

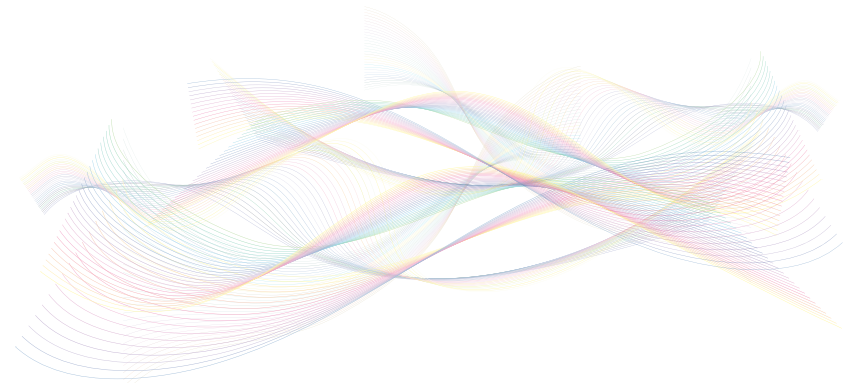
The Problem:

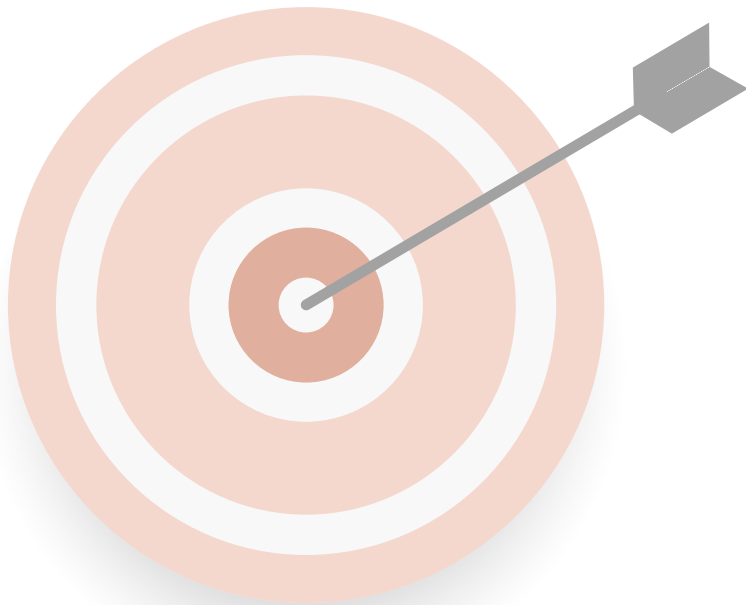
The very technologies and activities that allow for our high degree of productivity and fulfillment can, in turn, produce the opposite results-- distraction and overwhelm. These states can pose a huge drain on our energy and a roadblock to our fulfillment. Low motivation and an ever expanding to-do list only snowball to the point that it becomes hard to see a way out.



The Solution:

One particularly effective way to break this cycle and exit a rut is through accessing the state of flow. Do you ever become so engaged in an activity that the rest of the world fades away? You lose track of time and become fully immersed in what you are doing. During these particularly lucid moments you experienced heightened focus and creativity. This usually stems from doing something you love, or becoming so engrossed in a challenging project or problem, that any incremental momentum you achieve keeps propelling you forward. This state, is what Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi coined: *the state of flow*.





The Power of Flow

In his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Dr. Csikszentmihalyi states that flow occurs “when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a ***voluntary*** effort to accomplish something difficult or worthwhile.”

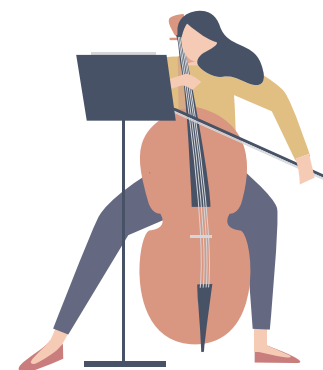
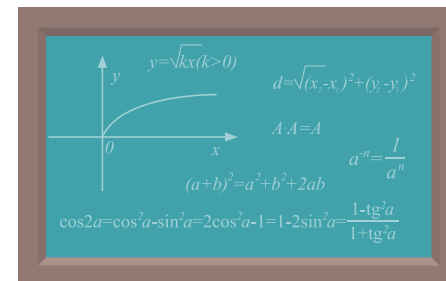
In a world driven by productivity yet laden with distraction, channeling the flow state is a key competitive advantage. It's a pathway to attaining personal achievement *while* maintaining well being. In the flow state, your focus is fully committed to the task at hand. Flow allows you to channel your energy towards meaningful tasks *at peak efficiency*.

On average, a person can process 126 bits of information per second. Within the flow state, your focus is so concentrated you are directing full processing power to the task at hand. This is why it seems like the rest of the world fades away-- it actually does. Your mind is not processing the extraneous stimuli you would otherwise pick up in a less-focused state.

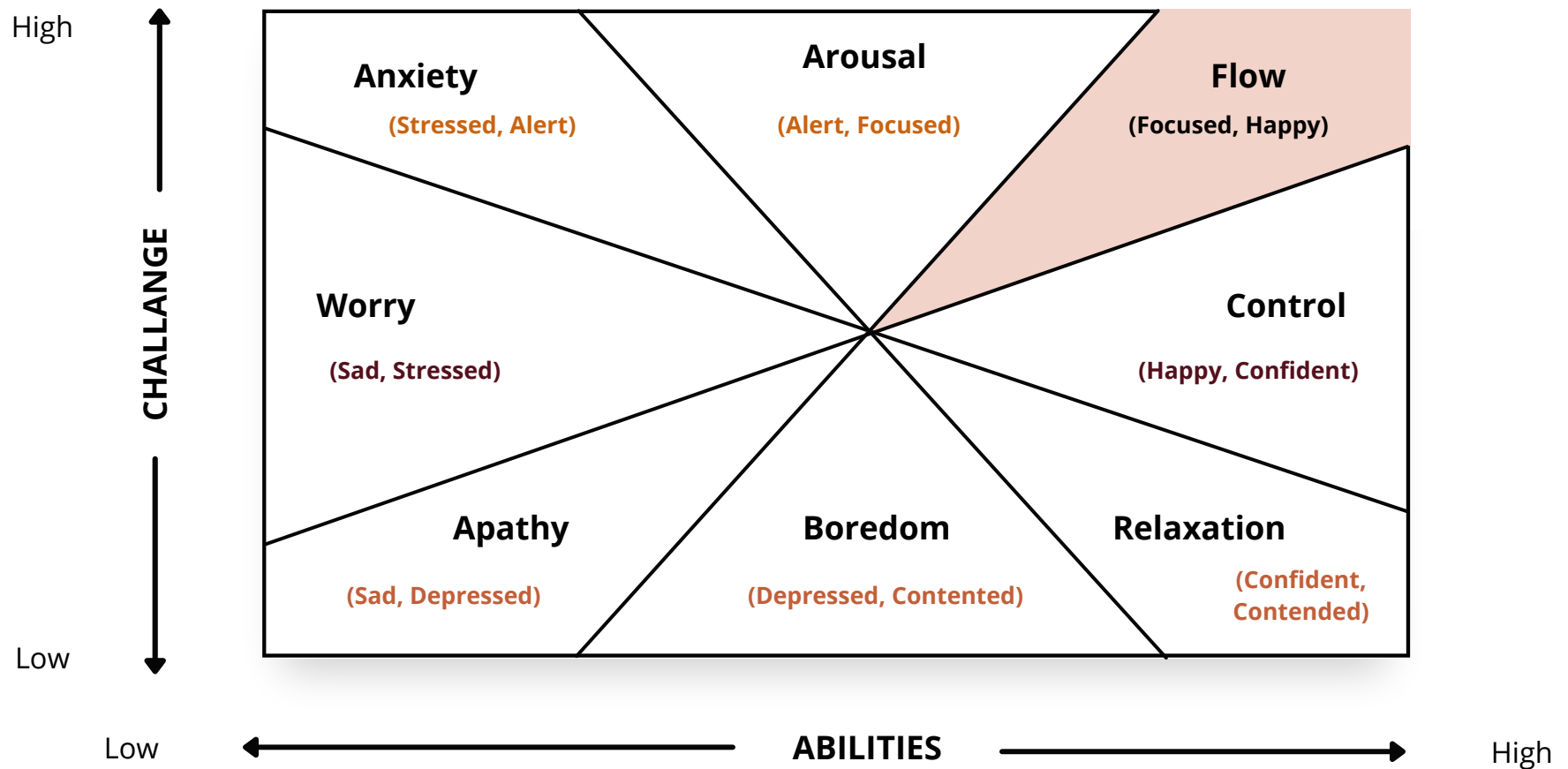
While we may be inclined to think that it's the passive, relaxing & receptive moments that we crave and that matter the most to us, it is actually the fully engaged moments that make us "tick".

When we voluntarily stretch our physical or mental limits, by channeling our energy into a fully optimized and focused state, we are able to accomplish our goals and make the relaxed and receptive moments all the more sweeter.

In many ways, the flow state is similar, or even synonymous with mindfulness. It's giving your full attention to the moment and task at hand, and not worrying about anything else. ***This creates room for your energy and creativity to surge.***



Dr. Csikszentmihalyi developed a visual model of the flow state, and how it correlates to challenge and ability. On either end of the spectrum are anxiety and apathy. Both are suboptimal and finding yourself in one of those states indicates that you need to adjust either your skill level or challenge level, in order to approach a task from a state of flow.



The Seven Conditions for Achieving Flow

from Owen Schaffer, Researcher at DePaul University



1

Knowing what to do

Knowing how to do it

2



3

Knowing how well you are doing

Knowing where to go
(when navigation is involved)

4



5

Perceiving significant challenges



6

Perceiving significant skills



7

Being free from distractions



Think of a challenge you've been struggling to overcome or task that's been difficult to complete. Write this challenge in the space below.

Now, consider which conditions are needed to tackle this challenge from a state of flow. Use the space below to evaluate.

Unlocking the Flow State

Below are six simple, yet highly effective steps to aid you in accessing the flow state. *Adapted from "6 Steps For Getting Into Flow State and Maximizing Productivity" by Thanh Pham, Founder of Asian Efficiency*

Step 1: Create A Flow State Ritual

We've already discussed how **positive rituals** can help align your day-to-day life with your values and purpose. They can also be used to prompt entry into the flow state. Your flow state ritual can be as simple as a 10 minute meditation or clearing off your workspace to minimize distraction. It can be any action or series of actions that promotes the focused, single-track mindset of the flow state, and serves as a trigger of sorts for your body to recognize that it is time to focus.

Use the space below to write down examples of rituals you could leverage to access the state of flow:

Novelist Neal Stephenson, author of spectacularly long books, helpfully puts it this way:

"The productivity equation is a non-linear one...This accounts for why I am a bad correspondent and rarely accept speaking engagements. If I organize my life in such a way that I get lots of long, consecutive, uninterrupted time chunks [aka flow state], I can write novels. But as those chunks get separated and fragmented, my productivity as a novelist drops spectacularly."

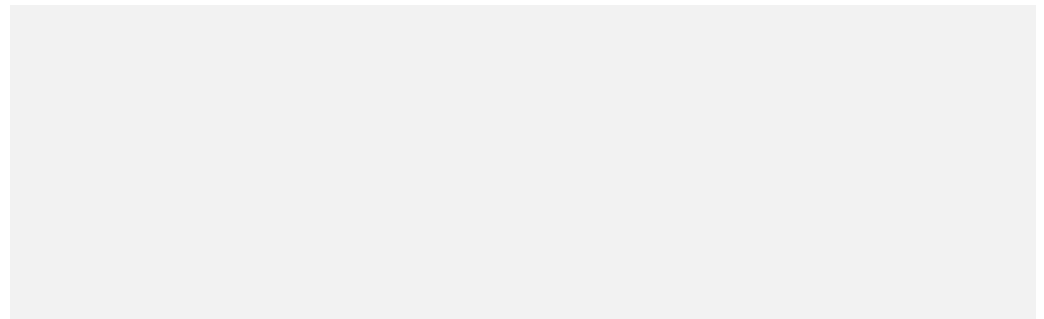
Step 2: Choose your most important task

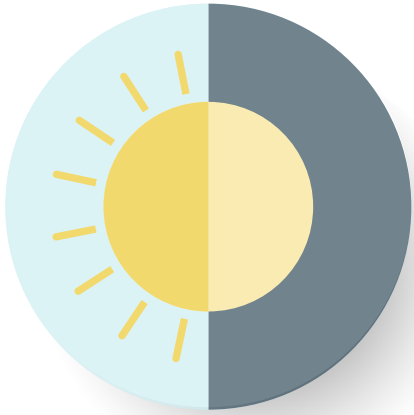
You don't want to waste the flow state on trivial tasks like answering emails or browsing social media. You want to channel the enhanced focus and energy towards something that's truly important for your life or career.

This is where the "eat your frog" technique comes into play. "Eating your frog" is a term coined by Brian Tracy, and refers to focusing on and completing your most important task first thing every day. This ensures that you make meaningful progress on important projects each day.

This technique sets the stage for enhanced focus and energy because it places the stakes of the task you need to complete, front and center. You know that by working on that task you are working towards a meaningful achievement in your day.

What is one task you can use the "eat your frog" technique on within the next week?





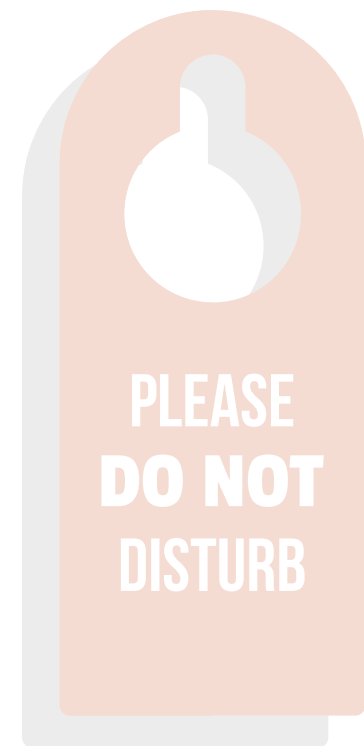
Step 3: Identify Your Peak Creative and Productive Time

It is difficult to enter the flow state- to focus or be creative- when you are tired and have low energy. Leverage the results of the **energy ebb and flow cycle exercise** to determine when your peak creative and productive time of the day is. Target flow sessions around that time.

Step 4: Eliminate All Distractions

The flow state is somewhat fragile. Simple distractions can easily yank you out of it, which is why it is so important to eliminate all possible distractions to the best of your ability.

Of course, oftentimes life simply doesn't allow extensive, never mind workday-long, periods of isolated focus. Neither does the brain's capacity (which is discussed in the next step). This is why, when you do have the opportunity to set aside time to enter into flow, you should attempt to eliminate any distractions as best you can.





Step 5: Set A Pomodoro Timer

As noted above, you can't maintain the flow state indefinitely. Your brain can't sustain it and your schedule may not allow it. The Pomodoro technique is an excellent tool to set a starting and ending point to your flow sessions, and allow for the brain to receive necessary rest and rejuvenation following periods of deep focus.

The Pomodoro technique consists of 25 minute work sessions followed by a 5 minute break. Ideally, your flow sessions would consist of four Pomodoros (approximately 90-120 minutes of work and 15-20 minutes of brief breaks), followed by a longer break which may cause you to exit the flow state. This is why it is recommended you complete at least four Pomodoros before taking a longer break, which could disrupt your flow.

Step 6: Keep Practicing

At first, it may be difficult to enter and sustain the flow state, especially if you are accustomed to multitasking and constantly switching from task to task and focus to focus. The key is starting small, with a simple goal of entering the flow state for 15 or 20 minutes. During these initial sessions, your mind may wander, and you may be tempted to check email or social media.

Don't give in to the temptation.

In many ways, focus is like a muscle. The more you use it, the stronger it becomes and the easier it is for you to enter the flow state. Don't be discouraged if you can't access a 90 minute flow from the start. With practice your ability to focus will build, as will the benefits of harnessing that focus to complete difficult and important tasks in your life.

