

The Content of Experience

We have seen that work, maintenance, and leisure take up most of our psychic energy. But one person might love work and the other hate it; one person might enjoy free time and the other be bored when there is nothing to do. So while what we do day in and day out has a lot to do with what kind of life we have, how we experience what we do is even more important.

Emotions are in some respect the most subjective elements of consciousness, since it is only the person himself or herself who can tell whether he or she truly experiences love, shame, gratitude, or happiness. Yet an emotion is also the most objective content of the mind, because the "gut feeling" we experience when we are in love, or ashamed, or scared, or happy, is generally more real to us than what we observe in the world outside, or whatever we learn from science or logic. Thus we often find ourselves in the paradoxical posi-

tion of being like behavioral psychologists when we look at other people, discounting what they say and trusting only what they do; whereas when we look at ourselves we are like phenomenologists, taking our inner feelings more seriously than outside events or overt actions.

Psychologists have identified up to nine basic emotions that can reliably be identified by facial expressions among people living in very different cultures; thus it seems that just as all humans can see and can speak, so they also share a common set of feeling states. But to simplify as much as possible, one can say that all emotions share in a basic duality: they are either positive and attractive, or they are negative and repulsive. It is because of this simple feature that emotions help us choose what should be good for us. A baby is attracted to a human face, and is happy when she sees her mother, because it helps her bond with a caretaker. We feel pleasure when eating, or when with a member of the opposite sex, because the species would not survive if we didn't seek out food and sex. We feel an instinctive revulsion at the sight of snakes, insects, rotten smells, darkness—all things that in the evolutionary past might have presented serious dangers to survival.

In addition to the simple genetically wired emotions, humans have developed a great number of more subtle and tender, as well as debased, feelings. The evolution of self-reflective consciousness has allowed our race to "toy" with feelings, to fake or manipulate feelings in ways that no other animal can. The songs, dances, masks of our ancestors evoked dread and awe, joy and intoxication. Horror movies, drugs, and music do the same thing now. But originally emotions served as signals about the outside world; now they are often detached from any real object, to be indulged in for their own sake.

Happiness is the prototype of the positive emotions. As many a thinker since Aristotle has said, everything we do is ultimately aimed at experiencing happiness. We don't really want wealth, or health, or fame as such—we want these things

because we hope that they will make us happy. But happiness we seek not because it will get us something else, but for its own sake. If happiness is really the bottom line of life, what do we know about it?

Until mid-century, psychologists were reluctant to study happiness because the reigning behaviorist paradigm in the social sciences held that subjective emotions were too flimsy to be proper subjects of scientific research. But as the "dust-bowl empiricism" in academia has cleared in the last few decades so that the importance of subjective experiences could again be recognized, the study of happiness has been pursued with renewed vigor.

What has been learned is both familiar and surprising. It is surprising, for instance, that despite problems and tragedies, all over the world people tend to describe themselves as much more happy than unhappy. In America, typically one-third of respondents from representative samples say that they are "very happy," and only one in ten that they are "not too happy." The majority rate themselves above the halfway mark, as "pretty happy." Similar results are reported from dozens of other countries. How can this be, when thinkers through the ages, reflecting on how short and painful life can be, have always told us that the world is a vale of tears, and we were not made to be happy? Perhaps the reason for the discrepancy is that prophets and philosophers tend to be perfectionists, and the imperfections of life offend them. Whereas the rest of humankind is glad to be alive, imperfections and all.

Of course there is a more pessimistic explanation, namely, that when people say they are pretty happy they are deceiving either the researcher who is taking the poll, or more likely, they are whistling in the dark. After all, Karl Marx has accustomed us to think that a factory worker can feel he is perfectly happy, but this subjective happiness is a self-deception that means nothing because objectively the worker is alienated by the system that exploits his labor. Jean-Paul

Sartre has told us that most people live with "false consciousness," pretending even to themselves that they are living in the best of all possible worlds. More recently Michel Foucault and the postmodernists have made it clear that what people tell us does not reflect real events, but only a style of narrative, a way of talking that refers only to itself. While these critiques of self-perception illuminate important issues that have to be recognized, they also suffer from the intellectual arrogance of scholars who believe their interpretations of reality should take precedence over the direct experience of the multitude. The profound doubts of Marx, Sartre, and Foucault notwithstanding, I still think that when a person says he is "pretty happy," one has no right to ignore his statement, or interpret it to mean the opposite.

Another set of familiar yet surprising findings has to do with the relationship between material well-being and happiness. As one would expect, people who live in nations that are materially better off and politically more stable rate themselves happier (e.g., the Swiss and Norwegians say they are happier than Greeks and Portuguese)—but not always (e.g., the poorer Irish claim to be happier than the wealthier Japanese). But within the same society there is only a very weak relationship between finances and satisfaction with life; billionaires in America are only infinitesimally happier than those with average incomes. And while personal income in the U.S. more than doubled between 1960 and the 1990s in constant dollars, the proportion of people saying they are very happy remained a steady 30 percent. One conclusion that the findings seem to justify is that beyond the threshold of poverty, additional resources do not appreciably improve the chances of being happy.

A number of personal qualities are related to how happy people describe themselves to be. For instance, a healthy extrovert with strong self-esteem, a stable marriage, and religious faith will be much more likely to say he is happy than a chronically ill, introverted, and divorced atheist with low

self-esteem. It is in looking at these clusters of relationships that the skepticism of the postmodernist critique might make sense. It is likely, for instance, that a healthy, religious person will construct a "happier" narrative about his or her life than one who is not, regardless of the actual quality of experience. But since we always encounter the "raw" data of experience through interpretive filters, the stories we tell about how we feel are an essential part of our emotions. A woman who says she is happy to work two jobs to keep a roof over her children's head is probably in fact happier than a woman who doesn't see why she should have to bother with even a single job.

But happiness is certainly not the only emotion worth considering. In fact, if one wants to improve the quality of everyday life, happiness may be the wrong place to start. In the first place, self-reports of happiness do not vary from person to person as much as other feelings do; no matter how empty a life otherwise might be, most persons will be reluctant to admit being unhappy. Furthermore, this emotion is more a personal characteristic than a situational one. In other words, over time some people come to think of themselves as happy regardless of external conditions, while others will become used to feeling relatively less happy no matter what happens to them. Other feelings are much more influenced by what one does, who one is with, or the place one happens to be. These moods are more amenable to direct change, and because they are also connected to how happy we feel, in the long run they might lift our average level of happiness.

For instance, how active, strong, and alert we feel depends a lot on what we do—these feelings become more intense when we are involved with a difficult task, and they get more attenuated when we fail at what we try to do, or when we don't try to do anything. So these feelings can be directly affected by what we choose to do. When we feel active and strong we are also more likely to feel happy, so that in time

the choice of what we do will also affect our happiness. Similarly most people feel they are more cheerful and sociable when they are with others than when they are alone. Again, cheerfulness and sociability are related to happiness, which probably explains why extroverts on the average tend to be happier than introverts.

The quality of life does not depend on happiness alone, but also on what one does to be happy. If one fails to develop goals that give meaning to one's existence, if one does not use the mind to its fullest, then good feelings fulfill just a fraction of the potential we possess. A person who achieves contentment by withdrawing from the world to "cultivate his own garden," like Voltaire's *Candide*, cannot be said to lead an excellent life. Without dreams, without risks, only a trivial semblance of living can be achieved.

Emotions refer to the internal states of consciousness. Negative emotions like sadness, fear, anxiety, or boredom produce "psychic entropy" in the mind, that is, a state in which we cannot use attention effectively to deal with external tasks, because we need it to restore an inner subjective order. Positive emotions like happiness, strength, or alertness are states of "psychic negentropy" because we don't need attention to ruminate and feel sorry for ourselves, and psychic energy can flow freely into whatever thought or task we choose to invest it in.

When we choose to invest attention in a given task, we say that we have formed an intention, or set a goal for ourselves. How long and how intensely we stick by our goals is a function of motivation. Therefore intentions, goals, and motivations are also manifestations of psychic negentropy. They focus psychic energy, establish priorities, and thus create order in consciousness. Without them mental processes become random, and feelings tend to deteriorate rapidly.

Goals are usually arranged in a hierarchy, from trivial ones, like getting to the corner store to buy some ice cream,

to risking one's life for the country. In the course of an average day, about one-third of the time people will say that they do what they do because they wanted to do it, one-third because they had to do it, and the last third because they had nothing better to do. These proportions vary by age, gender, and activity: children feel they have more choice than their fathers, and men more than their wives; whatever a person does at home is perceived to be more voluntary than at work.

Quite a bit of evidence shows that whereas people feel best when what they do is voluntary, they do not feel worst when what they do is obligatory. Psychic entropy is highest instead when persons feel that what they do is motivated by not having anything else to do. Thus both intrinsic motivation (wanting to do it) and extrinsic motivation (having to do it) are preferable to the state where one acts by default, without having any kind of goal to focus attention. The large part of life many people experience as being thus unmotivated leaves a great deal of room for improvement.

Intentions focus psychic energy in the short run, whereas goals tend to be more long-term, and eventually it is the goals that we pursue that will shape and determine the kind of self that we are to become. What makes Mother Theresa the nun radically different from Madonna the singer are the goals into which they have invested their attention throughout their lives. Without a consistent set of goals, it is difficult to develop a coherent self. It is through the patterned investment of psychic energy provided by goals that one creates order in experience. This order, which manifests itself in predictable actions, emotions, and choices, in time becomes recognizable as a more or less unique "self."

The goals one endorses also determine one's self-esteem. As William James pointed out over a hundred years ago, self-esteem depends on the ratio of expectation to successes. A person may develop low self-esteem either because he sets his goals too high, or because he achieves too few successes. So it is not necessarily true that the person who achieves

most will have the highest self-esteem. Contrary to what one would expect, Asian-American students who get excellent grades tend to have lower self-esteem than other minorities who are academically less successful, because proportionately their goals are set even higher than their success. Mothers who work full-time have lower self-esteem than mothers who do not work at all, because although they accomplish more, their expectations still outpace their achievements. From this it follows that contrary to popular wisdom, increasing children's self-esteem is not always a good idea—especially if it is achieved by lowering their expectations.

There are other misconceptions concerning intentions and goals. For instance, some point out that Eastern religions, such as the various forms of Hinduism and Buddhism, prescribe the abolition of intentionality as a prerequisite for happiness. They claim that only by relinquishing every desire, by achieving a goalless existence, can we hope to avoid unhappiness. This line of thought has influenced many young people in Europe and America to attempt to reject all goals, in the belief that only completely spontaneous and random behavior leads to an enlightened life.

In my opinion this reading of the Eastern message is rather superficial. After all, to try abolishing desire is itself a tremendously difficult and ambitious goal. Most of us are so thoroughly programmed with genetic and cultural desires that it takes an act of almost superhuman will to still them all. Those who expect that by being spontaneous they will avoid setting goals, usually just follow blindly the goals set down for them by instincts and education. They often end up being so mean, lecherous, and prejudiced as to stand a good Buddhist monk's hair on end.

The true message of the Eastern religions, it seems to me, is not the abolition of all goals. What they tell us is that most intentions we form spontaneously are to be mistrusted. To make sure that we survive in a dangerous world dominated by scarcity, our genes have programmed us to be greedy, to

want power, to dominate over others. For the same reason, the social group into which we are born teaches us that only those who share our language and religion are to be trusted. The inertia of the past dictates that most of our goals will be shaped by genetic or by cultural inheritance. It is these goals, the Buddhists tell us, that we must learn to curb. But this aim requires very strong motivation. Paradoxically, the goal of rejecting programmed goals might require the constant investment of all one's psychic energy. A Yogi or a Buddhist monk needs every ounce of attention to keep programmed desires from irrupting into consciousness, and thus have little psychic energy left free to do anything else. Thus the praxis of the religions of the East is almost the opposite of how it has usually been interpreted in the West.

Learning to manage one's goals is an important step in achieving excellence in everyday life. To do so, however, does not involve either the extreme of spontaneity on the one hand, or compulsive control on the other. The best solution might be to understand the roots of one's motivation, and while recognizing the biases involved in one's desires, in all humbleness to choose goals that will provide order in one's consciousness without causing too much disorder in the social or material environment. To try for less than this is to forfeit the chance of developing your potential, and to try for much more is to set yourself up for defeat.

The third content of consciousness are cognitive mental operations. Thinking is such a complex subject that it is entirely out of the question to deal with it systematically here—instead it makes sense to simplify the subject so that we can talk about it in relation to everyday life. What we call thinking is also a process whereby psychic energy gets ordered. Emotions focus attention by mobilizing the entire organism in an approach or an avoidance mode. Goals do it by providing images of desired outcomes. Thoughts order attention by

producing sequences of images that are related to each other in some meaningful way.

For instance, one of the most basic mental operations consists in the linking of cause and effect. How this begins in a person's life can be easily observed when an infant first discovers that by moving her hand she can ring the bell hanging over the crib. This simple connection is the paradigm on which much of later thinking is based. With time, however, the steps from causes to effects become increasingly more abstract and removed from concrete reality. An electrician, a musical composer, a stockbroker consider simultaneously hundreds of possible connections between the symbols on which they are operating in their minds—watts and ohms, notes and beats, the buying and selling prices of stocks.

By now it is probably apparent that emotions, intentions, and thoughts do not pass through consciousness as separate strands of experience, but that they are constantly interconnected, and modify each other as they go along. A young man falls in love with a girl, and experiences all the typical emotions that love implies. He intends to win her heart, and begins to think of how to reach this goal. He figures that getting himself a snazzy new car will win the girl's attention. So now the goal of earning money to buy a new car becomes embedded in the goal of wooing—but having to work more may interfere with going fishing and produce negative emotions, which generate new thoughts, which in turn may bring the boy's goals in line with his emotions . . . the stream of experience always carries many such bits of information concurrently.

To pursue mental operations to any depth, a person has to learn to concentrate attention. Without focus, consciousness is in a state of chaos. The normal condition of the mind is one of informational disorder: random thoughts chase one another instead of lining up in logical causal sequences. Unless one learns to concentrate, and is able to invest the effort, thoughts will scatter without reaching any conclusion. Even

daydreaming—that is, the linking together of pleasant images to create some sort of mental motion picture—requires the ability to concentrate, and apparently many children never learn to control their attention sufficiently to be able to daydream.

Concentration requires more effort when it goes against the grain of emotions and motivations. A student who hates math will have a hard time focusing attention on a calculus textbook long enough to absorb the information it contains, and it will take strong incentives (such as wanting to pass the course) for him to do so. Usually the more difficult a mental task, the harder it is to concentrate on it. But when a person likes what he does and is motivated to do it, focusing the mind becomes effortless even when the objective difficulties are great.

Generally, when the issue of thinking comes up, most people assume it must have to do with intelligence. They are interested in individual differences in thinking, such as: "What's my IQ?" or: "He is a genius at math." Intelligence refers to a variety of mental processes; for instance, how easily one can represent and manipulate quantities in the mind, or how sensitive one is to information indexed in words. But as Howard Gardner has shown, it is possible to extend the concept of intelligence to include the ability to differentiate and to use all kinds of information, including muscle sensations, sounds, feelings, and visual shapes. Some children are born with an above-average sensitivity to sound. They can discriminate tones and pitches better than others, and as they grow up they learn to recognize notes and produce harmonies more easily than their peers. Similarly small advantages at the beginning of life can develop into large differences in visual, athletic, or mathematical abilities.

But innate talents cannot develop into a mature intelligence unless a person learns to control attention. Only through extensive investments of psychic energy can a child with musical gifts turn into a musician, or a mathematically

gifted child into an engineer or physicist. It takes much effort to absorb the knowledge and the skills that are needed to do the mental operations an adult professional is supposed to perform. Mozart was a prodigy and a genius, but if his father hadn't forced him to practice as soon as he was out of diapers, it is doubtful his talent would have blossomed as it did. By learning to concentrate, a person acquires control over psychic energy, the basic fuel upon which all thinking depends.

In everyday life, it is rare for the different contents of experience to be in synchrony with each other. At work my attention might be focused, because the boss gave me a job to do that requires intense thinking. But this particular job is not one I ordinarily would want to do, so I am not very motivated intrinsically. At the same time, I am distracted by feelings of anxiety about my teenage son's erratic behavior. So while part of my mind is concentrated on the task, I am not completely involved in it. It is not that my mind is in total chaos, but there is quite a bit of entropy in my consciousness—thoughts, emotions, and intentions come into focus and then disappear, producing contrary impulses, and pulling my attention in different directions. Or, to consider another example, I may enjoy a drink with friends after work, but I feel guilty about not going home to the family and mad at myself for wasting time and money.

Neither of these scenarios is particularly unusual. Everyday life is full of them: rarely do we feel the serenity that comes when heart, will, and mind are on the same page. Conflicting desires, intentions, and thoughts jostle each other in consciousness, and we are helpless to keep them in line.

But now let us consider some alternatives. Imagine, for instance, that you are skiing down a slope and your full attention is focused on the movements of the body, the position of the skis, the air whistling past your face, and the snow-

shrouded trees running by. There is no room in your awareness for conflicts or contradictions; you know that a distracting thought or emotion might get you buried facedown in the snow. And who wants to get distracted? The run is so perfect that all you want is for it to last forever, to immerse yourself completely in the experience.

If skiing does not mean much to you, substitute your favorite activity for this vignette. It could be singing in a choir, programming a computer, dancing, playing bridge, reading a good book. Or if you love your job, as many people do, it could be when you are getting immersed in a complicated surgical operation or a close business deal. Or this complete immersion in the activity may occur in a social interaction, as when good friends talk with each other, or when a mother plays with her baby. What is common to such moments is that consciousness is full of experiences, and these experiences are in harmony with each other. Contrary to what happens all too often in everyday life, in moments such as these what we feel, what we wish, and what we think are in harmony.

These exceptional moments are what I have called *flow experiences*. The metaphor of "flow" is one that many people have used to describe the sense of effortless action they feel in moments that stand out as the best in their lives. Athletes refer to it as "being in the zone," religious mystics as being in "ecstasy," artists and musicians as aesthetic rapture. Athletes, mystics, and artists do very different things when they reach flow, yet their descriptions of the experience are remarkably similar.

Flow tends to occur when a person faces a clear set of goals that require appropriate responses. It is easy to enter flow in games such as chess, tennis, or poker, because they have goals and rules for action that make it possible for the player to act without questioning what should be done, and how. For the duration of the game the player lives in a self-contained universe where everything is black and white. The

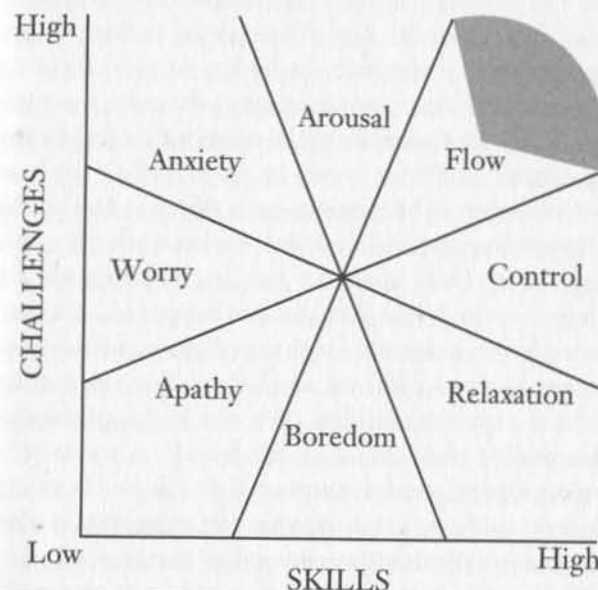
same clarity of goals is present if you perform a religious ritual, play a musical piece, weave a rug, write a computer program, climb a mountain, or perform surgery. Activities that induce flow could be called "flow activities" because they make it more likely for the experience to occur. In contrast to normal life, flow activities allow a person to focus on goals that are clear and compatible.

Another characteristic of flow activities is that they provide immediate feedback. They make it clear how well you are doing. After each move of a game you can tell whether you have improved your position or not. With each step, the climber knows that he has inched higher. After each bar of a song you can hear whether the notes you sang matched the score. The weaver can see whether the last row of stitches fits the pattern of the tapestry as it should. The surgeon can see as she cuts whether the knife has avoided cutting any arteries, or whether there is sudden bleeding. On the job or at home we might go for long periods without a clue as to how we stand, while in flow we can usually tell.

Flow tends to occur when a person's skills are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable. Optimal experiences usually involve a fine balance between one's ability to act, and the available opportunities for action (see figure 1). If challenges are too high one gets frustrated, then worried, and eventually anxious. If challenges are too low relative to one's skills one gets relaxed, then bored. If both challenges and skills are perceived to be low, one gets to feel apathetic. But when high challenges are matched with high skills, then the deep involvement that sets flow apart from ordinary life is likely to occur. The climber will feel it when the mountain demands all his strength, the singer when the song demands the full range of her vocal ability, the weaver when the design of the tapestry is more complex than anything attempted before, and the surgeon when the operation involves new procedures or requires an unexpected variation. A typical day is full of anxiety and

Figure 1

The quality of experience as a function of the relationship between challenges and skills. Optimal experience, or flow, occurs when both variables are high.



Sources: Adapted from Massimini & Carli 1988; Csikszentmihalyi 1990.

boredom. Flow experiences provide the flashes of intense living against this dull background.

When goals are clear, feedback relevant, and challenges and skills are in balance, attention becomes ordered and fully invested. Because of the total demand on psychic energy, a person in flow is completely focused. There is no space in consciousness for distracting thoughts, irrelevant feelings. Self-consciousness disappears, yet one feels stronger than usual. The sense of time is distorted: hours seem to pass by in minutes. When a person's entire being is stretched in the full

functioning of body and mind, whatever one does becomes worth doing for its own sake; living becomes its own justification. In the harmonious focusing of physical and psychic energy, life finally comes into its own.

It is the full involvement of flow, rather than happiness, that makes for excellence in life. When we are in flow, we are not happy, because to experience happiness we must focus on our inner states, and that would take away attention from the task at hand. If a rock climber takes time out to feel happy while negotiating a difficult move, he might fall to the bottom of the mountain. The surgeon can't afford to feel happy during a demanding operation, or a musician while playing a challenging score. Only after the task is completed do we have the leisure to look back on what has happened, and then we are flooded with gratitude for the excellence of that experience—then, in retrospect, we are happy. But one can be happy without experiencing flow. We can be happy experiencing the passive pleasure of a rested body, a warm sunshine, the contentment of a serene relationship. These are also moments to treasure, but this kind of happiness is very vulnerable and dependent on favorable external circumstances. The happiness that follows flow is of our own making, and it leads to increasing complexity and growth in consciousness.

The graph in figure 1 can also be read to indicate why flow leads to personal growth. Suppose a person is in the area marked "Arousal" on the graph. This is not a bad condition to be in; in arousal a person feels mentally focused, active, and involved—but not very strong, cheerful, or in control. How can one return to the more enjoyable flow state? The answer is obvious: by learning new skills. Or let us look at the area labeled "Control." This is also a positive state of experience, where one feels happy, strong, satisfied. But one tends to lack concentration, involvement, and a feeling that what one does is important. So how does one get back to flow? By increasing challenges. Thus arousal and control are very im-

portant states for learning. The other conditions are less favorable. When a person is anxious or worried, for example, the step to flow often seems too far, and one retreats to a less challenging situation instead of trying to cope.

Thus the flow experience acts as a magnet for learning—that is, for developing new levels of challenges and skills. In an ideal situation, a person would be constantly growing while enjoying whatever he or she did. Alas, we know this is not the case. Usually we feel too bored and apathetic to move into the flow zone, so we prefer to fill our mind with ready-made, prepackaged stimulation off the video shelf or some other kind of professional entertainment. Or we feel too overwhelmed to imagine we could develop the appropriate skills, so we prefer to descend into the apathy engendered by artificial relaxants like drugs or alcohol. It takes energy to achieve optimal experiences, and all too often we are unable, or unwilling, to put out the initial effort.

How often do people experience flow? That depends on whether we are willing to count even mild approximations of the ideal condition as instances of flow. For example, if one asks a sample of typical Americans: "Do you ever get involved in something so deeply that nothing else seems to matter, and you lose track of time?" roughly one in five will say that yes, this happens to them often, as much as several times a day; whereas about 15 percent will say that no, this never happens to them. These frequencies seem to be quite stable and universal. For instance, in a recent survey of a representative sample of 6,469 Germans the same question was answered in the following way: Often, 23 percent; Sometimes, 40 percent; Rarely, 25 percent; Never or Don't Know, 12 percent. Of course if one were to count only the most intense and exalted flow experiences, then their frequency would be much more rare.

Flow is generally reported when a person is doing his or her favorite activity—gardening, listening to music, bowling, cooking a good meal. It also occurs when driving, when talk-

ing to friends, and surprisingly often at work. Very rarely do people report flow in passive leisure activities, such as watching television or relaxing. But because almost any activity can produce flow provided the relevant elements are present, it is possible to improve the quality of life by making sure that clear goals, immediate feedback, skills balanced to action opportunities, and the remaining conditions of flow are as much as possible a constant part of everyday life.