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MIND BREW

Office of Student Success

Building up and going with the flow: How we can build flow state

THE LEARNING SPECIALIST TEAM

Athletes commonly share a feeling of being "in the zone". A state of complete concentration and automaticity. The state of "flow" was first proposed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

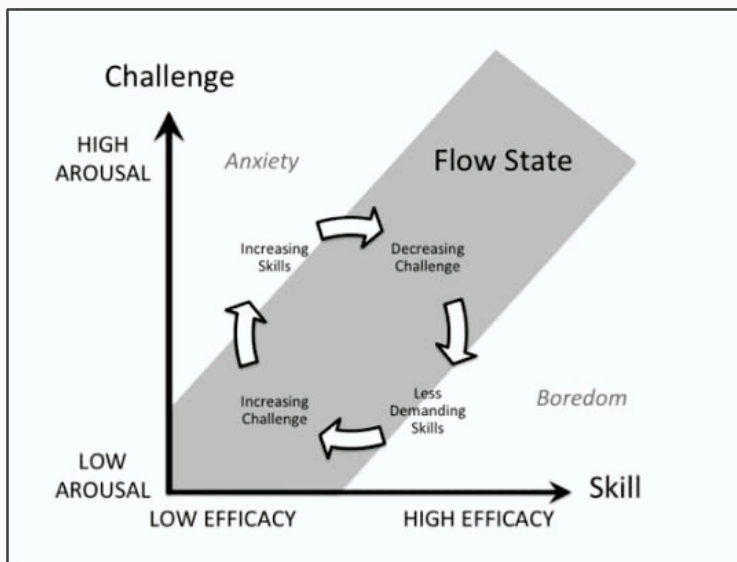
Flow is a highly enjoyable psychological state that refers to the holistic sensation people feel when they act with total involvement with an activity. While in this state, people will often report losing awareness of time, their surroundings, and all other things except the activity itself (Kowal & Fortier, 1999).

Research within fields such as education, sport, and work demonstrated the necessary components to entering a flow state. Unsurprisingly, to enter a flow state you must inherently enjoy what you are doing (intrinsic motivation). Intrinsic motivation is likely to increase with a sense of self-efficacy. According to self-determination theory, people's need for autonomy and competence correlate with motivation levels. Those high in autonomy and competence will produce the intrinsic motivation to develop the necessary skills to accomplish a goal. However, just having self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation isn't enough to enter flow state.

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"There is no inherent problem in our desire to escalate our goals, as long as we enjoy the struggle along the way."

MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI



If we examine the flow state chart pictured above, self-efficacy is just one critical component. Appropriate goal-orientation and task-challenge are needed to produce a higher likelihood of flow state. If the task is too simple, there is little cognitive arousal to stimulate flow. If the challenge is too daunting, performance anxiety can be induced and over-monitoring of the activity can lead to decreased performance.

So where does this tie in with medical school performance? Flow state builds automaticity. When we engage in flow we switch from a slower top-down processing to a faster bottom-up processing even on more complex tasks (Dietrich & Hader, 2017). On a neurobiological level, flow has been linked to the release of norepinephrine, dopamine, anandamide, and serotonin. The outcome of this combination has been found to increase rapid-fire problem solving and lateral thinking.

By increasing flow state, we are able to engage in a higher level of performance on complex tasks in a more efficient manner. As you continue building your medical knowledge and clinical skills, remember that inherently enjoying the process and going with the flow can enhance your experience.

For more strategies and tips, please email your assigned learning specialist.

References

- Dietrich, A., & Haider, H. (2017). A neurocognitive framework for human creative thought. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, 2078.
- Kowal, J., & Fortier, M. S. (1999). Motivational determinants of flow: Contributions from self-determination theory. *The journal of social psychology*, 139(3), 355-368.

Cognitive Science in Media

Understanding Flow State and How to Induce It (7 Minute Podcast)



The Art of Impossible (The Accidental Creative)



Check out our brand new Office of Student Success Podcast Mind Brew! Episode 2: Flow State

