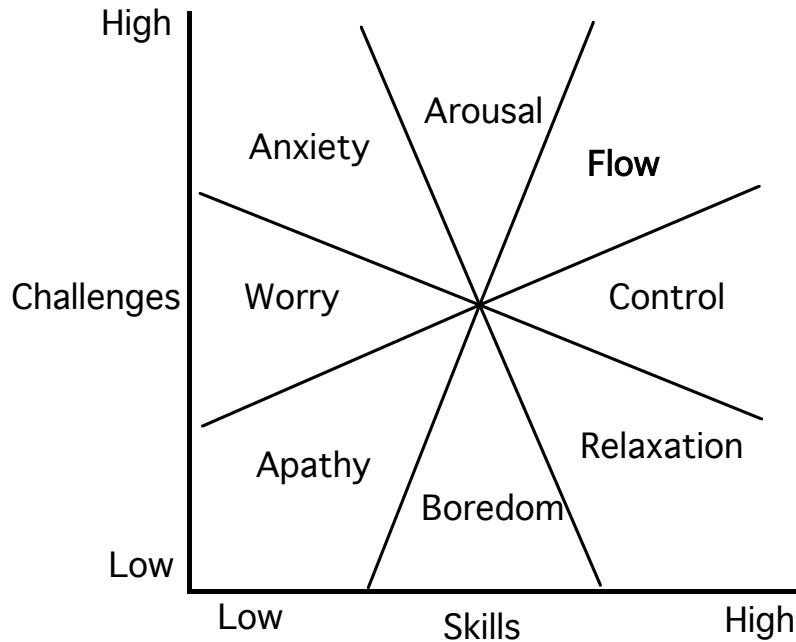


Learning Joyfully

Develop Your Skills



Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced Chick-sent me-high-ee) is one of the founders of positive psychology. One of his innovations is the “experience sampling methodology.” Basically he had people wear a pager and he paged them at random times. When they were paged, they were to write down what they were doing, what they were thinking, and how they felt. By having people record this information immediately at randomly selected times he hoped to get a better sense of people’s actual existences. He conducted many studies with huge numbers of participants.

One of his core findings was the concept of “flow.” He defines it as “being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you’re using your skills to the utmost.” A fairly small portion of the population experiences flow regularly, but it seems a key to happiness and creativity. Interestingly, flow seems to happen most often when you are doing something very difficult, but that you have a very high skill level for. It turns out that flow can happen just as easily with work or play, but as Henry David Thoreau noted “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” And, we often settle for work that is tedious and play that is boring.

So one key to joyfully learning is to develop your skills in the face of a difficult challenge. If you are finding your assignments boring or the prospect of an assignment causes you anxiety, consciously increasing your skill level can do a great deal to help. With the fundamentals of writing, reading, and thinking there are always greater challenges ahead and higher levels of skill to reach.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Finding Flow. 1998 (\$10.78)