

# Flow to Health and Happiness

Have you ever found yourself in a state of complete absorption in a complex and challenging activity that stretches your skills? This wonderful state is called **flow**, and is described in the best-selling book *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, PhD (Basic Books 1997). Csikszentmihalyi believes that being in flow generates the peak experiences in our lives. The more flow we experience, he suggests, the happier we are.

Below, learn why flow is so important and how you can increase flow experiences in your life from Coach Meg (Margaret Moore), MBA, founder and chief executive officer of Wellcoaches® Corp. and co-founder of the McLean Hospital/Harvard Medical School Coaching and Positive Psychology Initiative and annual coaching conference.

## How Do You Know When You're in Flow?

When you're in flow, you don't think about yourself and you aren't distracted or fretting. You're intently focused. You feel fully alive, awake, energized and present. You take risks. You lose your sense of time, and you notice your bodily functions (hunger, thirst) less than usual. You don't particularly notice your emotions. You feel uplifted when the flow experience ends. Flow experiences are great, not just good or "business as usual."

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## The Benefits of Flow

How does being in flow help you? Csikszentmihalyi's extensive research has shown that boosting flow in our lives has many benefits:

- more life engagement
- more life satisfaction
- better quality of life
- more positive emotions
- more resources
- more self-esteem

## How to Find Flow

Use the following steps to guide yourself toward more and better flow experiences:

**Assess and Discover Your Flow Experiences.** Stop, think, identify and list the flow experiences in your life today—both at work and in your personal life. When do you lose yourself in an activity that uses your skills beautifully and leaves you energized when it's done? Also, what are your best skills? The higher the level of your skills, the better the quality of a potential flow experience can be. Then think about all the ways you currently use your strengths in your work life and your personal life. When do you use these strengths in ways that are so completely absorbing that you lose yourself and time?

### Make Today's Flow Experiences Better.

Set your stresses and strains aside so that you fully enjoy those activities that generate flow in your life. Before starting them, take a few moments to reflect on and connect with their higher purpose. If anxiety arises because an activity is too challenging, set yourself a slightly lower challenge. You can also try to find new flow experiences. Look for new and creative ways to engage your strengths. ■

## A Shortcut to Flow

In 1998, when Martin Seligman, PhD, conceived of the domain of positive psychology (the scientific study of what drives happiness and life satisfaction), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, PhD, was among the founding team, and flow was adopted as a signature area of work. In his seminal book *Authentic Happiness* (Free Press 2002), Seligman asserts that the highest level of happiness occurs when we are in flow in activities *that have a higher purpose*—where we are contributing to the world. So knitting a sweater or refinishing a piece of furniture is more pleasurable when we do it for a homeless shelter than when we do it for ourselves. Seligman's recipe for increasing the frequency of our flow experiences is to recraft our lives to engage our signature character strengths. Along with these strengths typically comes a high level of skill. When we challenge and stretch ourselves to apply those strengths and skills, we get to flow!

Since *Authentic Happiness* was released, Chris Peterson and Seligman have completed groundbreaking work identifying a set of universal character strengths and virtues. You can discover your own strengths and virtues by completing the VIA Signature Strengths Questionnaire at [www.authentichappiness.com](http://www.authentichappiness.com).

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