

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

April 23, 2013



Claremont Graduate University

James McKeen Cattell Fellow Award

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has devoted his career to studying what makes people happy. His books and scientific research publications on creativity, innovation, and what makes life worth living are used extensively and widely cited across many disciplines and professions. His seminal work was reported in his bestselling 1990 book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. He is the author of 13 other books and 225 research articles. Building on years of detailed research, Csikszentmihalyi created the term “flow” to describe the experience of being completely immersed in an activity for its own sake. Whether in creative arts, athletics, work, or spiritual practice, flow leads to a deep motivation to excel and triumph over limitation, he says. The happiness, he avers, lies in the challenge to transcend beyond one’s previous level of skills.

In the early 1970s, Csikszentmihalyi developed the Experience Sampling Method (ESM), a set of techniques designed to capture people’s behaviors, thoughts, and feelings as they occur. ESM became the core of flow research. When someone is in a state of flow, self-consciousness disappears and the sense of time becomes distorted, according to Csikszentmihalyi’s research. “An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult or dangerous,” he once wrote.

Csikszentmihalyi steered behavioral research into an alternative direction. Until the late 20th century, most behavioral studies focused primarily on mental illness, aggression, and other human failings and pathologies. Csikszentmihalyi has showed us that it’s equally important to understand life satisfaction and achievement.