

A CASE FOR FLOW STATE

BEN C.



This work explores the “flow” state. This sculpture depicts what flow state feels like to me, as well as its significance to our minds. I aim to discover what role it can play in our lives.

I researched artistic and athletic communities built around flow experiences. What is special about the sports I love that are conducive to finding the flow state? I created a replica of a skate-park near my home. It is made of wood and micro-filler. The sculpture is representative of flow state and my earliest experiences with it. This topic is astronomically significant to my life and development.

During this process, I discovered the true role that flow or “being in the zone” plays in my life and happiness. After looking at these phenomena, I realized that today’s society seeks fulfillment mainly through consumption of material goods. I’ve concluded, however, that we neglect the activities, hobbies, and passions that can provide us with true fulfillment.

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Flow is an important part of my life and through my research and writing this article, I intended to educate the reader briefly on the idea of the flow state and to discover flow's significance and role in our lives. This article includes a personal narrative that was meant to demonstrate an example of flow and show its effects on emotional well-being and performance in which I wrote about an experience of mine in the sport of skateboarding. After much research having found that it is a vastly important and beneficial element of life that has ties with things like happiness and self confidence, , this article became dedicated to demonstrating flow's importance and our society's failure to acknowledge and educate the importance and benefits of it.

Growing up, I've always been eager and passionate about sports and artistic and athletic activities, especially those that are individualistic in nature. My most gratifying experience in team sports was when I played lacrosse and found myself gravitating towards and fascinated by playing goalkeeper. As I continue to participate in a variety of individual, artistic and athletic activities like skateboarding weightlifting, and painting. I've grown curious as to why it is that I repeatedly am attracted to individual activities. What I have discovered is that these activities are all very conducive to entering and experiencing what is sometimes referred to as "the zone", or achieving a flow state in which one completes the task(s) at hand gracefully and effortlessly with a great sense of ease, control, and intense focus. For me, I chase this mindset through my athletic passions and firmly believe that it is the key component in leading a fulfilled, content life and should absolutely be a more renowned phenomenon. I am learning that certain conditions seem to be more conducive to arriving there than others. For example, I have a few years of experience being filmed in skateboarding and have noticed that it is often when the camera is on me that my biggest accomplishments and finest tricks unfold. I'll go to an obstacle or skate spot with a camera and decide on a trick or a series of tricks to do and attempt it until I succeed, and more often than not find I am able to things I would not normally be able to do without the presence of a camera (or a witness), because I'm able to really get into my zone.

One cold, foggy fall day of 2016, I set out to do a sequence of tricks at a local hometown skate spot of mine, nicknamed, "The Marble Spot". The sequence consisted of two tricks on the flat marble ground, followed by a complicated chain of quickly linked tricks preceding and descending a flight of stairs. Going into this, I acknowledged the difficult nature of this sequence of tricks and mentally prepped for a great challenge ahead. My film-maker and I embarked and I started attempting the sequence, trick by trick. My skill set was just high enough to meet the challenge and I quickly found myself in a state of intense focus, confidence and extreme motivation. I was in my zone. I attempted the sequence of tricks over and over, incessantly without giving up for the better part of three hours. Having found my flow and feeling confident, I refused to give up and finally, I succeeded and captured the sequence on film. Upon completion of my mission, I felt an overwhelming wave of total, true happiness, excitement, and real accomplishment. The sense of fulfillment I felt after accomplishing such a challenging goal for me was brilliant, I felt indestructible. I would describe being in the zone as a state of intense focus where completion of my task at hand seems to occur unforced, effortlessly and gracefully. This occurs and the flow state is achieved when an individual is challenged¹, but their skill set is just high enough to meet the challenge.

When the flow state is achieved, a loss of self-consciousness occurs which is why athletes have a difficult time describing how they felt while in the flow state but their retrospective reports state that they felt terrific afterwards. The loss of self-consciousness allows for individuals in the zone to not hesitate and second guess themselves and be at their peak performance. Another quality and benefit of the flow state is that an individual, "in the zone is not only able to suppress and ignore negative thoughts, but they are also found to have higher self-esteem and confidence".² These are the kinds of qualities and feelings that contribute greatly to and evoke happiness. So, seeing as the flow state induces peak performance, high self-esteem and confidence, certainty, and the ability to suppress or disregard negative thoughts, it is clear that flow enhances one's performance as well as evokes happiness, at least momentarily.

¹ Csikszentmihalyi M

² R.A Cardsted

Given this information on flow and its effects on us, the correlation between having high self-confidence and living a happier life overall, is why I strongly believe that flow is a real component in leading a fulfilled, content life. I pondered all of the athletic and artistic activities that I practice frequently, wondering what it is that connects these activities, I realized that not only are they all individual activities, but that they are strongly rooted in their own, tight-knit community and subculture. Not only are these activities subcultural, they also have exclusive attitudes that make individuals such as myself who are fascinated by and entirely immersed in these communities feel as though they're part of something special and different that goes against the grain and most importantly sets them apart from the rest of the population whose interests are more mainstream and unoriginal. Not only did I find that the activities that I'm most passionate about offer me a real sense of individuality and independence on trends as well as a tight-knit community of likeminded people, but most importantly, they offer me the opportunity to find my flow and get into the zone whenever I challenge myself through my activities, which I believe is the reason that I keep returning to these same activities. Upon revision of an old weightlifting log of mine, I stumbled across a quote in which I stated, "Submaximal lifts today, 1/12/17, tired, lacking effort and motivation. Unsatisfied with today's numbers... [referring to the weight on my lifts that day]." This was interesting for me to see because without enough challenge in my training, I seemed to feel unsatisfied and down even though I was engaging in an activity in which I'm very passionate about. Comparing this training session in which I did not challenge myself and trained with weight that is considered submaximal for my strength with the ecstatic, content, accomplished feeling that I usually experience when my training goes well. The case was in this instance was that my challenge that day was not high enough for my skillset and I wasn't able to get into the zone and therefore felt unsatisfied, unfulfilled and down. Without the necessary challenges to meet my skillset, my failure to find flow in my athletic passion, and lacking the emotional byproducts of being in the zone, my happiness and emotional well-being took a temporary toll, and the results of my training session were lackluster and undermined my confidence. Although despite this poor experience training, I continue to return to the gym to train regularly, this is because I'm driven by getting into my zone that ultimately leads me to accomplish something and later, reap the rewards.

A vast amount of our modern-day society feels as though they're unhappy, unfulfilled or unsatisfied and that they lack something in their lives that, if obtained would complete them. The assembly of scientific evidence stating that, "flow is highly correlated with happiness, both SWB (Subjective well-being) and PWB (Psychological well-being)." ³ and that, "people who experience a lot of flow regularly also develop other positive traits, such as increased concentration, self-esteem, and performance." ⁴ Benefits like this are virtually unheard of especially when achieved through simply getting into your zone from doing an activity that you might challenge yourself in. Although this is the case, we spend our time and money in hopeless attempts to find happiness. Everyone's guilty of trying to find happiness through consuming material goods or getting that haircut that will *surely* turn your self-esteem issues around. Our culture puts too much of an emphasis on getting the, "next big thing" and material goods that advertisements tell you will make your life so much better and fill the hole in our lives. The

³ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

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problem is that, as a society, we neglect the importance of getting out and doing something, starting a project that fascinates you, making music, getting into your zone and finding that flow state. For some, going on an intense bike-ride might do the trick, for others, like my Mom, something like playing the piano will suffice, but my point remains that our society's head is in the wrong place and given a new perspective on flow in which we hold it to a higher, more renowned value, We would find ourselves in a far more content state. I have decided that flow is undeniably what makes activities; some being seemingly pointless like drawing or weightlifting, the arts and crafts, and teaching, so enjoyable. Flow is absolutely a if not the real key to happiness as well as reaching peak performance in athletic and artistic activities. I firmly believe that it is imperative that everyone incorporate an activity that gets them into the zone into their daily routine to be their happiest, highest-performing, most fulfilled and confident possible self.

I strongly believe that the flow state is highly undervalued by most and by our society as a whole and that if our modern-day society was aware of and educated about flow's effects and impacts on both emotional well-being and that overall sense of fulfillment, we could very well be a far happier, more productive society. With people seeking happiness through activity or the arts, rather than over-consuming material goods, our society would be happier and it is possible that partial solutions to very significant social issues of ours such as lack of physical activity, obesity, as well as over-consumption could be solved. With an entire young generation of bright minds, encouraged to engage in their favorite activities with an emphasis on the arts, physical activities, and sciences, we could potentially become a far more productive society and begin to push the limits of our bodies and minds. I do not think that it is a stretch to state that if encouraged by parental and scholar figures as well as mainstream media, a new generation of exceptional athletes, artists, and scientists could be raised. Young people getting into their zone and being pushed, challenged and fascinated each and every day could absolutely make for a very productive and remarkable future society. Today, we lack motivation and tend to engage in activities out of necessity or because we're forced to; doing things like working a boring, unsatisfying job, taking uninteresting classes, and most of all, not being challenged every day. As a society, we lack flow and given an emphasis on its importance and benefits, overtime, our society could transform for the better. I believe that getting into your zone should be an everyday occurrence for everyone and we could be a much happier, more fulfilled society. Finally, I believe that it is imperative that flow's importance and necessity be emphasized through mainstream media and from parental and influential figures. It is critical that our shyness of challenge be overcome and that we see flow for what it is; they key to a content, fulfilled, and overall satisfied life.

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