving your troubles behind that resulted from flow experiences (Csikszentmihaly's). This stands in contrast to the 8-to-5 mind, by the end of a week at school or work, most of us feel at least a bit stressed, worn down, & ready for the weekend.
- People who regularly participate in flow activities might enjoy some enhancement of physical & mental health.

- During flow, attention is freely invested to achieve a person's goals because there is no disorder to strengthen out or no threat for the self to defend against.
- When a person can organize his or her consciousness so as to experience flow as often as possible, the quality of life starts to improve.

- In flow, we are in control of our psychic energy & everything we do adds order to consciousness. Following a flow experience, our self becomes more complex than that it had been before, due to two broad psychological processes-**differentiation** & **integration**.

Differentiation & Integration

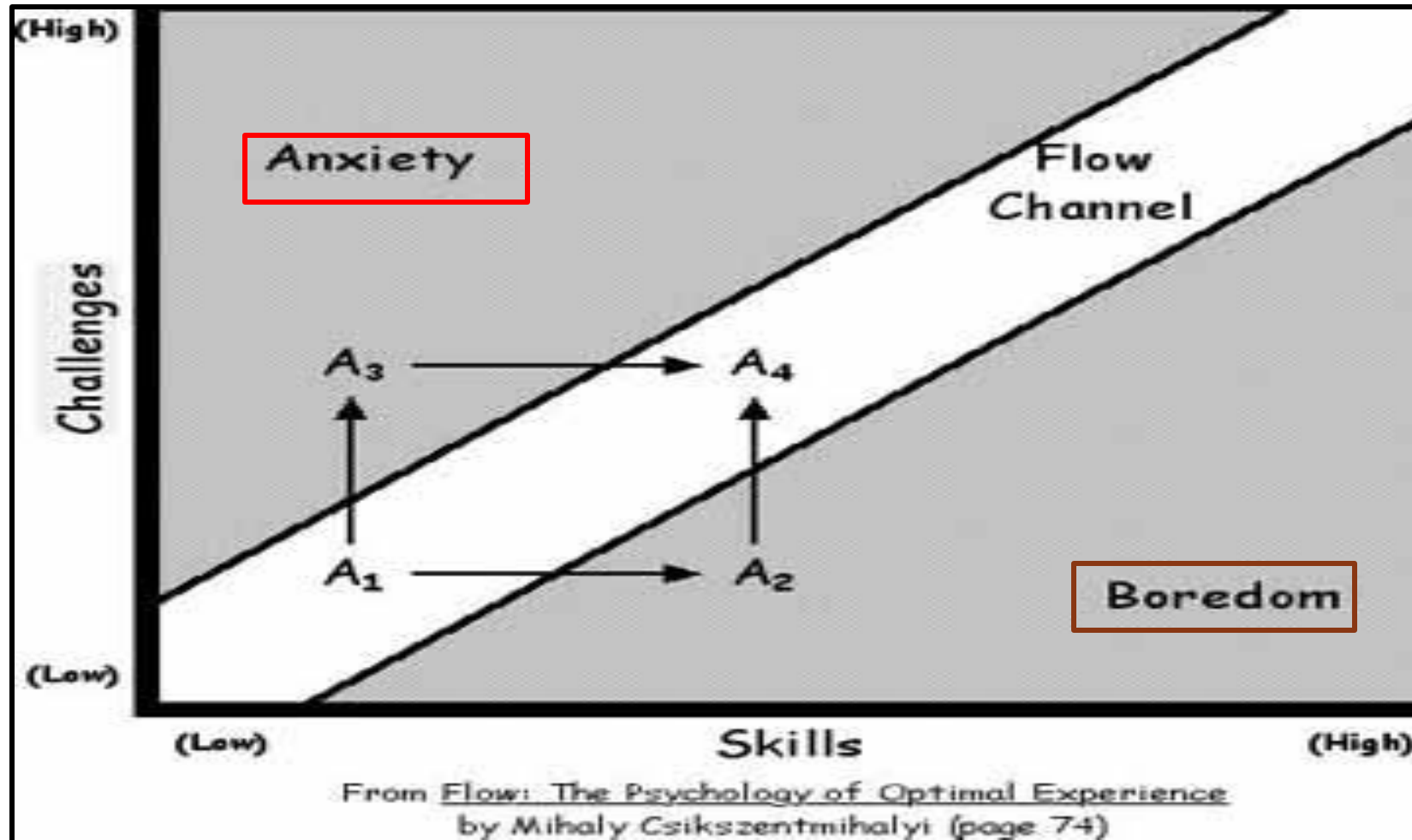
- The self becomes differentiated as the person after a flow experience feels more capable & skilled. Flow leads to integration because thoughts, intentions, feelings & the senses are focused on the same goal. After a flow episode, one feels more together than before, not only internally but also with respect to other people & the world in general.
- Differentiation promotes individuality while Integration facilitates connections & security.

- People who need only a few external stimuli to represent events in consciousness, are more autonomous from the environment. They have a more flexible attention that allows them to restructure experience more easily & therefore to achieve optimal experiences more frequently.
- People who can enjoy themselves in a variety of situations can screen out unwanted stimuli & focus only on what is relevant for the moment.

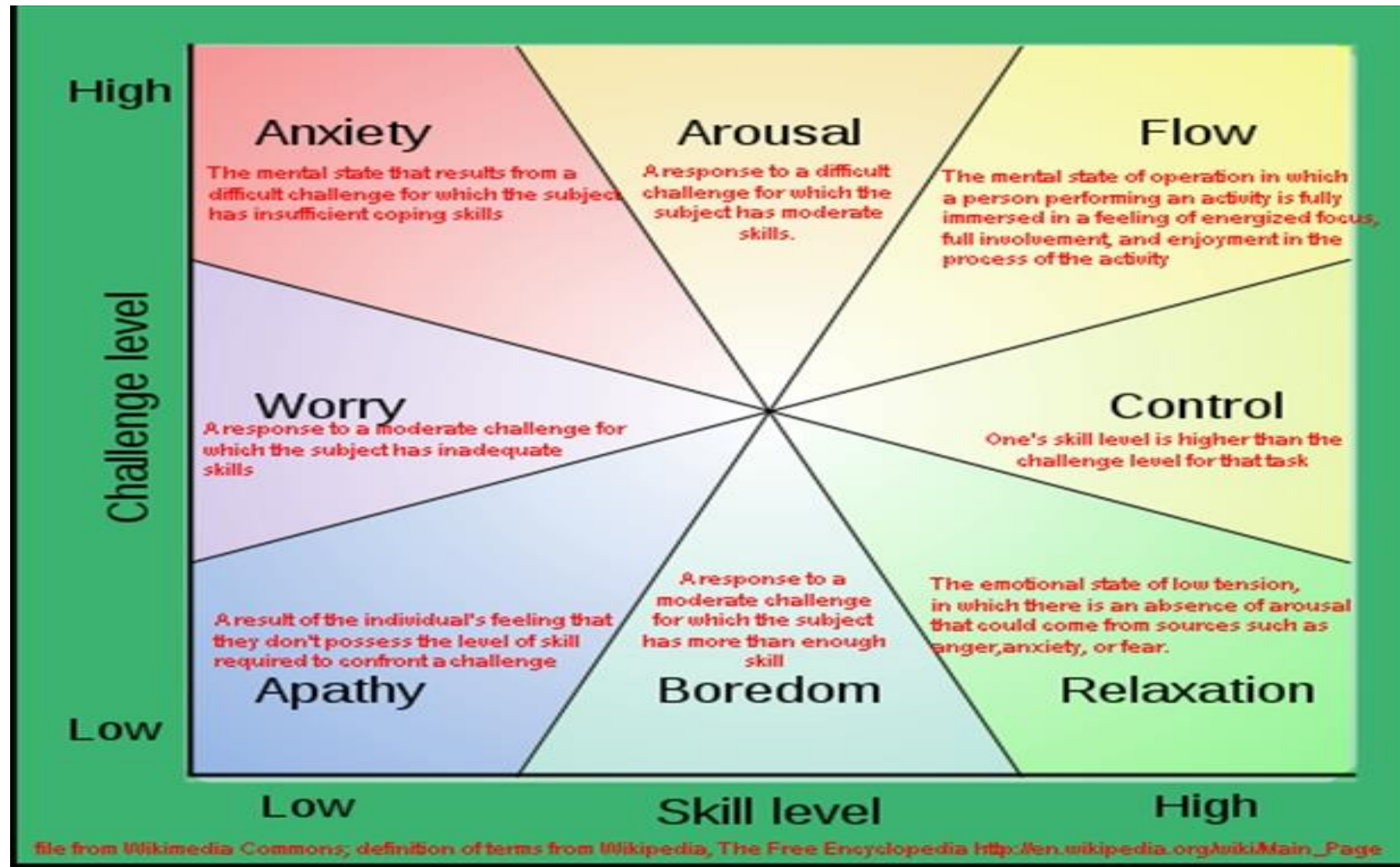
- People who achieve flow more regularly pay close attention to the minute details of their environment, discover hidden opportunities for action, set goals, monitor progress using feedback & keep setting bigger challenges for themselves.
- The most important trait of people who find flow even during adversity is non self conscious individualism, i.e. a strongly directed purpose that is not self seeking. Because of their intrinsic motivation, they are not easily disturbed by external events.

How to be in Flow?

Engagement & Flow



Flow= High Challenge X High Skill



Different ways to achieve FLOW

1. The Body:

- Everything the body can do is potentially enjoyable. Yet many people ignore this capacity.
- If one takes control of what the body can do and learns to impose order on physical sensations, entropy leads to a sense of enjoyable harmony in consciousness.
- Sports, dance, sex, yoga, the martial arts, music, fasting, can all help produce enjoyment.

2. The Mind:

- Some of the most exhilarating experiences we undergo are generated inside the mind, triggered by information that challenges our ability to think.
- These activities that order the mind directly are primarily symbolic in nature. They depend on natural languages, mathematics or some other abstract system like a computer language to achieve ordering of the mind.
- Like in the case of physical activities, there must be rules, a goal and a feedback.

- The normal state of the mind is chaos. Without training and without an object in the external world that demands attention, people cannot focus their thoughts for more than a few minutes at a time.
- It is relatively easy to concentrate when attention is structured by outside stimuli and we place ourselves on automatic pilot. But when we are left alone, the basic disorder of the mind reveals itself. With nothing to do, it begins to follow random patterns, usually stopping to consider something painful or disturbing.

- The mind will usually focus on some real or imaginary pain, on recent grudges or long term frustrations. So it is important to gain control over mental processes.

3. Leveraging Memory:

A mind with some stable content is much richer than one without. A person who can remember stories, poems, etc often finds it more easy to find meaning in the contents of her mind. Observing, recording and preserving the memory of both the large and small events of life is one of the oldest and most satisfying ways to bring order to consciousness.

- Having a record of the past can free us from the tyranny of the present and make it possible for consciousness to go back to older times.

4. Writing:

Writing provides important benefits. Writing gives the mind a disciplined means of expression. It allows one to record events and experiences so that they can be easily recalled and relived in the future.

5. Communication:

Conversation is another way of enhancing our lives by improving the quality of experience. It is a way to analyze and understand experiences. It is a self communication that brings order to them.

6. The Philosophy:

Great thinkers have always been motivated by the enjoyment of thinking rather than the material rewards that would be gained by it. Indeed, playing with ideas can be exhilarating. Not only philosophy but the emergence of new scientific ideas is fueled by the enjoyment one obtains from creating a new way to describe reality.

7. Lifelong Learning:

The goal of learning is to understand what is happening around us and develop a personally meaningful sense of what one's experience is all about. So the end of formal education (long painful memories) should be the start of a different kind of education that is motivated intrinsically.

8. The Job:

A job can also provide opportunities for flow. The more a job resembles a game with variety, appropriate and flexible challenges, clear goals and immediate feedback, the more enjoyable it will be regardless of the worker's level of development. Jobs can always be made more enjoyable.

9. Solitude:

An average adult spends about one third of his or her working time alone. So one must also learn to tolerate and enjoy being alone. We must learn to control consciousness even when we are alone. Indeed, the ultimate test for the ability to control the quality of experience is what a person does in solitude, with no external demands to give structure to attention.

- A person who rarely gets bored, who does not constantly need a favorable external environment to enjoy the moment, has passed the test for having achieved a creative life. If being alone is seen as a chance to accomplish goals that cannot be reached in the company of others, then instead of feeling lonely, a person will enjoy solitude and might be able to learn new skills in the process.

10. Coping with Stress:

The ability to make something good of a misfortune or adverse situation or stressful situation is a very rare gift. No trait is more useful, more essential for survival or more likely to improve the quality of life than the ability to transform adversity into an enjoyable challenge.