From a TOPSS unit lesson plan on Positive Psychology, published by the American Psychological Association in 2003.
This activity is intended for TOPSS members for use in their classes. Any further use requires additional APA permission.



7 DAYS PSYCHOLOGY

***Activity 4.1***

## Creating Flow Experiences

*Amy C. Fineburg, Homewood High School, Birmingham, Alabama*
Based on the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, University of Chicago

**Concept:** Flow is the state of optimal experiences in which a person engages in an activity simply for the sake of the activity itself. People who are in a state of flow during activities are using high levels of skill and challenge together to create an experience that is rich and personally beneficial. School can often be devoid of flow for many students because they are engaging in many activities for which a high level of skill and challenge is not likely to be present. This activity will help students create flow experiences in their daily lives, thus enriching their school experiences.

**Materials:** Transparency Masters C & D

**Description:** *Step 1*—Prior to teaching the concepts of flow, lead students in a discussion about activities in which they have skill and enjoy the challenges involved in participating (Transparency Master C). Brainstorm as a class about the qualities of the skillful activities to determine how and why those activities are more enjoyable.

*Step 2*—Following this discussion, present the qualities of flow experiences. Be sure to discuss how the activities the students listed would fall under the category of flow.



*Step 3*—Using Transparency Master D, brainstorm activities that do not require skill or challenge and ways to make those activities become flow experiences. Share with the students the following anecdote.

> Professor Heinz Maier-Leibnitz, a German experimental physicist, suffers from an occupational handicap common to academics: having to sit through endless, often boring, conferences. To alleviate this burden, he invented a private activity that provides just enough challenge for him not to be completely bored during a dull lecture, but is so automated that it leaves enough attention free so that if something interesting is being said, it will register his awareness.
>
> What he does is this: Whenever a speaker begins to get tedious, he starts to tap his right thumb once, then the third finger of the right hand, then the index finger, then the fourth finger, then the third finger again, and then the little finger of the right hand. Then he moves to the left hand and taps the little finger, the middle finger, the fourth finger, the index, and the middle finger again, and ends with the thumb on the left hand. Then the right hand reverses the sequence of the tapping, followed by the reverse of the left hand's sequence. It turns out that by introducing full and half stops at regular intervals, there are 888 combinations one can move through without repeating the same pattern (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

From a TOPSS unit lesson plan on Positive Psychology, published by the American Psychological Association in 2003.
This activity is intended for TOPSS members for use in their classes. Any further use requires additional APA permission.

While most students may not create such elaborate games to play while listening to boring lectures, they can engage in similar routine microflow activities that will bring enjoyment to otherwise low-skill and low-challenge activities. Examples of other, less complicated microflow experiences may include doodling, chewing on gum or pencils or pen tops, smoothing hair, or humming a tune.

**The Challenge:** Once Step 3 is complete, have students choose one way in which they can make a low-skill and low-challenge activity into a flow experience. During the next couple of days (instructor's choice) students should engage their microflow strategies during a particularly non-flow experience, such as a lecture. Students will write a short paper about this experience addressing the following questions:

- In what microflow activity did you engage? In what situation was the microflow activity used? What were the qualities of this situation that made it a nonflow experience for you?
- How did you make the microflow activity provide challenge for you while you were engaged in it? How could you make it provide even more challenge in the future as you become more skilled at the microflow activity?
- How do you create flow in situations in which you are skilled?

**Discussion:** Most students are skilled in some activity in which they engage, but trouble arises in relatively boring situations or in situations that present a low level of challenge. Microflow activities help people overcome boring, tedious situations in which escape is usually impossible without consequences (like school attendance). While microflow types of activities help in inescapable situations, life is not enhanced by them overall. Students need complex, demanding, and high-skill activities that will produce flow and will also provide something to look forward to during boring experiences. As Dr. Mike Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced as "Cheek-sent-me-high") says in his book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience,* "Enjoyment appears at the boundary of boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are balanced with the person's capacity to act."



**Reference**

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience.* New York: HarperCollins.

***Transparency Master C***
*Activities That Require Skill and Challenge*

| Activities that Require Skill and Challenge | Enjoyable Qualities of These Activities |
|---|---|
| | |

# Positive Psychology

***Transparency Master D***
*Activities that DO NOT Require Skill and Challenge*

| Activities that DO NOT Require Skill and Challenge | Ways To Create Flow in These Activities |
|---|---|
| | |