

Imagine you're engrossed in some activity. It could be something physical like rock climbing or skiing, something artistic or creative like playing the piano or painting, or working on or giving your next presentation. Whatever the activity, you become totally engrossed, totally in the moment. Everything else falls away, your sense of time changes, and you almost forget who you are and where you are. What I'm describing is called a *flow state*.

SOME FACTS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE FLOW STATE

The man who wrote the book on flow is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. He's been studying the flow state around the world for many years. Here are some facts about the flow state, the conditions that produce it, and what it feels like:

You have very focused attention on your task. The ability to control and focus your attention is critical. If you get distracted by anything outside the activity you're engaging in, the flow state will dissipate. If you want people to be in a flow state during your presentation, then you need to minimize distractions. And you will need to give people ample time to do any activity. Instead of 5 to 10 minutes, you will need to provide a minimum of 20 minutes, up to an hour or two.

You are working with a specific, clear, and achievable goal in mind. Whether you are singing, fixing a bike, or running a marathon, the flow state comes about when you have a specific goal. You then keep that focused attention and only let in information that fits with the goal. Research shows that you need to feel that you have a good chance of completing the goal to get into, and hold onto, the flow state. If you think you have a good chance of failing at the goal, then the flow state will not be induced. And, conversely, if the activity is not challenging enough, then you won't hold your attention on it and the flow state will end. When you are preparing your presentation and any audience activities, make sure to build in enough challenge to hold attention, but don't make the activities so hard that they get discouraged.

You receive constant feedback. To stay in the flow state, you need a constant stream of information coming in that gives you feedback as to the achievement of the goal. Make sure you are building in lots of feedback as people perform the activities you give them.

You have control over your actions. Control is an important condition of the flow state. You don't necessarily have to be in control—or even feel like you're in control—of the entire situation, but you do have to feel that you're exercising significant control over your own actions in a challenging situation. Give people control at various points along the way.

Time changes. Some people report that time speeds up—they look up and a whole hour has gone by. Others report that time slows down.



How you know you've induced a flow state

I teach a lot of half-day workshops. I know I've done a good job planning the activities when I start to bring the 3-hour session to a close and people look up stunned and say, "What? It's already 4 p.m.?!". It means they were in a flow state.

The self does not feel threatened. To enter a flow state, your sense of self and survival cannot feel threatened. You have to be relaxed enough to engage all of your attention on the task at hand. In fact, most people report that they lose their sense of self when they are absorbed in the task.

The flow state is personal. What triggers a flow state for one person might be different from what triggers it for another person.

The flow state crosses cultures. So far it seems to be a common human experience across all cultures, with the exception of people with certain mental illnesses. People who have schizophrenia, for example, have a hard time inducing or staying in a flow state, probably because they have a hard time with some of the other items above, such as focused attention, control, or the self not feeling threatened.

The flow state is pleasurable. People like being in the flow state.

The prefrontal cortex and basal ganglia are both involved. I haven't found specific research on the brain correlates of the flow state, but I'm guessing that it involves both the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for focused attention, as well as the basal ganglia, which is involved in dopamine production.

Takeaways

- * If your presentation induces a flow state, people will find the experience enjoyable.
- * Use activities during your presentation. Flow states require that people be deeply engaged. Even if you are a great presenter, you talking will not induce a flow state in the audience. They have to be doing an activity to be in a flow state.
- * Give people some control over their actions during activities. Control is an important attribute of the flow state.
- * Minimize distractions.
- * Make activities challenging but not too difficult.
- * Give people feedback about the activity they are doing. Constant feedback is required for people to be in, and stay in, a flow state.