

The Good Life Involves Choosing to Challenge Ourselves

Seven year old Mikey looks pretty bored as he waits for his dinner at Joe's Crab Shack in Newport Beach. His Aunt Alanna reenergizes him by asking which subject he enjoys most in school. After a pause he grins and surprisingly answers, "Math because it makes my head hurt a little bit." Upon further questioning it seems that Mikey is searching for the correct word to describe the feeling of fulfillment he receives while grappling with an invigorating challenge. According to Dr. Michael Csikszentmihalyi the right term is flow – it's essential for the good life and is commonly avoided by many adults.

Based upon thousands of studies of athletes, musicians, chess players, artists, and mountain climbers, Csikszentmihalyi chose the word flow to describe the fully engaged experience provoked by a right-sized challenge. Ironically we may choose to avoid challenges even though they are profoundly gratifying afterwards.

We may have some insight to the paradox if we think about Mikey's future and our own past. Mikey will run into tougher and tougher math problems; some may overwhelm his capability and leave him feeling anxious and fearful. We've all faced challenges that have been too much for us, that have left us feeling incompetent and not good enough.

Mikey will also find some easier junk flow and pleasant activities. Watching television may offer the same sense of absorption without the painful sense of being overmatched. Laying on the beach, eating hot dogs, and potato chips will initially seem pleasurable. As Mikey grows up, when he has a choice of activities he may opt for comfortable junk flow and pleasant activities without realizing that he is now on a hedonic treadmill that ultimately leaves him feeling bored, listless, and strangely tired. Mikey's story captures human involvement from our natural state of enjoying challenges to protecting ourselves from potential pain, substituting easy pleasures, and ending up with safer, less satisfying lives.

We can live more engaging, gratifying lives by changing how we deal with challenges. The first step is to remember that a right-sized challenge is gratifying. According to Csikszentmihalyi as long as the activity we choose is the right balance between the demand of the task and the strengths we bring to it, we have an opportunity for engagement and flow. If the challenge is too hard we can break it into more manageable chunks or we can increase our competence. Second, we can see if we have the proper balance of both easy, pleasant activities and ones that stretch us by simply noting how we look and feel. Vitality signals full engagement with life.

We need to remember that every day is a new opportunity for engagement. This past weekend my husband and I went to our family cabin to celebrate our anniversary. My husband asked me if I'd like to set my wine glass down and get out of my rocker which was comfortably positioned by the fire. He's suggested that we break some new ground snowshoeing. It took me fifteen minutes of arguing with myself to get out the door, but ninety minutes later I came back refreshed and happier.

We never outlive the need for flow. The new learning a challenge stimulates can increase our feeling of self worth and willingness to stretch ourselves even further.

As we work hard, accumulate wealth, and grow older we may feel entitled to and have the means to afford an easy life of endless pleasure. Solely pursuing the pleasant life may actually lead to the boring life. When we want to become fully engaged - more courageous, taking bigger risks, and living The Good Life, we challenge ourselves. The good life involves remembering the rewards of a challenge, breaking out of cozy cocoons, and grabbing many right-sized challenges.