

In the Flow

Flow is a mental state in which a person is completely immersed in what engages her or him. The individual feels focused, energized, and totally involved. There is a merging of action with acute awareness. The notion of Flow has been a prominent feature of many spiritual traditions and is best represented by a sense of being at one with things. We can apply this concept to the flow of nerve impulses and chemicals in the brain and show how it affects our mind's focus and sense of attunement or flow.

If the flow of information across our brain moves in response to stimuli, we will have a flexible response and be rational in our thinking, self-aware and reflective in our thought processes, and intentional in our communication or positive in our attitude. That is how it all flows together on a good day. Of course, the outside event can be a conflict that triggers old memories, but the development of the prefrontal cortex allows us to choose how to respond in less reactive ways.

In the nucleus of each neuron, lie our genes (the basic units of heredity) and DNA (the chemical basis of heredity). They incline us to develop particular traits such as physical features, attitudes, behavioral patterns, emotional responses, social roles, mannerisms, and what we call our personality. Neural pathways carry messages from our genes via electrochemical impulses to express our personality in the form of emotional responses and interests, for example. We identify with our personality traits; they are what give us the sense of being a person as opposed to merely a body with a brain. In addition, we are raised by our parents or other caregivers whose attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral patterns we imitate, incorporating their characteristics into our personality structure. We begin to imitate them by using our mirror neurons at about age two. Between our gene coding and using mirror neurons, we develop our distinctive personalities to make what we call "me." Every thought, perception, sensation, cognition, and emotion that expresses this "me" has both an electrical impulse and a chemical component.

We wear our traits so closely that they are what and who we are. As we easily act out these traits over and over again, they become habitual; an electrochemical addiction. The chemicals in the neuronal pathways that have been reinforced by our repetitive behavior keep us "addicted" to the same pattern. For example, if you like things to be straight and orderly, you may believe that you acquired this naturally. Actually, your mind and its thoughts have reinforced this sense of orderliness from a very early age and this trait is a pattern of chemical and electrical impulses that gives comfort and familiarity.

Let's assume that someone just the opposite of you in maintaining an organized, clean space, comes to your home or work space and is constantly messy. You will probably have a negative emotional response to their messiness and to them. What actually happens is that this person messing up your space disrupts your familiar and comforting neural flow of orderliness. The result is a surge of negative

emotional reactions to both the situation and the person. This triggers your brain to release emergency chemicals to prepare for the defense of your orderly view of things. These chemicals pour into the bloodstream, triggering feelings of anger, fear, or anxiety.

At this point, the situation becomes a stress response triggered by someone else's patterns that are different from yours. You are now unhappy, anxious, or fearful. You want things to be different from what they are, so you react. Now, if nothing is done to change this negative response, it can continue and turn into your constantly raging against messy people. This raging against messiness now becomes familiar and over time you get addicted to the chemicals that are released in the bloodstream, according to Patt Lind-Kyle in *Heal Your Mind, Rewire Your Brain: Applying the Exciting New Science of Brain Synchrony for Creativity, Peace and Presence*.

These chemicals act like any addictive substance and keep us locked into automatic emotional behaviors. It is like being constantly asleep to what is actually happening to us. Both the external stimulus and the internal reaction create a physical-emotional response. We are a pharmacopeia that gets activated by automatic thoughts that keep us reacting to life. This automatic pattern of our thoughts, emotions, and actions stops the brain flow and creates a kind of deadness in our lives. When the brain is in a natural flow, we are conscious of the automatic and habituated processes that all too often drive our lives, and are poised to change them. Unconscious habituation can make us feel that life is meaningless, with little direct control. Without conscious thought or attention, we feel imposed on and often become a victim to what life brings us.

The Buddha called this automatic reaction pattern, "suffering." He said, "I teach one thing. There is suffering, and there can be an end to suffering." The modern day term for this suffering, of course, is "stress," with which we have all become familiar. We are so engaged with stress that we hold tight to physical and emotional tension and its pain without even realizing it. More important, we generally don't know how to identify and then reduce or change our sources of stress. Conscious awareness that stress is controlling us is the first step to changing and ending our suffering.

Stress responses can create a negative loop in our body-mind interface that keeps repeating itself over and over. There are two ways the brain responds to our reactions: via the nervous system and via the endocrine system (chemical system). What is exciting is that our habitual emotional responses can be changed or transformed by a shift in how we use our mind. Neurofeedback is a tool available to utilize your neuroplasticity, and create new neuro- genesis toward better self-regulation and FLOW.