

STATE OF FLOW



What is "flow" and how to cultivate that state?

Flow happens when the challenge you face meets your skill level, it is neither too hard nor too easy. This means for example that you are so involved in an activity that nothing else matters. An activity you are passionate about (art making for artists, gardening for plant lovers, etc) will bring a concentration that is so intense, that in return, there is no attention left for everyday problems. Thoughts about past and future cease, self consciousness disappears, sense of time and place becomes distorted.

Where does this idea come from?

The state of flow was popularised by psychologists Jeanne Nakamura and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. This idea was already present in the time of Greek Stoic Philosopher Epictetus (135AD) and Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180BC). More recently, neurologist and psychotherapist Viktor Frankl, Holocaust survivor, devoted his life to understand what makes our life meaningful, what makes us happy. One way he found, is by losing oneself in creativity and finding flow.

If flow is a key to happiness, how to reach it?

Be well rested

There is no point trying to get into the state of flow if you are tired or feeling drained. Mornings or late evenings are good times for creative activities such as the ones presented in this guide.

An American study surprisingly showed that night owls' peak performance is early mornings while people who identify as early birds feel more attuned later in the day... What works best for you?

Prepare by eliminate all internal distractions

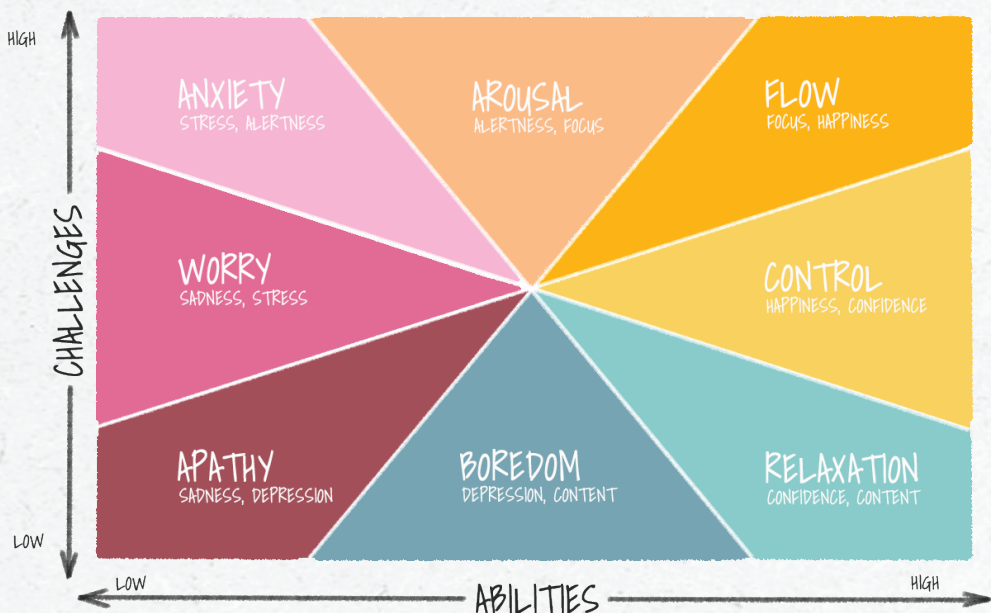
Meditate daily, at least 10 minutes. If you have not had a chance to meditate yet, start your creative session with a meditation. You might find it helpful to use apps such as [Insight Timer](#), [Waking Up](#), [Headspace](#).

If you are not into meditation, try instead cardiac coherence / Pranayama. It will help you ground yourself: breath in for 5 seconds, hold your breath gently, breath out for 5 seconds, hold your breath again. Repeat this for 5 to 10 minutes. Here again, some apps might be useful such as [Cardiac Coherence Mindfulness](#).

Daily journaling is a great way to bring your attention back to the moment and limit mind wandering.

Challenge vs Skills

Set a creative task that is just challenging enough to get you excited. If too easy, you will be bored and if too challenging, you will get anxious. So find the right balance (see below Jeanne Nakamura and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's chart).



Use music

Repetitive music such as classic or meditative, that does not have lyrics, and is by nature repetitive, will trigger a state of flow. To prevent being distracted by background noise or mental noise, listen to music with headphones on. This will help increase your focus. Only listen to songs or soundscape you are familiar with as otherwise, the newness of it will distract you.

Set a specific task

Having a specific goal and knowing what you want to focus on will help you enter the state of flow. Not being clear with what you would like to work on will get you to switch between tasks, get distracted and let mental noise take over. Your target can be as varied as reading one chapter, doing one creative activity, etc.

Drink caffeine

Caffeine improves performance, but remember, a little is good, a lot is too much! Over two cups of coffee (the equivalent of 200mg caffeine) will trigger your anxiety and decrease your focus.

Give your brain water

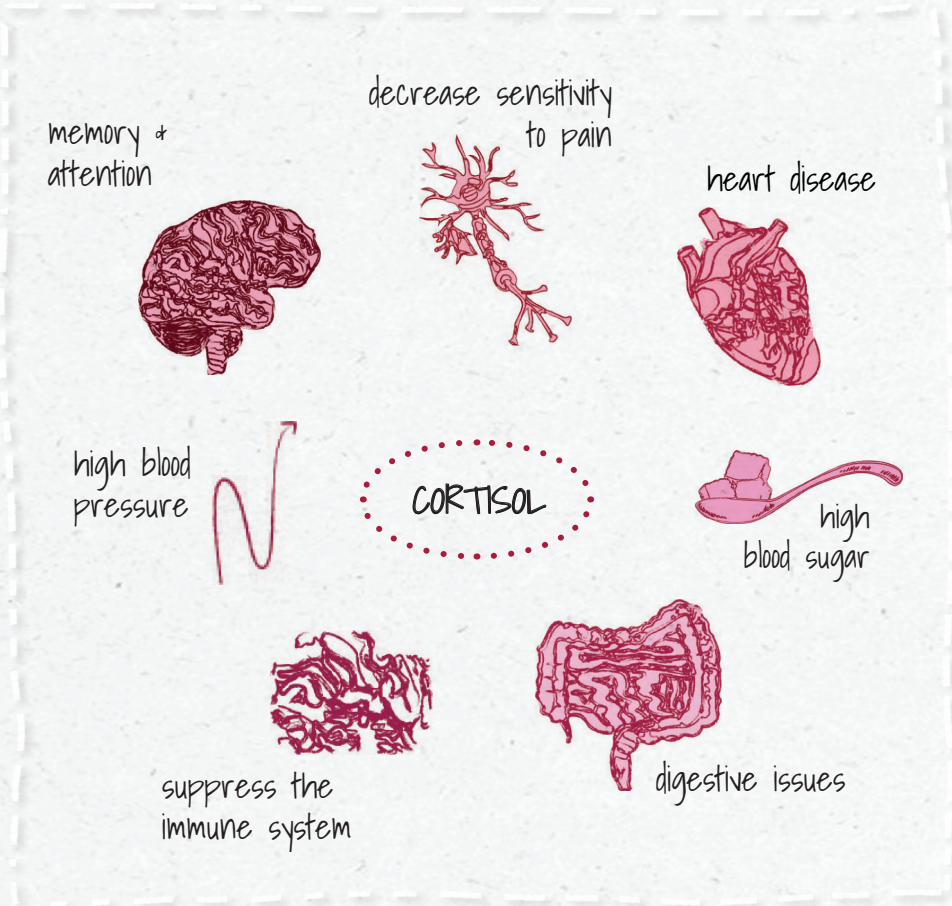
The brain consists of 75% of water, so when dehydrated we lose focus. One of the easiest ways to reach the state of flow is to drink a large glass of water before starting your creative activity.

Stress hormones and the state of flow

Our main stress hormone is called cortisol: it plays an important role in regulating body responses to stress. Cortisol is produced by our adrenal glands, which are located one above each kidney. It is at its highest in the morning for the body to step into action. Under normal circumstances, levels drop over the day.

In balance, cortisol is important in helping us to enter in focused action. However, if we are constantly 'on', cortisol levels can become overly elevated which leads to adrenal fatigue. Chronically elevated Cortisol levels are related to many health problems (see illustration). In turn, adrenal fatigue can lead to reduced cortisol production which is associated with depleted brain acuity, depression and lowered immune response. This is why an exhausted body needs time to relax and restore.

The body functions optimally when stress and relaxation are balanced with the right mix of diverse activities. Studies have found that participating in art making and immersive environments can help bring stress into balance by reducing cortisol.

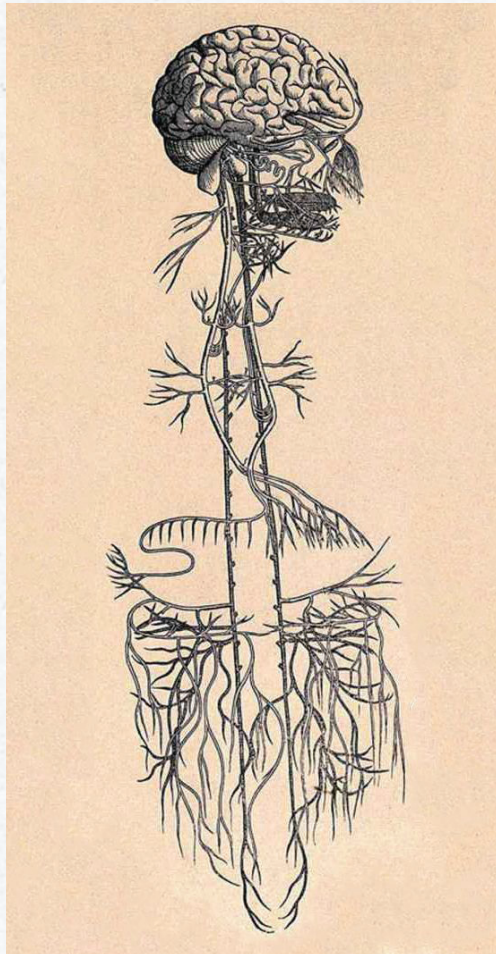


Role of the vagus nerve

The Vagus nerve forms part of the involuntary or parasympathetic nervous system which regulates unconscious body processes (such as heart rate, breath and digestion).

The vagus nerve is central to rest, relaxation and restoration. It is largely made of sensory fibres that respond to relaxation inducing activity which in turn aids stress release. By engaging in activities that help the vagus nerve to become active, we help develop vagal tone and just like most habits, we can become better at balancing stress and relaxation.

A range of the arts have been found to stimulate vagal tone including drawing, painting, singing and music.



Meditative Drawing

Materials needed:
pencil or pen, your journal

Connecting in - becoming present

Use three fingers on one hand to feel your pulse on your opposite wrist.

Close your eyes and feel the beat of your heart as it pumps blood through your body. Take a few moments just to feel the beat then quietly count 1..2..3 - everyone has different pulse rates and they change with our moods and activity. Observe, let your thoughts come and go. After about 30 seconds, keep the count of your pulse and pick up a colour pencil - draw short lines across the page in the same rhythm 1..2..3.



Connecting in - release tension

Close your eyes and scan your body for a point of tension.

Stay with this point and see if you can sense its shape - is it a blob, is it angular, moving, something else? Does the shape have a colour, a sound or texture? There is no right or wrong, simply acknowledge what is there without judging, simply check into your body and your senses.

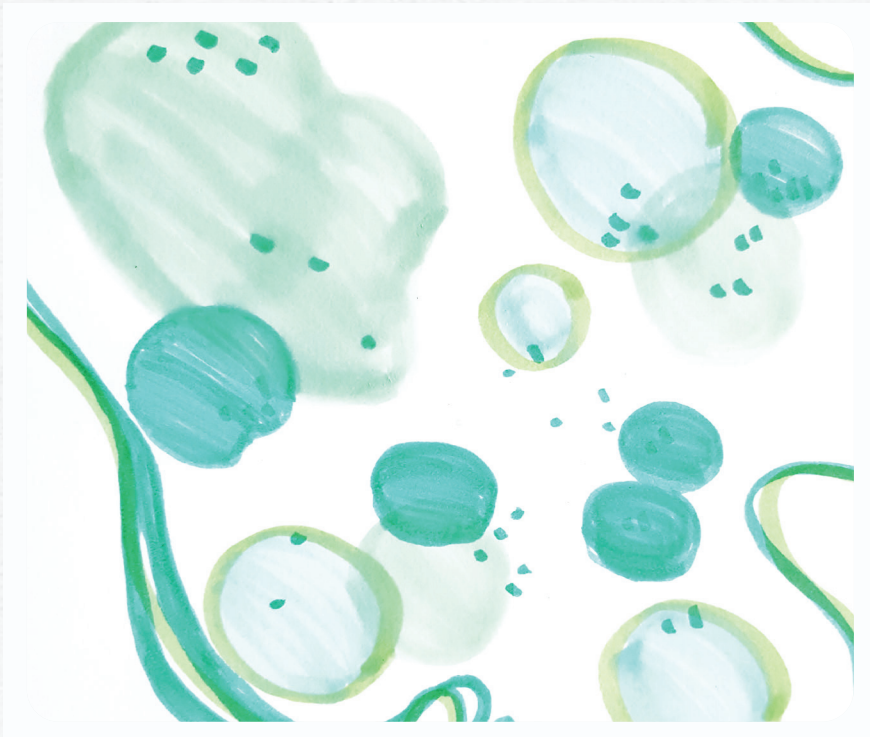
Grab a colour tool and draw/paint this shape.
Add as many details as possible.

Take a moment to observe

What do you notice?

How worried are you about being precise?

What do the colours you used tell you?



Journaling

Drawing involves repetition, and repetitive activities are known to have calming effects. Repetition has deep roots in how we learn and feelings of connection to life around us. Drawing is also known to help us tap into our memories and those feelings of calm connection.

Research in arts therapy and neuroscience has shown that using different drawing tools help us connect to memories and the understandings we absorbed when we learnt to use each instrument - for example a lead pencil can take us back to early experiences of learning to use a drawing instrument and expressing ourselves.

As you engage with these drawing activities, notice how your hands feel, what your breathing and muscle tension is doing, the memories that arise and anything that comes up. In your journal, take notes of the sensations and memories without filtering any of them. In your own time, use these notes to reflect, feed your creativity, release tension.

Ultimately, drawing is a way of finding the tools and textures you like to use and also looking for new ideas that can come up through very simple mark making exercises. It is also about finding materials and methods that help you to relax into a calm and creative space. From here new ideas can be born.

Sharing

Think about new ways to use repetitive colouring and cardiac coherence breathing/pranayama. Create short activities you can easily share with your family members or Community. See if you can incorporate some of these activities in your own creative wellbeing routine.

Activity for Children

No materials needed.
This is a physical expression activity.

Activity

To access that place inside us that is peaceful, creative and full of joy, the following activity is best led in an immersive environment. Play some relaxing music (with no lyrics and no percussion), diffuse some lavender essential oil, sit with the children on the floor to feel more grounded.

Using the image of a bird trapped in a cage that is about to be set free, the goal for the children is to find if there is a point of tension hidden in their body and to release it.



Step 1 - Body Scanning

Eyes closed, the children focus their attention on their different body parts. First, name the crown of the head, then the face, the ears, the back of the head, the neck... and manage your way down until you reach the feet. Notice any point of tension.

Step 2 - Visualisation

Similar to observing a bird busy with its birdly business, ask the children to go back to that point of tension (if there is one) and to observe it as a bird in a cage. No mind chatter is needed, instead show curiosity, patience, 'look' at what is happening without judging. Just notice. What is the bird doing?

Step 3 - Movement

Still sitting and eyes closed, children mimic with their hands and arms the shape of the 'bird'. How big is it? How fast or slow does it move? Repeat the movements over and over until it feels flowy, almost like an effortless dance. At that stage the children can engage their full body and completely let go.

Step 4 - Verbalisation

Give a name to the bird. Whenever the children experience anxiety (or tension in their body), they can now refer to it by this name. By labeling anxiety and their experience of it, it will help the children to detach themselves from it and take the first step to let go of it.

