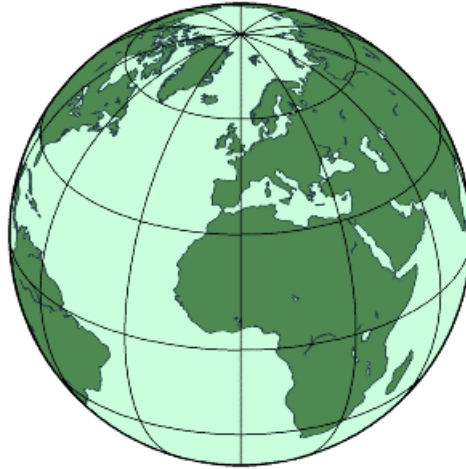


# Flow



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# What is flow?

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- You may have the following experience occasionally:
  - You focus your attention on an activity
  - Your involvement with the activity becomes deep but it seems effortless
  - You become unaware of your surroundings or the passing of time
- That experience is called *flow*:
  - Also referred to as being *in the groove* or *in the zone*
  - After flow has ended, you usually feel very happy and self-confident
- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is a psychologist:
  - He wondered “When are people happy?”
  - In researching that question, he discovered the concept of flow
  - He wrote *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*
- This chapter explains flow and explains why it is relevant to people who want to change the world

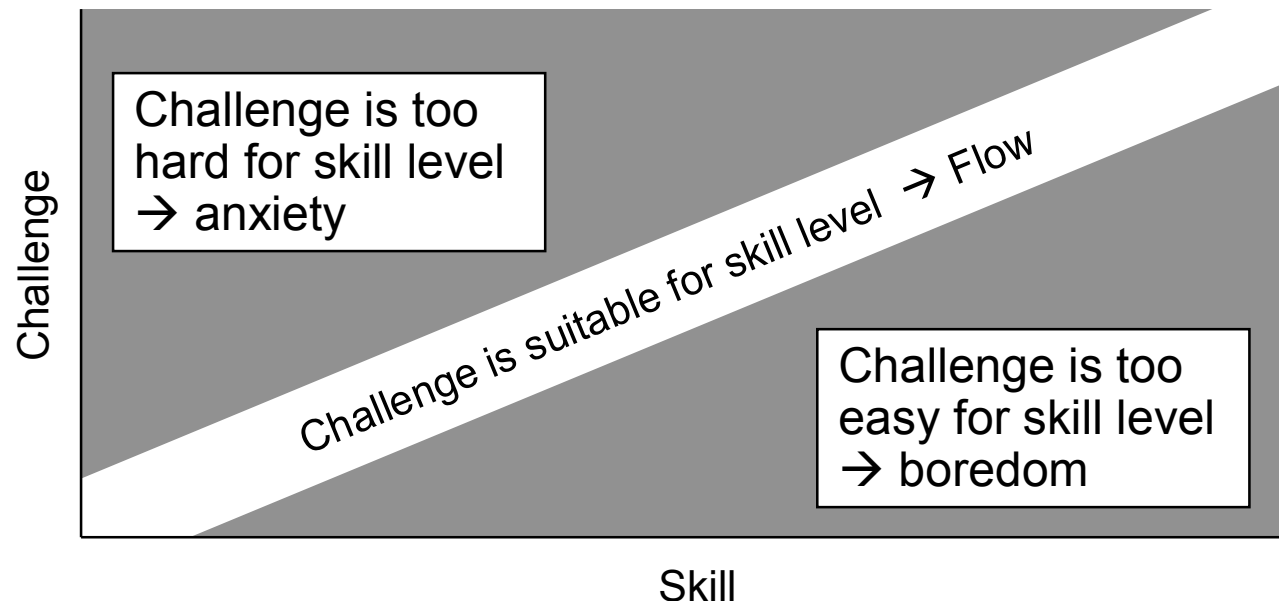
# Awareness of surroundings during flow

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- During flow, people are often unaware of their surroundings
- There is experimental evidence to support this:
  - Brain activity in the cerebral cortex is associated with senses
  - Individuals had activity in their cerebral cortex measured before and during an experiment
    - The experiment involved individuals paying attention to flashes of light or sound
  - There was *increased* brain activity in people who reported they rarely entered states of flow
  - There was *decreased* brain activity in people who reported they often entered states of flow
  - Conclusion: while in flow, your brain processes only inputs relevant to the task at hand

# Flow provides opportunities for learning

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- You can enter a state of flow when your skills are just good enough for the challenge of the task:
  - As skills improve, you must increase the challenge to remain in flow
  - In this way, flow provides opportunities for learning and improving skills
- After a state of flow has ended, you feel happy:
  - Because your skills or knowledge have improved

# Entering a state of flow for different activities

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- Most people experience flow for a particular activity:
  - That activity varies from one person to another
  - Examples: playing chess, painting, mountain climbing, swimming, reading, gardening, writing, composing music, playing a sport, ...
- Some people invent games to enter a state of flow during boring activities:
  - Doing this can turn a boring situation into an interesting one
- Example:
  - One man, had a repetitive boring job on a factory assembly line
  - The task performed on each unit was supposed to take 43 seconds
  - He set himself the challenge of doing it faster
  - Over a five-year period, he reduced his time to 28 seconds per unit

# Entering a state of flow for different activities (cont')

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- Another example:

- To pass time in boring meetings, a man composed complex sequences of finger taps

- Some people invent games to enter a state of flow during times of stress:

- Doing this can turn a stressful situation into an invigorating challenge

- Some examples from former prisoners:

- Play chess against yourself in your head
- Compose and memorise poems
- Hold imaginary conversations in a foreign language
- In a Hungarian prison, inmates kept themselves occupied for over a year by secretly running poetry translation competitions

# Flow and the meaning of life

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- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi claims that flow can help you to find the meaning of life
- His logic is as follows:
  - What is the meaning of life?
  - It is whatever provides you with meaning in life
  - How do you find meaning in life?
  - By frequently doing an activity that puts you in a state of flow



# Relevance to changing the world

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- Reasons why flow is relevant to people who want to change the world...
- Changing the world takes a lot of time and effort:
  - You may not have the required endurance if there is a lot of anxiety or boredom
  - If your effort frequently puts you in a state of flow then you will find it to be deeply satisfying
- This suggests two useful pieces of advice:
  - Your work of changing the world should be based on flow-inducing activities
  - If that is not feasible then invent mind games to help you enter a state of flow for boring or stressful activities