



Cover feature

Peak performance: The psychological edge in sport and performing arts

Flow: The mindful edge in sport and performing arts

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Performing to a high level in sport and the performing arts requires a positive mindset, which is critical to success in any endeavour involving skill and challenge. There is a psychological model that helps us to understand how finding the right mix of challenges and skills in a situation can bring about an optimal psychological state for performance. This is the flow model.

What is flow?

Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1990) developed the flow concept after investigating the experiences of individuals during times when they were totally involved in what they were doing and when everything came together during performance of their chosen activity. Csikszentmihalyi operationally defined flow as being a psychological state that can occur when challenges and skills in a situation are both high. More precisely, flow is predicted to occur when an individual is being extended by virtue of performing in a challenging situation, and has a skill level that matches the challenge being faced. Flow occurs when the individual moves beyond his or her average experience of challenge and skill in a situation. Sport and the performing arts are environments conducive to the experience of flow, both involving a clearly defined structuring of performance around a graduated series of skills and challenges.

In the flow model, other experiences are predicted to result from different mixes of challenges and skills. It is important to remember that flow is more dependent on the perception of challenge in a situation, and the perception of skill one has, than on the objective level of challenge and skill in any given situation. Anxiety, for example, is predicted to occur when perceived challenges are high, but perception of skills low. Boredom on the other hand is predicted to occur when skills are perceived to be high, but the challenges in a situation are perceived to be low.

Dimensions of flow

The relative mix of challenges and skills is an important starting point for understanding flow. However, it is through focusing on the qualities that flow brings to an experience that this optimal psychological state is more clearly understood. Flow represents those special moments in time when everything comes together in one's experience. During flow, there are some wonderful aspects to our experience: we know exactly what it is we want to do; we receive clear feedback about how well we are doing; we become totally immersed in what we are doing, to the point of action and awareness merging; we are totally focused on the task at hand; we experience a sense of control and a loss of self-consciousness; we may have a sense of change in the normal passage of time; and what we experience provides such a high level of intrinsic reward that we are motivated to return to this state.

Translating these dimensions into how performers in flow describe their experience can help us to understand what the experience is like. The types of phrases used by performers interviewed about what being in flow is like (Jackson, 1996) include descriptors such as “felt easy”, “complete task focus”, “totally relaxed”, “enjoying experience as it occurs”, “totally absorbed in what I am doing”, “endless supply of energy”, “things happening automatically”, “nothing else enters awareness”, and “leaves you feeling great”. Accompanied by positive experiential characteristics such as these, moments in flow remain etched in our memory, creating a blueprint of optimal experience.

DIMENSIONS OF FLOW

- Challenge–skill balance
- Action–awareness merging
- Clear goals
- Unambiguous feedback
- Concentration on the task at hand
- Sense of control
- Loss of self consciousness
- Time transformation
- Autotelic (intrinsically rewarding) experience

Flow and performance

Flow can be experienced in any human endeavour, from the tasks of daily living to demonstrations of outstanding levels of performance in sport and the performing arts. Having interviewed many athletes at the very top of their sport, I have found a consistent theme of performers valuing their experience of flow, appreciating the opportunity to speak about their experiences (rather than their results), and being motivated to have more flow in their performances. The following quote by an elite athlete illustrates how motivating an experience flow can be.

Flow is what gives you the buzz to keep doing what you are doing, keep doing the sport. Because once you've got it, it just lifts you. Once you lose it, it can be a real slog until you get it back again. And once you've got it back again, and you're just grooving along, everything's going well, that's great. That's just what you want it to be.

Psychologists have the potential to assist performers to experience flow, through working with them on developing a mindset that facilitates flow state in what they are doing.

Flow occurs when everything comes together in one's experience, creating a psychological state of total absorption in the task at hand. Once flow is understood, the pathway to enhanced performance becomes clear, as the flow model provides a practical pathway to an optimal psychological state. Knowing the conditions that set the stage for its occurrence puts flow into

the realms of an attainable psychological state, rather than a mystical experience that occurs if luck is on one's side. Setting the stage for flow to occur is the challenge–skill balance.

Qualitative research with elite athletes (e.g., Jackson, 1995) demonstrated that there are several factors that are perceived to influence whether flow occurs. These include being well prepared for the challenge, having high levels of motivation, having the right level of energy for the performance, having a clear plan for the performance, having a sense that performance was progressing to this plan, staying focused on the task, remaining confident, experiencing good team work, and managing distractions. These are examples of the types of factors that psychologists can work on with performers to help them be prepared for the challenges they face, and to face those challenges with a mindset that can lead to flow.

Flow and mindfulness

Having good awareness and a present-focused mindset are key psychological factors for experiencing flow. Awareness and focus can be developed through the practice of mindfulness. The increasing popularity and use of mindfulness-based approaches to psychology demonstrates the recognition of the value of present-moment awareness. Mindfulness can be defined as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally” (Jon Kabat-Zinn, 1994). The present-moment awareness that defines mindfulness is also critical to the experience of flow. The flow state associated with high level performance in sport and the performing arts can be one outcome of being mindful in a challenging situation.

Interestingly, sport psychologists have been teaching athletes about being mindful (perhaps without using the term mindfulness) for many years. Take the following quote from 1990 by a leading Canadian sport psychologist, Terry Orlick, where the optimal state for performance is described.

The ideal performance focus is total concentration to your performance. Focusing on distracting thoughts (about final placing, others' expectations, the weather) interferes with an effective task focus. Stay in the moment, which is the only one you can influence anyway. (p.16)

Orlick is one of many applied sport psychologists who, in their work with performers, have emphasised the importance of increasing awareness of the present moment as a key factor in peak performance.

Cultivating awareness as a path to flow

Developing awareness in athletes and performing artists will enhance their experience, and may help such individuals find flow in their performances. Awareness can be cultivated through mindfulness training, and there are a number of psychological approaches that incorporate mindfulness as a key construct.

One such approach is acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). The focus on present-moment awareness and taking committed action in the service of identified goals makes ACT a useful model to work from with athletes and performing artists. Flow occurs

when we are engaged in activities we enjoy, which also extend our capabilities. Working from an ACT framework, a psychologist might help performers to identify what is important to them, and then to take action that will help them move towards these goals in a present-focused way. Part of the process would involve learning

how to manage difficult thoughts and feelings that arise, while returning, again and again, to a present-focused awareness.

Flow is an optimal state because it involves being totally focused in the present moment. When in flow, nothing disturbs or detracts from this concentrated state. Neither external nor internal distractions take up mental space. This present-moment focus is congruent with the aims of increasing mindfulness, and thus by helping individuals to be more mindful, psychologists may also be helping create the conditions for flow.

Why does flow matter? Because quality of experience in what we do matters, and it is often when we are placed in a challenging situation that we have the opportunity to experience total involvement in what we are doing, as described by Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999).

What is true for life as a whole is also true in the more limited domain of sport. Winning, getting medals, improving one's time, or beating a record are important to get us motivated in the beginning, but if we take these goals too seriously – so that their pursuit blinds us to the experience along the way – then we miss the main gift that sport can give. (p.163)

Sport and the performing arts provide environments where individuals can experience being in the present moment. One potential outcome is that athletes and performing artists can find flow in what they are doing. ■

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‘Flow occurs when everything comes together in one’s experience, creating a psychological state of total absorption in the task at hand.’

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