How to enter ‘Flow State’ on command

Flow is described as a state of 'effortless effort,' where we feel like we're propelled through an activity, and everything else seems to disappear. More specifically, flow refers to any moment of rapt attention and total absorption. You're so focused on the task at hand that everything else seems to disappear. Researchers have discovered 22 catalysts that can help you prepare your environment and quickly drop into a flow state. A few of these include distraction management, dopamine triggering, and concentration.

Flow is often described as a state of 'effortless effort.' We feel like we're propelled through the activity. Everything else just seems to disappear.

Time is going to dilate, which is a fancy way of saying it's going to pass strangely. Five hours go by in about five minutes. Occasionally, it'll slow down, and you get a freeze-frame effect,

Flow itself the term is coined by Goethe, who uses the German word "rausch," which means overflowing with joy.

Nietzsche wrote about flow. William James worked on the topic, but Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is often referred to as the Godfather of Flow Psychology.

He was very interested in the sort of well-being, meaning of life, and he went around the world talking to people about the times in their lives when they felt their best, and they performed their best. Everywhere he went, people said the same thing. "I'm in this altered state of consciousness where every action, every decision I make, seems to flow effortlessly, perfectly, seamlessly from the last."

Flow refers to any of those moments of rapt attention and total absorption. You're so focused on the task at hand, so focused on what you're doing, everything else just seems to disappear. But one of the things that athletes talk about a lot is what they call "the voice."

Often, when I'm skiing in flow, I will get directions-right, left, do this, do that- and it's very quick. You either do what the voice is telling you to do, or you tend to crash. The challenge-skills balance is often called the "golden rule to flow." And the idea here is simple. We pay the most attention to the task at hand when the challenge of that task slightly exceeds our skill set. So, to do this work and to get good at it, you must get good at being comfortable with being uncomfortable.

You want to prepare yourself and prepare the environment to drop into flow. The flow triggers are your toolkit. There are probably way more, but so far, researchers have identified 22. The most basic of flow triggers complete concentration. You really want to start your work session if you can, in relation to your physiology. It's best to wake up at 3:30, four o'clock in the morning. That's when most people are awake and most alert, night owl hours. That's when your brain comes alive.

And then you want to try to block out 90 to 120 minutes for uninterrupted concentration. Practice management of time.

So, you want to turn off your phone, turn off email and social feeds, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, et cetera, all your messages, all your alerts.

There was a study where they found that coders in flow, if they get knocked out by distraction, a knock at the door, a text alert, or whatever, it can take them 15 minutes to get back into flow state, if they can get back in at all.

Flow only shows up when all your attention is in the right gear or frequency. One way to explore flow triggers, there's a cluster of them that are predominantly dopamine triggers. They drive focus, they drive attention, they drive alertness and excitement, and there are a lot of different ways to get dopamine.

Novelty produces dopamine. We see the same thing with unpredictability, complexity, and the experience of awe. You look up at the night sky, and you see stars everywhere, and you know those stars are part of the greater universe, and you get an intense feeling of the universe's perceptual vastness.

If you've ever done a crossword puzzle or sudoku, and you get an answer right, that little rush of pleasure you get is dopamine.

And then you usually get a couple of answers right in a row; that's because the dopamine that is now in your system is amplifying pattern recognition.

We get that same dopamine from risk-taking. And this could be physical risks, emotional risks, social risks, and intellectual risks, possibly spiritual risks. We get dopamine not as a reward for taking the risk, which is what some people used to believe, but now we know it's to drive motivation.

Now, there are lots of different intrinsic motivators, but from a motivation standpoint, there are five, and they're all designed to be

built into one another and work in a sort of specific order, in a specific sequence.

The most basic human motivator is curiosity. One of the things we get from curiosity is focusing for free. When we're curious about something, we don't have to struggle. We don't have to burn a lot of calories trying to pay attention to it. Curiosity is designed, biologically again, to be built into passion. That's a tremendous amount of focus for free.

Now, passion is incredibly useful, but as a motivator, you can go one better, which is purpose. Everyone's talking about "I have a purpose," and it's this altruistic thing, and it's good for the world, and all those things may be true, but from a peak performance perspective, it's very, very selfish.

Once you have a purpose, the purpose initiates autonomy. It motivates you to pursue your purpose. And once you have that intention, the system wants motivator mastery. Mastery is the skill to pursue that purpose well. One of the incredible things about being human is that we're all built for peak mental and physical performance.

Flow is universal in humans. It's universal in most mammals and all social mammals. There's a shared collective version of a flow state, a team performing at its best, a group performing at its best. This is called 'group flow.' In fact, studies have shown that the people who score off the charts for these characteristics, who score off the charts for overall well-being and life satisfaction, are the people with the most flow in their lives. We're all capable of so much more than we know. That is a commonality across the board. It's the largest lesson

in 30 years of studying peak performance. Motivation is what gets us into the game. Learning allows us to continue to play. Creativity is how we steer. And flow, which is optimal performance, is how we amplify all the results beyond all reasonable expectations.

The Neurochemistry of Flow States

Besides neuroanatomical changes in flow state, there are neurochemical changes, right. The brain produces a giant cascade of neurochemistry. You get norepinephrine, dopamine, anandamide, serotonin, and endorphins. All five of these are performance-enhancing neurochemicals. So, they make you faster, stronger, quicker, and they do the same thing with your brain.

In the front end of a flow state, you take in more information and process it more deeply, meaning you process it using more parts of your brain and process it more quickly. There's some debate about this, but it does appear that you process it more quickly. This is norepinephrine and dopamine.

So, when people enter a flow state, they talk about feeling like their senses are incredibly heightened. This is the performance-enhancing aspect of norepinephrine and dopamine. Where these chemicals really come in handy is how they affect motivation, creativity, and learning.

We'll start with motivation. Besides being performance-enhancing chemicals, these are obviously all feel good drugs. These five chemicals are the most potent feel-good drugs the brain can produce. As a result, flow is considered the most addictive state on Earth. Scientists don't like the word addictive, so instead they use

autotelic. When something is autotelic, it is an end in itself. What it means is that once experience starts producing flow, we will go extraordinarily far out of our way to get more of it, which is why researchers now believe flow is the source code of intrinsic motivation. Another thing that those neurochemicals do is they augment the creative process.

So, creativity is always recombination. It's the product of novel information, bumping into old thoughts to create something startlingly new. So, if you want to amplify creativity, you want to amplify every aspect of that process. Again, the neurochemicals help.

So, on the front end of the flow state, when you get norepinephrine and dopamine, they're tightening focus, so you are taking in more information per second.

So, you are boosting that part of the creative process. Norepinephrine and dopamine do something else in the brain, which lowers the signal-to-noise ratio, so you detect more patterns. They jack up pattern recognition, so our ability to link ideas together is also enhanced.

Taking in more information, we can link it together. Anandamide, which is another chemical that shows up in flow, doesn't just promote pattern recognition. It promotes lateral thinking. So, pattern recognition is the linking of familiar ideas together.

Lateral thinking is the linking of very disparate ideas together. So, more information per second, all kinds of pattern recognition, and lateral thinking. All of it surrounds the creative process and amplifies all of it, which is why, for example, studies run by the organization,

Flow Genome Project, found that creativity has increased from 500 to 700 percent. To give another example, in a recent Australian study, they took 42 people, gave them a very tricky brainteaser to solve, the kind that needs very creative problem-solving. Nobody could solve the problem.

They induced flow artificially using transcranial magnetic stimulation to basically knock out the prefrontal cortex. They induced artificial transient hypo-frontality technically. As a result, 23 people solved the problem in record time. So, massively amplified motivation, massively amplified creativity. The last thing flow does that's important is it jacks up learning. So, a quick shorthand for how learning works is the more neurochemicals that show up during experience, the better chance that experience has of moving from short-term holding into long-term storage.

Neurochemicals, among their many other functions, one of them is tagging experiences. A sign telling us this experience or sign is really important, save for later, because flow is this giant neurochemical dump. It massively amplifies learning. So, in studies run by DARPA and researchers at Advanced Brain Monitoring in California, when they introduced flow artificially this time, using neurofeedback in soldiers, marksmen to be exact, they found that soldiers in a flow state learn to shoot 230 percent faster than normal. When they redid this study using novice marksmen, they did it with riflemen and archers. What they discovered is that the period it takes to train a novice archer or novice marksman up to the expert level when they're in flow can be cut in half. So, Malcolm Gladwell's famous 10,000 hours to mastery, what the research shows is that flow state cuts that time in half.