

Liking work correlates to how one performs

By Paul A. O'Keefe, New York Times

We have all had to work on tasks we detest: Calculus homework, for example, is boring and hard. As soon as we start, we feel mentally exhausted, and the quality of our work suffers.

Now imagine you are an aspiring architect. Learning how calculus can help you design more creative and ambitious structures could be fascinating. Instead of feeling exhausted by your homework, you might feel energized and could work on it all night. The same work, but with a very different psychological effect.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a psychologist at the Claremont Graduate University, has been studying this latter phenomenon for decades. He calls it flow: the experience we have when we're "in the zone." During a flow state, people are fully absorbed and highly focused; they lose themselves in the activity.

In our research, we asked a group of undergraduates to work on word puzzles. Before they began, we had them tell us how exciting and enjoyable they thought the task would be. Then they read a statement that framed the task as either personally valuable or of neutral value.

Those who read the first statement, and who also thought the task would be enjoyable, solved the most problems. Moreover, their work didn't flag, meaning they did not perform best simply because their interest made them want to work on it longer, thereby causing them to solve more problems. Instead, their engagement was more efficient. In other words, they were "in the zone."

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