

THE
DAVIS FOUNDATION

FOR PROVIDING
EMOTIONAL COMFORT

Letter of March 24, 2004

Dear Reader,

Our goal in doing self-hypnosis is to achieve emotional comfort and our assumption is that this will make us happy, as well. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of *Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience*, has studied happiness for many years. A professor of psychology and management at Claremont Graduate University in California, and formerly Chairman of the Psychology Department at the University of Chicago, he and his colleagues have investigated the conditions that lead to enjoyment for many groups of people in varying circumstances. They have found that regardless of external circumstances individuals experience the most enjoyment when they are actively engaged in an activity in which the effort that is required matches the demand of the endeavor. If the challenge is insufficient (as when a game is too easy) an individual will be bored. If the skill level is insufficient to meet the challenge (as when a person is given an assignment he can't complete) that person will feel anxious. When the match is right, we enter a state of "flow," a condition in which our attention is directed fully to the activity. There is no room in our minds for extraneous thoughts; we even lose a sense of ourselves and of the passage of time, and the activity becomes effortless.

We may derive pleasure from many situations in which we are passive, but we will gain enjoyment, a greater happiness, when we are actively engaged. Listening to music can be experienced passively but we will truly enjoy it if we listen actively, by thinking about it. And a repetitive chore may bring enjoyment if we think of a way to convert it to a challenge with a specific goal. An autotelic person is one who is able to engage actively with all aspects of his environment and who therefore spends most of his time in flow. Because his responses to situations come from within, they are authentic, and in responding actively to challenges he continually develops his skills and capabilities.

Csikszentmihalyi feels that when the mind is not focused on a specific activity, anxieties and doubts surface and happiness is dampened. The state of flow, with its exclusive focus on responding to a challenge, displaces negative thoughts.

We know, however, that while anxieties and doubts may occupy awareness at times, positive stimuli often prevail. Good news, compliments, knowledge of tasks well completed, anticipation of pleasurable experiences, daydreams, delightful sights, sounds, tastes, and kinesthetic sensations often fill our minds. Whatever stimulus is most disequilibrating at any given moment enters awareness and remains until a new stimulus that is more disequilibrating occurs.

However, flow is clearly a desirable state. How can we cultivate it?
Csikszentmihalyi suggests consciously focusing on bringing it about in as many



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situations as possible. But we know that habit patterns are locked-in as they are formed, and can only be changed in the presence of a complex stimulus. When changes do occur, it is because a complex stimulus has occurred in the environment spontaneously. These situations happen randomly and are not under our control. One can't will oneself to become more autotelic.

Fortunately, that isn't necessary. As we develop our Inner Guides by doing self-hypnosis regularly, we will experience flow effortlessly. An Inner Guide is composed of three things: the mental pathway of all instances of comfort, a sense of its own identity, and the wish to help. As soon as it comes into existence it is able to search the memory for the origin of all discomforts and find solutions for them. (Out of awareness, the mind works extremely rapidly.) The Inner Guide can then arrange for complex stimuli to occur at relevant moments so that maladaptive habit patterns can be replaced with true solutions. Finally, with sufficient time during self-hypnosis, it is able to bring the new solutions into awareness.

We experience emotional comfort when we are maintaining an optimal stimulus level; that is, when we are neither under- nor overstimulated, and when our feeling tone is positive. As an Inner Guide brings true solutions into awareness, anxieties, doubts, and other negative thoughts disappear. Our feeling tone is almost always positive. And an Inner Guide works to maintain an optimal stimulus level. When we are neither under- nor overstimulated, we are neither bored nor anxious, and our skills and capabilities are recruited to optimally address whatever level of stimulation is present. We are almost always in flow.

One of Csikszentmihalyi's findings was that people more often experience flow at work than at leisure, yet while at work they wish they were somewhere else. He attributes this to the cultural expectation that leisure is supposed to be more enjoyable than work. However, the categories of work that he described did not include the self-employed. We know that despite the enjoyment that work may bring to employees, it will always be contaminated by the constraint created by the fact that they have a boss. No matter how pleasant a boss may be, she is associatively related with parents, teachers, and other past authority figures whose actions, no matter how well-meaning, interfered at times with the child's comfort level. The autonomy that the self-employed enjoy is not interfered with by this disturbance.

Must we all become self-employed to avoid the disequilibrium caused by having a boss? Not necessarily. Csikszentmihalyi describes the experience of a welder in a plant where railroad cars were manufactured. This man did not wish to be promoted because he didn't want to boss anyone else, but he occupied himself by learning how to do all the other jobs as well as his own and also by learning how to fix all the various pieces of machinery. He maintained an ongoing state of flow. He was considered indispensable and treated with great respect. In this way he became autonomous.

In a previous Letter, I wrote in more detail about the advantages of being self-employed. If you report to someone but are otherwise content with your position, perhaps you can gain autonomy, and uncontaminated flow, in the way that the welder did. Your Inner Guide will show you how.

QUESTION:

My Inner Guide had been communicating with me but now she has stopped. Has she gone away?

ANSWER:

No. Once your Inner Guide has been brought into existence, she cannot stop existing. However, she may work quietly for periods of time. Not communicating is one of many ways in which she can cause you to feel slightly disequibrated. This facilitates the unlocking of old habit patterns so that true solutions can replace them. She will resume communicating with you when that will most efficiently further integration.

I welcome your questions and comments, and will publish as many of them as possible. I look forward to hearing from you, either by post or at info@davis-foundation.org. If you would like to be anonymous, just let me know.

Cordially,

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