

Flow by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Summary:

Entropy is the universal standard. Entropy is death: death of self, of expression, of creation. To deny entropy in larger contexts (society, globally, artistically, etc), one must deny entropy within oneself and create exotropy for oneself – order. The more a person confronts attacks to the order of one's self this is only new information and can be viewed as stress, trauma, or a threat to our goals. Or, this new information can be viewed as an opportunity to get one step closer to a larger goal of greater order (whatever that greater order may be: artistic expression, activism, family, religious experience). Getting there is called the Optimal Experience and that is called Flow in both objective and subjective and near and far lived-experience. Developing Flow is the most successful strategy to deny entropy and Flow is a 'game', a system of symbolic order that includes the following steps: 1)Flow activities have rules that require the learning of skills, 2)they set up goals, 3)they provide feedback, 4)they make control possible, 5)they facilitate concentration and involvement by making the activity as distinct as possible from everyday existence. To understand the most appropriate response to achieve Flow easily: **if you are bored, you have to increase your challenges; if you are anxious, you have to increase your skills.** To live in a state of Flow, one needs to develop a **Life Theme**: goal-directed actions that provide shape and meaning to an individual's life. In a life theme, whatever happens is either a step toward or away from that goal. The clear feedback will keep them involved with their actions. Even if one loses all their money or experiences a trauma, that person's thoughts and actions will see that as worthwhile.

Below is what I found to be instructive within the text (page number is bolded):

A joyful life is an individual creation that cannot be copied from a recipe

Happiness is a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated, and defended privately by each person

Optimal experience is something we make happen

6. A complex person has

- achieved control over psychic energy and
- invested it in consciously chosen goals

6. A complex person does this by

- transforming jobs and efforts into Flow-producing activities
- making relations with parents, spouses, children and friends more enjoyable

6. Each of us has a picture, however vague, of what we want to accomplish before we die. How close we come to accomplishing it becomes the measure for the quality of our lives.

21. Why are we so helpless, or more so, than our ancestors were in facing the chaos that interferes with happiness? Because:

1. control over the environment and ourselves must be learned each time anew individually and through trial and error
2. the knowledge of how to control consciousness must be reformulated every time the cultural context changes

31. Attention: the force that selects relevant bits of information

31. The mark of a person who is in control of consciousness is the ability to focus attention at will.

37. When the internal order of the self is disrupted, this is the process: 1)some information that conflicts with an individual's goals appears in consciousness. 2) Depending on how central that goal is to the self and on how severe the threat to it is, some amount of attention will have to be mobilized to eliminate the danger, leaving less attention free to deal with other matters.

37. Psychic Entropy: Whenever information disrupts consciousness by threatening its goals we have a condition of inner disorder

38. The outside event (a flat tire, a divorce, etc) appears in consciousness purely as information, without necessarily having a positive or negative value attached to it. It is the self that interprets that raw information in the context of its own interests, and determines whether it is harmful or not.

39. Every piece of information we process gets evaluated for its bearing on the self. Does it threaten our goals, does it support them, or is it neutral?

41. Following a flow experience, the organization of the self is more complex than it had been before. It is by becoming increasingly complex that the self might be said to grow. Complexity is the result of two broad psychological processes: differentiation and integration.

41. Differentiation: a movement toward uniqueness, toward separating oneself from others.

41. Integration: a union with other people, with ideas and entities beyond the self.

41. A complex self is one that succeeds in combining these opposite tendencies.

43. There are two main strategies we can adopt to improve the quality of life.

- 1: to try making the external conditions match our goals.
- 2:to change how we experience external conditions to make them fit our goals better.

50. Skill: any capacity to manipulate symbolic information

55. In some creative activities, where goals are not clearly set in advance, a person must develop a strong personal sense of what she intends to do. (a development of "internal guidelines")

59. Flow: lacking the sense of worry about losing control that is typical in many situations of normal life

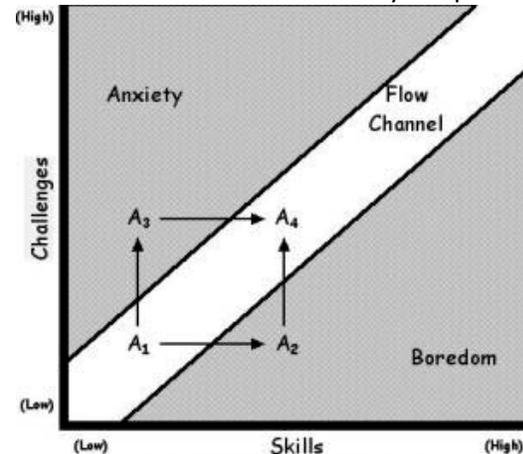
61. What people enjoy is not the sense of being in control, but the sense of exercising control in difficult situations.

70. It would be senseless, however, to ignore a source of energy because it can be misused: "Water can be both good and bad, useful and dangerous. To the danger, however, a remedy has been found: learning to swim." Democritus

72. Flow activities are designed:

1. they have rules that require the learning of skills
2. they set up goals
3. they provide feedback
4. they make control possible
5. they facilitate concentration and involvement by making the activity as distinct as possible from everyday existence

75. Neither boredom nor anxiety are positive experiences



From *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*
by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (page 74)

75. If you are bored, you have to increase your challenges

75. If you are anxious, you have to increase your skills

78. If we assume that the desire to achieve optimal experience is the foremost goal of every human being, the difficulties of interpretation raised by cultural relativism become less severe. Each social system can then be evaluated in terms of how much psychic entropy it causes, measuring that disorder not with reference to the ideal order of one or another belief system, but with reference to the goals of the members of that society. A starting point would be to say that one society is "better" than another if a greater number of its people have access to experiences that are in line with their goals. A second essential criterion would specify that these experiences should lead to the growth of the self on an individual level, by allowing as many people as possible to develop increasingly complex skills.

79. The pygmies of Ituri live in harmony with one another and their environment, filling their lives with useful and challenging activities...Every adult is expected to be a bit of an actor, singer, artist, and historian as well as a skilled worker.

81. Cultures are defensive constructions against chaos, designed to reduce the impact of randomness on experience. They are adaptive responses just as feathers are for birds and fur on mammals. Cultures prescribe norms, evolve goals, build beliefs that help us tackle the challenges of existence. In so doing they must rule out many alternative goals and beliefs, and thereby limiting possibilities; but this channeling of attention to a limited set of goals and means is what allows effortless action within self-created boundaries.

88. There is ample evidence to suggest that how parents interact with a child will have a lasting effect on the kind of person that child grows up to be....The family context promoting optimal experience could be described as having five characteristics:

1. clarity: the teenagers feel that they know what their parents expect from them (goals and feedback in the family interaction are unambiguous)
2. centering: the child's perception that their parents are interested in what they are doing in the present, in their concrete feelings, and experiences, rather than being preoccupied with whether they will be getting into a good college or not.
3. Choice: children feel that they have a variety of possibilities from which to choose, including that of breaking parental rules – as long as they are prepared to face the consequences
4. commitment: or the trust that allows the child to feel comfortable enough to set aside the shield of his defenses and become unselfconsciously involved in whatever he is interested in
5. challenge: the parents' dedication to provide increasingly complex opportunities for action to their children

90. People survive by finding ways to turn bleak objective conditions into subjectively controllable experiences.

92. When adversity threatens to paralyze us, we need to reassert control by finding a new direction in which to invest psychic energy, a direction that lies outside the reach of external forces...Then, even though that person is objectively a slave, subjectively he is free.

95. ...Adding an elaborate ritual dimension to the activity...becomes a source of complex feedback that provides optimal experience and adds strength to the self

97. It is more worthwhile to consider acts that bring enjoyment as signs of health, not of disease, not of a defensive ploy against repressed anxieties

97. Essential steps in the process of producing flow:

1. to set an overall goal and as many subgoals as are realistically feasible
2. to find ways of measuring progress in terms of the goals chosen
3. to keep concentrating on what one is doing and to keep making finer and finer distinctions in the challenges involved in the activity
4. to develop the skills necessary to interact with the opportunities available
5. to keep raising the stakes if the activity becomes boring

99. enjoyment doesn't depend on what you do but rather on how you do it

103. To become more complex

110. Stages of listening to music

1. Sensory Experience: one responds to the qualities of sound that induce the pleasant physical reactions that are genetically wired into our nervous system
2. Analogic Mode: one develops the skill to evoke feelings and images based on the patterns of sound
3. Analytic Mode: the most complex stage, the attention shifts to the structural elements of music and the ability to recognize the order underlying the works and the means by which the harmony was achieved

115. Repression is not the way to virtue.

115. Repression is not the way to virtue. When people restrain themselves out of fear, their lives are by necessity diminished. They become rigid and defensive and their self stops growing. Only through freely chosen discipline can life be enjoyed and still kept within the bounds of reason

127. When a person has learned a symbolic system well enough to use it, they have established a portable, self-contained world within the mind...playing with ideas is extremely 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.

131. The point of writing is to create information not simply to pass it along.

132. Every individual is a historian of his or her own personal existence....Having a record of the past can make a great contribution to the quality of life. It frees us from the tyranny of the present and makes it possible for consciousness to revisit former times. IT makes it possible to select and preserve in memory events that are especially pleasant and meaningful and so to "create" a past that will help us deal with the future...Of course such a past might not literally be true. But then the past can never literally be true in memor: it must continuously edited, and the question is only whether we take creative control of the editing or not. (this sounds like Cognitive Therapy)

141. The point of becoming an amateur scientist is not to compete with professionals on their own turf but to use a symbolic discipline to extend mental skills and to create order in (one's own personal) consciousness. On that level, amateur scholarship can hold its own, and can be even more effective than its professional counterpart. But the moment that amateurs lose sight of this goal and use knowledge mainly to bolster their egos or to achieve a material advantage, then they become caricatures of the scholar.

152. .. they were able to change constraints into opportunities for expressing their freedom and creativity

152. The more a job inherently resembles a game – with variety, appropriate and flexible challenges, clear goals, and immediate feedback – the more enjoyable it will be regardless of the development

161. Three most popular and important complaints by the average American worker:

1. The lack of variety and challenge on the job – this is especially true for lower-level occupations in which routine plays a major role
2. Other people on the job, especially bosses.
3. Burnout: too much pressure, too much stress, too little time to think for oneself, too little time to spend with the family

163. People who learn to enjoy their work, who do not waste their free time, end up feeling that their lives as a whole have become much more worthwhile

168. The worst moods are reported when one is alone and there is nothing that needs to be done

171. To fill free time with activities that require concentration, that increase skills, that lead to a development of the self, is not the same as killing time by watching television or taking recreational drugs. Although both strategies might be seen as different ways of coping with the same threat of chaos, as defenses against ontological anxiety, the former leads to growth, while the latter merely serves to keep the mind from unraveling (which can be very important sometimes)

172. The way to grow while enjoying life is to create a higher form of order out of the entropy that is an inevitable condition of living.

179. Accepting limitations is liberating. Choosing to invest psychic energy, one is freed of the constant pressure of trying to maximize emotional returns.

180. A great deal of energy gets freed up for living, instead of being spent on wondering about how to live.

180. To provide flow, a family has to have a goal for its existence. Extrinsic reasons are not sufficient: it is not enough to feel that, well, "Everybody else is married." "It is natural to have children" or "two can live as cheaply as one." These attitudes may encourage one to start a family, and may even be strong enough to keep it going, but they cannot make family life enjoyable. Positive goals are necessary to focus the psychic energies of parents and children on common tasks.

180. Some of these goals might be very general and long-term, such as planning a particular life-style...For such goals to result in interactions that will help increase the complexity of its members, the family must be both differentiated and integrated. Differentiation means that each person is encouraged to develop his or her unique traits, maximize personal skills, set individual goals. Integration, in contrast, guarantees that what happens to one person will affect all others. If a child is proud of what she accomplished in school, the rest of the family will pay attention and will be proud of her too. In an integrated family, each person's goals matter to all others (super important to remember this when dealing with my brothers but also the family I choose to attach myself to)

180. In addition to long-term goals, it is imperative to have a constant supply of short-term objectives. Unless there are goals that the whole family is willing to share it is almost impossible for its members to be physically together, let alone involved in an enjoyable joint activity....the common goals should reflect the goals of individual members as much as possible.

181. As with any other flow activities, family activities should also provide clear feedback. It is simply a matter of keeping open channels of communication. In this context it is worth stressing that entropy is the basic condition of group life, just as it is of personal experience. Unless the partners invest psychic energy in the relationship, conflicts are inevitable.

182. When relationships become a boring routine, the only way to restore flow to the relationship is by finding new challenges in it.

182. This might involve varying the routines of eating, sleeping or shopping. They might involve making an effort to talk together about new topics of conversation, visiting new places, making new friends. More than anything else they involve paying attention to the partner's own complexity.

188. Friendships allow us to express parts of our beings that we seldom have the opportunity to act out otherwise. One way to describe the skills that every man and woman has is to divide them into two classes: the instrumental and the expressive.

1. Instrumental skills are the ones we learn so that we can cope effectively with the environment. They are basic survival tools, like the cunning of the hunter or the craft of the workman or intellectual tools, like reading and writing and the specialized knowledge of the professional in our technological society. People who have not learned to find flow in most of the things they undertake generally experience instrumental tasks as extrinsic – because they do not reflect their own choices, but are requirements imposed from the outside.
2. Expressive skills on the other hand refer to actions that attempt to externalize our subjective experiences. Singing reflects how we feel, translating our moods into a dance, painting a picture that represents our feelings. When involved in an expressive activity we feel in touch with our real self.

189. If a person surrounds himself with 'friends' who simply reaffirm his public persona, who never question his dreams and desires, who never force him to try out new ways of being, he misses out on the opportunities that friendship presents.

190. While family provides primarily emotional protection, friendships usually mysterious novelty. When people are asked about their warmest memories, they usually remember holidays and vacations spent with relatives. Friends are mentioned more often in contexts of excitement, discovery and adventure.

192. Optimal experience should not be regarded as the frosting on a cake made with solid ingredients like health and wealth; by itself being a flimsy decoration. It is not: only with a solid base of these more real advantages does it help make subjective aspects of life satisfying. The whole thesis of this book argues against such a conclusion. Subjective experience is not just one of the dimensions of life: it is life itself. Material conditions are secondary: they only affect us indirectly, by way of experience. Flow and even pleasure on the other hand benefit the quality of life directly. Health, money, and other material advantages may or may not improve life. Unless a person has learned to control psychic energy, chances are advantages will be useless.

198. Coping with stress: the difference in how a person responds to stressful events has been called "coping ability" or "coping style"

198. Three kinds of resources account for a person's ability to cope with stress:

1. external support available: especially the network of social supports
2. a person's psychological resources, such as:
3. intelligence
4. education,
5. relevant personality factors
6. coping strategies that person uses to confront the stress

199. There are two main ways people respond to stress:

1. positive response is called a 'mature defense' or 'transformational coping'. An example is when faced with a stress the following actions are applied:

Immediately after stress

- a. keeping your cool
- b. temporarily suppressing feelings of anger or fear

- c. analyzing the problem logically
- d. reassessing priorities

After the immediacy has passed:

- e. redefining what the problem is so that it can be solved more easily

2. negative response to stress would be a 'neurotic defense' or 'regressive coping'

Immediately after stress

- a. withdraw into oneself
- b. deny what has happened
- c. avoid thinking about it
- d. overly worrying about it
- e. discharging frustration by turning against family and loved ones
- f. disguise frustration through drinking more than usual or other destructive behavior

After the immediacy has passed:

- g. giving up
- h. scaling down the complexity of their lives forever

200. Courage and the ability to overcome hardship are the qualities most often mentioned as a reason for admiration

200. Of all the virtues we can learn no trait is more useful, more essential for survival, and more likely to improve the quality of life than the ability to transform adversity into an enjoyable challenge.

201. Complex life forms depend for their existence on a capacity to extract energy out of energy.

201. The entire vegetable kingdom on our planet is a huge dissipative structure because it feeds on light, which normally would be a useless by-product of the sun's combustion

201. Unless men learned various tricks for transforming the forces of disorder into something they could use, we would not have survived as successfully as we have.

203. Why are some people weakened by stress, while others gain strength from it? The answer is simple: those who know how to transform a hopeless situation into a flow activity that can be controlled will be able to enjoy themselves and emerge stronger from the ordeal. There are three main steps that seem to be involved in such transformations:

1. **Unselfconscious self-assurance:** the implicit belief that their destiny was in their hands. Self-assured: not doubting that their own resources would allow them to determine their fate. Unselfconsciousness: ego is curiously absent and they are not self-centered and their energy is typically not bent on dominating their environment as much as on finding a way to function within it harmoniously
2. **Focusing attention on the world:** People who know how to transform stress into enjoyable challenge spend very little time thinking about themselves. They are not expending all their energy trying to satisfy what they believe to be their needs, or worrying about socially conditioned desires. Instead their attention is alert, constantly processing information from their surroundings.
3. **The discovery of new solutions:** the ability to confront preconceived notions with ability to disrupt them and disregard them if they no longer work for to achieve goals.

210. Summary of an autotelic person – someone in flow:

- **Setting goals:** one must have clear goals to strive for. Selecting a goal is related to the recognition of challenges. As soon as the goals and challenges define a system of action, they in turn suggest the skills necessary to operate within it. And to develop skills, one needs to pay attention to the results of one's actions – to monitor the feedback. Without constant attention to feedback I would soon become detached from the system of action, cease to develop skills and become less effective.
- **Becoming immersed in the activity:** investing psychic energy and attention to the task at hand. To do so one must learn to balance the opportunities for action with the skills one possesses.
- **Paying attention to what is happening:** concentration leads to involvement, which can only be maintained by constant inputs of attention. The ability to sustain involvement.
- **Learning to enjoy the immediate experience:** one can enjoy life even when objective circumstances are brutish and nasty. Being in control of the mind means that literally anything that happens can be a source of joy. To achieve this control requires determination and discipline. One must develop skills that stretch capacities, that make one become more than what one is. Flow drives individuals to creativity and outstanding achievement.

213. To create harmony in whatever one does is the last task that the flow theory presents to those who wish to attain optimal experience; it is a task that involves transforming the entirety of life into a single flow activity, with unified goals that provide constant purpose

214. If we enjoyed work and friendships and faced every challenge as an opportunity to develop new skills we would be getting rewards out of living that are outside the realm of ordinary life.

215. From the point of view of an individual, it does not matter what the ultimate goal is provided that it is compelling enough to order a lifetime's worth of psychic energy

216. People who find their lives meaningful usually have a goal that is challenging enough to take up all their energies, a goal that can give significance to their lives. We may refer to this process as achieving purpose.

217. Someone who knows his desires and works with purpose to achieve them is a person whose feelings, thoughts, and actions, are congruent with one another, and is therefore a person who has achieved inner harmony.

222. Building a complex meaning system involves focusing attention alternately on the self and on the Other (basically this is Maslow's pyramid)

1. Psychic energy is invested in the needs of the organism and psychic order is equivalent to pleasure.
2. The person begins to invest attention in the goals of a community and what is meaningful that corresponds to the group values (belonging to a larger human system)
3. Self Actualization: bringing attention back to the self and the challenge of discerning the limits of personal potential becomes Self Actualization – at this stage enjoyment rather than pleasure becomes the main source of rewards. But because this phase involves becoming a Seeker, the person may also encounter a midlife crisis, a career change and an increasingly desperate straining against the limitations of individual capability. From this point on the person is ready for the last shift in the redirection of energy: having discovered what one can and, more important, cannot do alone, the ultimate goal merges with a system larger than the person- a cause, an idea, a transcendental entity.

223. Individual life appears to consist of a series of different 'games' with different goals and challenges, that change with time as a person matures. Complexity requires that we invest energy in developing whatever skills we were born with, in becoming autonomous, self-reliant, conscious of our uniqueness and of our limitations. At the same times, we must invest energy in recognizing, understanding and finding ways to adapt to the forces beyond the boundaries of our own individuality.

225. But how do we know where to invest psychic energy? There is no one out there to tell us, "here is a goal worth spending your life on." Because there is no absolute certainty to which to turn, each person must discover ultimate purpose on his or her own. Through trial and error, through intense cultivation, we can straighten out the tangled skein of conflicting goals, and choose the one that will give purpose to action.

225. Self-knowledge is the process through which one may organize conflicting options. There are two ways to do this: a life of action or the path of reflection.

- Viva Activa: a person achieves flow through total involvement in concrete external challenges and one sets from themselves lifelong goals that they pursue with great resolve
- Viva contemplativa: detached reflection upon experience, a realistic weighing of options and their consequences

226. Activity and reflection should ideally complement and support each other. Action by itself is blind, reflection impotent.

227. The forms of psychic entropy that currently cause us so much anguish – unfulfilled wants, dashed expectations, loneliness, frustration, anxiety, guilt – are all likely to have been recent invaders of the mind. They are by-products of the tremendous increase in complexity of the cerebral cortex and of the symbolic enrichment of culture. They are the dark side of an emergence of consciousness.

228. Animals other than man are not in a position to be the cause of their own suffering.

230. Life Theme: Sartre called it the Project, which is the term for the goal-directed actions that provide shape and meaning to an individual's life. In a life theme, whatever happens is either a step toward or away from that goal. The clear feedback will keep them involved with their actions. Even if one loses all their money or experiences a trauma, that person's thoughts and actions will see that as worthwhile.

231. Authentic projects tend to be intrinsically motivated, chosen for what they are worth in themselves.

233. To find purpose in suffering one must interpret it as a possible challenge.

236. Many people confronted with the randomness of existence have drawn hope from the knowledge that others before them had faced similar problems and had been able to prevail.

238. If a new faith is to capture our imagination it must be one that will account rationally for the new things we know, the things we feel, the things we hoped for, and the ones we dread. It must be a system of beliefs that will marshal our psychic energy toward meaningful goals, a system that provides rules for a way of life that can provide flow (Kardashev Scale – Type 1 Civilization)

239. If science is to help it will need to transform itself and develop an integrated interpretation of all that is known, and relate it to humankind and its destiny. (Consilience)

240. The most promising faith for the future might be based on the realization that the entire universe is a system related by common laws and that it makes no sense to impose our dreams and desires on nature without taking them into account. Recognizing the limitations of human will, accepting a cooperative rather than a ruling role in the universe, we should feel the relief of the exile who is finally returning home. The problem of meaning will then be resolved as the individual's purpose merges with the universal flow. (this is Beginning of Infinity and Eco Theory)