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The Discovery of Flow Hypnosis

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Introduction

"This is what the navigator feels when the wind whips his face, it is the feeling of a parent at the first smile of a child. Such experiences do not occur only when external conditions are favorable ... these great moments of life arise when the body and mind are used to their limits in a voluntary effort to achieve something that 'We can provoke'."

-- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 2004

What is Flow?

Flow is an altered state of consciousness characterized by complete immersion in a specific problem solving task, without the effort of typical conscious problem solving. Due in part to the good feelings that are associated with it, this phenomenon has become closely associated with the positive psychology movement, as first researched and elaborated by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

Flow naturally occurs when there is a total immersion in a chosen activity with well-defined goals and motivation, for which the skills of the individual and the level of challenge of the activity are perfectly matched. The combination of these elements makes it possible to feel a "state of grace", a fluidity (often felt by athletes, but also during other activities), and a sensation of ease and automaticity. In this state of flow, a double temporal distortion occurs, with the individual having both the paradoxical impression that time is shorter, while at the same time feeling that he has more time to perform the actions he must do. Most notably, there is an immersion in a sense of intense pleasure and a heightened feeling of control over physical interactions. Those who have felt it during sporting or problem-solving activities describe it as one of the highlights of their lives and wish to see it reappear.

Flow was first described in 1975 by Csikszentmihalyi as a modified state of consciousness. Csikszentmihalyi is a psychologist of Hungarian origin, who was born in Italy but immigrated to the USA at 22 years of age. It was therefore in the USA that he studied and developed this notion of Flow.

In 1998, the American Association of Positive Psychology linked this notion of flow to the field of positive psychology. Positive psychology, in contrast to traditional clinical psychology, focuses on the development of health and well-being rather than on the search for the causes of mental disorders. Thus, positive psychology is oriented towards discovering the means to increase the experience of positive emotions such as happiness and joy. Flow is considered to be the most successful expression of such a state. This current of positive psychology is itself connected with the earlier movement of humanistic psychology, which was developed in particular by Carl Rodgers. Because of its focus on meaningful, goal-oriented behaviour; flow psychology also elaborates on the existential psychology of Rollo May and Victor Frankel.

Currently, the concept of flow has been taken up in many applied fields, including sports psychology, the performing arts, and in education. Csikszentmihalyi admits that this state has long existed in other forms, most notably in Eastern religions such as Zen Buddhism, as well as in martial arts such as Aikido (for which the founder, Morihei Ueshiba, has in many ways described this particular state of intuition and anticipation). Flow as a contemporary concept, has mainly developed in the United

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States, Germany, and in the East of Europe. Its development in France has been more recent, emerging only after the turn-of-the-century. There still remains a need for tools to measure and evaluate it, which explains its relatively small influence in the world of psychology and psychotherapy, in contrast with its growing influence in the field of sports coaching.

To better understand flow, it is helpful to know its concrete characteristics. Flow is generally recognized as a state of intense, effortless concentration. This state is more specifically characterized by:

- Dual time distortion with the feeling that time passes faster (due to intense cognitive absorption) but also that time is slowed down, leaving more time to perform the action. This has been illustrated in research with tennis players. While concentrating on the action of their blow, these athletes' experienced an effect of slow motion of the ball arriving on their racket, leaving them all the time needed to prepare their arm and the position of their body. So the subjective experience was as if everything was going on in slow motion, even as these athletes and the ball moved to a great speed.
- Total immersion in a given task, with no distraction. This is sometimes referred to as cognitive absorption, and for those who studied hypnosis, it matches Braid's concept of the fixation of attention (Braid, 1853).
- An intense pleasure, which is one of the characteristics of this state and which creates a desire for repetition. This pleasure is associated with a feeling of fullness, or even a moment of ecstasy.
- A sense of control over the physical interaction, combined with the active use of real-time feedback.
- A sensory and cognitive curiosity, allowing the individual to learn new skills during this state, which results in an improvement in self-esteem.
- An absence of self-concern, with a dilation of the ego. In other words, the individual is less concerned with themselves as an actor and more focused on the process of the thing that is being done.

These different characteristics can be present independently during an activity but it is their simultaneous action that defines the flow experience. The feeling of well-being then becomes a reward in itself an intrinsic source of motivation that increases the desire to maintain a flow state. The activity that produces it also serves to increase it, by generating a feeling of ecstasy and an impression of being outside of reality.

In order for flow to occur, conditions must be right. There is a critical match between the difficulty of a given challenge and the level of individual skill. Both must be nearly equal in degree in order to achieve flow. If the difficulty is much lower than the level of skill, the result is a state of boredom, which prevents pleasure from occurring. But when the level of skill is much lower than the difficulty of the task, the result is a state of anxiety, which interferes with proper absorption in the task, while also inhibiting the effortless execution of action due to excessive self-consciousness or rumination on failure.

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What is Hypnosis?

While there has always been some controversy over how to define hypnosis, it is generally considered to be a natural function of the mind and body. Although some people use the term “hypnosis” and the term “trance” interchangeably, as if they were the same thing, it is helpful to define each individually. This is especially important since some researchers believe in hypnosis but doubt the validity of trance (Kirsch & Lynn, 2004), while others such as William James (1902) and Milton Erickson (1976) have suggested that trance can produce benefits beyond the scope of suggestive therapeutics. When seeking to make sense of terms such as “hetero-hypnosis” versus “self-hypnosis”, we see that the word hypnosis is more closely associated with a procedure. This is to be distinguished from trance, which is a phenomenological experience that can co-occur with hypnosis, or meditation, or during awe-inspiring encounters with nature. In other words, hypnosis is something that you choose to do, whereas trance is something that you spontaneously experience (Short, 1999).

When we speak of a hypnotic trance, we are describing an altered state of consciousness induced by means of hypnosis. When used in a clinical setting, hypnosis (or hypnotherapy) is used to elicit subconscious processes in the act of healing or problem-solving. When the clinical objective is situational problem-solving, “creative hypnosis” is used to activate an internal, unconscious search, with the expectation of an emergent solution, or an answer. During this type of problem solving, an objective must be clearly identified that is realistic in regard to existing skill sets and achievable in terms of plausibility (Rhue, Lynn, & Kirsch, 1993).

While there has been disagreement since the earliest days of hypnosis over what must be altered by the hypnotic procedure, with some saying that altered expectations are the essential aim (Bernheim, 1900, Kirsch, 1990) and others arguing that an altered state of consciousness is the principal component, during which there is a reorganization of ideas at a subconscious level (Erickson, Rossi & Rossi, 1976); all seem to agree that during hypnosis a state of intense, effortless concentration is essential. Accordingly, the father of hypnosis, James Braid, most concisely described the act of hypnosis as “a strong direction of inward consciousness to any part of the body – especially if attended with the expectation or belief of something being about to happen” (Braid, 1852). Once that is achieved, the creative and imaginative processes of the mind seem to *flow* forth producing results beyond the reach of ordinary conscious volition.

One question that has been asked about the process of hypnotic induction is whether or not eye-closure is necessary. From a practical perspective, it is been argued that eye-closure helps facilitate an inward focus of attention. However from a research perspective, it has been demonstrated that all trance phenomena can be produced with eyes open and even while in a state of vigorous activity, such as riding a stationary bike (Banyai & Hilgard, 1976).

The latter has been referred to as active-alert or kinetic hypnosis. The importance of alert hypnosis was not overlooked by James Braid, who wrote that, “it should be clearly understood by patients, that it is by no means generally requisite that they should lapse into the state of unconsciousness in order to ensure salutary effects of [hypnosis]” (Braid, 1853). In a later paper, Braid reports that only one in ten patients “ever passes into the state of oblivious sleep, during the processes which they are subjected to” (Braid, 1855). Accordingly, hypnosis has been used to achieve practical benefit during a variety of acts of physical exertion, such as artistic performance, professional sports, and educational activities such as test taking (Wark, 1998). Similar to sleep hypnosis, the use of alert hypnosis is also associated with an altered state of consciousness that is characterized by spontaneous dissociation (i.e., the paradoxical sensation that “I am here and elsewhere”), time distortion (i.e., time seems either elongated or shortened), cognitive alterations such as amnesia or hyperamnesia; and the

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alteration of somatic sensations such as spontaneous analgesia or increased energy or strength (Elkins, 2016).

Comparison and Contrast

Before attempting to answer the question of whether or not flow and hypnosis are two independent concepts, we should keep in mind the differences in definition. Remember, hypnosis is best understood as an intentional process that involves suggestion and can lead to the phenomenological experience of trance. Speaking in reverse, flow is the phenomenological experience of effortless action that is often produced by structured activities designed to focus attention on the performance of highly developed skill sets. Building on these general definitions, we can now study the specific similarities and differences.

Both flow and the hypnotic trance experience have the following points in common:

- A modified state of consciousness as well as altered mood
- The possibility of spontaneous occurrence or intentional activation by means of some structured activity
- A need for clear objectives when seeking intentional activation
- Deep concentration or fixation of attention
- The experience of time distortion as well as a modification of sensory perceptions
- An increase in self-efficacy
- The experience of effortless action as opposed to tension and stress
- The discovery of new adaptive capacities

For the sake of contrast, it could be argued that flow and the hypnotic trance experience have three essential differences:

- There are differences in applied setting. Hypnosis is most often conducted in private while flow is characterized by sporting events and performing arts exhibitions. However, it should be remembered that clinical hypnosis was originally conducted in groups or on stage (Braid, 1852) and that flow states were originally studied within the context of a work setting or a school setting during which individuals were often engaged in solitary activities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1989).
- There are also some key differences in regard to expected outcome. For example, in stage hypnosis, there is a general expectation that the trance subjects will engage in strange and absurd behaviour, seemingly under the complete control of the hypnotist. During clinical hypnosis, or hypnotherapy, there is an expectation that healing will occur on a physiological level, or that there will be a permanent change in mood, or a change in social adaptive abilities (e.g., becoming more assertive or less inhibited). In contrast, the experience of flow is generally expected to increase skill-based performance and temporarily heighten one's mood. However, it should be remembered that hypnosis has also been used to increase performance in the sports, performing arts, and in business (Short, Erickson, & Klein, 2005). Also, the experience of flow in everyday life has been associated with increased well-being and reduced physical symptomatology (Riva, Freire, & Bassi, 2016).

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- Age is the final significant difference. Hypnosis is a very old concept that has been modified and slowly evolved since Antoine Mesmer's discovery of animal magnetism in the mid-18th century. In contrast, flow is a very new concept with only four decades for study and application.

Given this comparison and contrast, it seems that the differences are mostly superficial while the similarities are substantial. If we assume along with the philosophical pragmatists that events are better defined in terms of practical outcomes, rather than by the names that have been assigned, then we can see evidence of these same states of consciousness in cultures across the globe and throughout time, in a variety of contexts; such as religion, indigenous medicine, or war (James, 1902).

Practical Application

If by now, the reader is willing to accept the idea that hypnosis and flow psychology are complementary; then we can begin to consider the ways in which these two concepts might inform one another. The primary focus for this paper will be the clinical application. Thus we are interested in how therapists might improve their practice through the knowledge of research produced by flow psychology.

The first major point is that flow is not likely to occur unless one is outcome-oriented and process focused. To be "outcome-oriented" one must be working toward specific goals, in a structured way, with a means of consciously monitoring progress and receiving concrete feedback. To be "process focused" one's attention must be more deeply absorbed in the act of exercising skills that have been practiced and highly refined, rather than focusing on the outcome. Challenges are embraced for the joy of problem-solving with the expectation that the outcomes will be as great as they can be without need for worry or distraction.

From both flow psychology and the subsequent positive psychology movement, therapists can learn to take a more practical perspective by spending less time investigating the cause of problems but rather identify existing skill sets and practical goals that will lead to their resolution. Any such task is not to be dreaded but rather embraced as an essential activity for enjoying life and knowing the experience of thriving.

From this last point, we can see the importance of approaching each patient with the conviction that he or she naturally possesses the ability to solve his or her difficulties. After all, each individual has spent a lifetime acquiring skills and overcoming challenges. According to flow psychology, when those challenges seem to exceed the individual's level of skill, anxiety and paralysis can be experienced. However, with the use of hypnosis, patients can be led through a subconscious search for unrecognized resources and creative solutions that can be generated from within when given the proper encouragement. In contrast, if the patient suffers from existential depression and chronic boredom or lack of motivation; according to flow psychology a set of challenges need to be identified and skills developed in any direction that suits the patient's personal value system.

If we add the two terms together, then we can speak in terms of "flow hypnosis" and thereby distinguish it from traditional hypnosis. In regard to flow hypnosis, there are five unique characteristics:

- *Setting goals* that the subject is on the verge of being able to accomplish, but just needs more time, practice, and encouragement

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With flow hypnosis, there is an effort to replace theory-driven goals with goals that have a high subjective value. As an example of the verbal suggestion used during the process, one might say, “You wanted to be able to [*new skill*] and now you are doing it with me! How does it feel? Did you even realize that you are doing it?”

- Building *psychological scaffolding* so that the patient can progress from familiar ideas and simple skills to more complex ideas and more sophisticated skill sets

The concept of scaffolding has also been referred to as “chunking”, which is the strategy of breaking a task down into component parts or revealing operations that are easily understood. Another way scaffolding can be conceptualized is the identification of setting short-term goals as greater skill and ability are accumulated. Most essentially, the therapist seeks to balance challenges with emerging abilities. As an example of the verbal suggestion used during the process, one might say, “You wanted to be able to [*new skill*] and you will do it soon enough. But for now, all that you need to do is this small piece of work. And this is something you already know how to do. And this small achievement can start building itself, increasing exponentially, until you at last achieve your goal.”

- *Offering feedback*, thus replacing redundant repetition or performance demands with intense excitement over what the subject is achieving on a moment by moment basis

During flow hypnosis the patient can be encouraged to ask questions of the therapist, even during trance, so that the patient can solicit the type of feedback that is most needed. As an example of the verbal suggestion used during the process, one might say, “Yes! That’s right! You’ve got it!” or “If you are uncertain of what should happen next, just ask me and I will guide you.”

- *Central nervous system (CNS) arousal*

This is one of the most unique characteristics of flow hypnosis. Rather than emphasizing or demanding a passive relaxed condition, the therapist can suggest an intense readiness for an exciting challenge. The process can be expected to create energy and result in the individual feeling more alive and invigorated than ever before. As an example of the verbal suggestion used during flow hypnosis, one might say, “Because your eyes are open, and your body is filling with energy, and your heart is beating powerfully, you can go into this type of trance anytime you wish to solve a difficult problem, and when you do time will go by faster even as you have more time to consider your choices, and your problem-solving will feel much more effortless and enjoyable.” This creates the freedom for the patient to use hypnosis anywhere and in any context.

- Radical acceptance of individual expression and self-organization

This last characteristic is in contrast to the medical model, which is normative-based and therefore prescribes acceptable outcomes for the patient. Conversely, flow hypnosis seeks to empower the patient by creating the experience of autonomy, individual preference, and self-determination. As an example of the verbal suggestion used during the process, one might say, “You get to solve this problem in a way that is interesting to you. You get to use your unique skills and abilities as you discover who you are meant to be!”

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to suggest that there are distinct clinical advantages that come from the assimilation of flow psychology with the practice of hypnotherapy. In contrast with traditional forms of hypnosis, flow hypnosis is an altered state of consciousness that is alert, awake, and often

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accompanied by physical motion. Thus the patient is better prepared for active problem-solving and the realization of new skills. Such skills can then be easily generalized outside of the therapy office for use in the real world. Furthermore, flow hypnosis emphasizes the importance of self-efficacy and self-determination. This change in perspective is illustrated in the wise adage, "Give a man a fish and he is fed for a day, but teach him to fish and he is fed for a lifetime."

Because joy is derived through the process of solving problems, individuals learn to see challenges as opportunities to exercise skills and to develop new adaptive ability. Choice and discernment are exercised as the individual seeks to pursue objectives that are a good match for his or her current level of skill.

As with any other skill, the flow state can be practiced and eventually summoned with greater ease. Although the subjective experience of flow might initially be brief; just even a fleeting moment of effortless problem-solving can inspire the patient to keep trying and to eventually pursue a more ambitious life-agenda. With the help of post-hypnotic suggestion, the benefits of flow hypnosis can be realized in any setting and practically any social context.

Lastly, the internal search, generated by the expectation of change at subconscious levels, greatly increases the fund of knowledge, memory, and creative solutions available for problem-solving. This type of "positive depth-psychology" (i.e., a focus on identifying subconscious ability rather than unconscious pathology) greatly facilitates the organic repair of psychic trauma, as well as physical or moral pain. These clinical elements add to the already rich benefits of flow psychology for the intensification of joy and the existential benefits of a purpose driven life.

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