

Title:

Going With "The Flow"

Word Count:

657

Summary:

Flow state, that mysterious mental zone where time and the outside world seem to disappear, is one of the keys to peak performance. Frankly, your ability to harness the limits of your intelligence, creativity, education, or talents will be largely determined by your capacity to remain in flow while under stress.

Those who cannot suffer "stage fright," "writer's block" "flop sweat" and numerous other labels for the same phenomenon—inability to access the deepest wells of co...

Keywords:

writing, flow, novel, advice

Article Body:

Flow state, that mysterious mental zone where time and the outside world seem to disappear, is one of the keys to peak performance. Frankly, your ability to harness the limits of your intelligence, creativity, education, or talents will be largely determined by your capacity to remain in flow while under stress.

Those who cannot suffer "stage fright," "writer's block" "flop sweat" and numerous other labels for the same phenomenon—inability to access the deepest wells of confidence and performance in the actual arena.

The key to unlocking this particular inner vault is to look at the phenomenon of flow itself, separate from any specific usage or application.

We all experience the "flow" phenomenon. The last moments before we fall asleep or the first after awakening (also known as the "hypnagogic state") have this quality. Ever gotten on the freeway, lost yourself in thought, and only snapped out of it when your exit appeared? Flow. Gone running, dancing, or walking and found time dissolving, so that an hour felt like mere minutes? Flow. One exceptionally powerful "flow moment" would be the last few seconds leading up to orgasm, when it feels like the barriers between you and your lover are melting away.

All of these moments share something in common: they all deal with the

dissolution of the subject-object relationship. The painter melts into the canvas. The writer disappears into the book, the reader into the magazine, the lover into the beloved, the martial artist into the flow of throw and punch. We stop being aware of "ourselves" and begin to sense a connection between all the disparate parts of the activity, as if we are simultaneously stepping back for a wider view, and sinking inwards to a place of almost impossible intimacy.

It is a path to genius. One might take the position that the ability to hold flow under stress is the single greatest key of all high-performing human beings in any arena of life. What is talent, separate from the focus required to manifest it?

There are many disciplines that address flow: meditation, yoga, Tai Chi, prayer, etc. And there are tools that work terrifically well for familiarizing you with this state: sixty beat per minute Largo rhythm string music (Vivaldi is great!), hot baths, incense, massage, etc. Distance running or rhythmic walking, dance, gardening or cooking (for some people), playing music, painting, and numerous other activities touch this space. Just look for the moments when time vanishes.

One core technique, used worldwide in thousands of disciplines, is breath control. This is key because breathing is the only physiological process both voluntary and autonomic, and is thus a key to the unconscious mind. Learning to breathe slowly and deeply even under stress will de-inhibit the flow response, allowing you to access your deeper wisdom and creativity even when a project is due by noon, or the baby is screaming in the next room.

To take advantage of this fact,

- 1) Learn to breathe deep in your belly. Lay on your back, and put a book on your tummy. As you inhale, it should rise. Exhale, it should fall. Your chest should move as little as possible.

- 2) Five times a day, at every hour divisible by three (9, 12, 3, 6, 9) concentrate on your breathing for sixty seconds. Learn to do this while driving, sitting in meetings, standing in elevators, or walking down the street.

- 3) Place (or catch) yourself under moderate stress, and practice this breathing. For instance, in the middle of an exercise class, while public speaking, in the middle of an argument, while caught in bad traffic, while experiencing an anxiety attack. Learn to breathe calmly and deeply in such situations, and you re-pattern your nervous system's threat response, enabling you to calm yourself to enter flow.

There are certainly other methods, but this one, modification of breathing, has

worked for thousands of year and hundreds of millions of people. It will work for you, as well.