

Dispositional Flow: A Resource for Successful Aging

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Introduction

First characterized by Csikszentmihalyi (1975), “flow” has been defined as a state of total engagement in an activity, in which participants feel as though their awareness of themselves outside of the activity diminishes, and their skills are perceived to be in balance with the challenge at hand. This construct has been used in a diverse set of disciplines, from sports psychology (Jackson & Marsh, 1996) to education (Vollmeyer & Rheinberg, 2006), to help explain how motivational goals interact with ability to produce the phenomenological experience of deep immersion in an activity (i.e., being “in the zone”) and how this experience contributes to self-regulation of the activity. Previous research into the experience of flow states in aging populations has shown that older adults with higher levels of fluid ability tend to experience flow states in activities with a high cognitive load, whereas older adults with lower fluid ability tend to experience flow in activities that are less cognitively demanding, demonstrating that flow states are an important aspect of how older adults self-regulate their activities to reach optimal performance (Payne, et al, 2011). However, more recent research into flow has reconsidered flow as a state-based construct, and has instead investigated flow as a more stable trait, which shows interindividual variability (Jackson & Eklund, 2002). In line with this perspective, Jackson, Martin, and Eklund (2008) developed an instrument to assess the tendency to reach a state of flow when participating in activities, which showed good psychometric properties and exhibited a factor structure reflective of the original conception of flow as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1975; Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2005). However, at this point no research has addressed flow as a stable trait in an aging population, which is surprising given the extent to which much recent research in cognitive aging has investigated older adult’s ability to self-regulate their activity engagement in order to achieve best possible performance. The present study seeks to address this need through the development of a trait-flow questionnaire the Dispositional Flow Scale (DFS), its psychometric properties, and its relationship to other psychological resources.

Method

Participants

Participants (N=150) were community-dwelling adults from east-central Illinois.

	Mean / Percent	Range
Age	72.92	60-91
Educational Level (years)	14.98	9-20
Gender (percent female)	74.7	

Procedure

All participants completed the Dispositional Flow Scale (DFS) as part of a package of assessments, which also included Big Five measurements of conscientiousness and openness to experience, Mindfulness, and quality-of-life ratings. Measurements took place twice, spaced six months apart. For each statement in the DFS, participants provided a rating in terms of how “typical” it was for them to have such an experience in the last several months, on a 5-point Likert scale (5= very typical).

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Dispositional Flow Scale (DFS)

Merging of Action and Awareness •I perform automatically, without actively deciding how to proceed. •I do things spontaneously and automatically. •Things just seem to happen automatically. •I make the correct actions or decisions without having to think about it.	Challenge/Skill Balance •I feel competent enough to meet the high demands of the situation. •I am challenged, but I believe that my skills will allow me to meet that challenge. •I feel just the right amount of challenge. •The challenge and my skills are at an equally high level.	Sense of Control •I feel like I can control what I am doing. •I feel as though I have everything under control. •I feel in total control of my thought processes. •I feel in total control of my body.
Clear Goals I know what I want to achieve. I clearly know what I want to do. My goals are clearly defined. I have a strong sense of what I want to accomplish.	Autotelic Experience The experience is extremely rewarding. I love the feeling of performing the activity and want to capture it again. The experience leaves me feeling great. I really enjoy the experience.	Concentration on Task I have total concentration. It is no effort to keep my mind on what is happening. My attention is focused entirely on what I am doing. I have no difficulty concentrating.
Loss of Self Consciousness I am not concerned with how I present myself. I am not worried about what others might be thinking of me. I am not concerned with how others might be evaluating me.	Transformation of Time It feels like time goes by quickly. Time seems to alter (i.e., to either slow down or speed up). I lose my normal awareness of time. The way time passes seems to be different from normal.	Unambiguous Feedback I am aware of how well I am performing. It is really clear to me how my performance is going. I have a good sense about how well I am doing.

Results

Test/Retest Reliabilities

Total DFS	.610
Merging Action and Awareness	.560
Clear Goals	.561
Loss of Self Consciousness	.361
Challenge/Skill Balance	.568
Autotelic Experience	.531
Transformation of Time	.554
Sense of Control	.637
Concentration on Task	.728
Unambiguous Feedback	.640

Correlations between Total DFS and ...

Agreeableness	.298
Openness	.199
Extraversion	.012
Neuroticism	-.179
Conscientiousness	.276
Life Satisfaction	.249
Mindfulness	.199

Internal Consistency (α)	.92
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CONCLUSIONS

- Individuals vary in their capacities to self-regulate into a state of Flow, so that Flow can be considered as a dispositional trait.
- The internal structure of Dispositional Flow is well aligned with that of measures of the Flow state.
- Dispositional Flow in daily activity is related to a certain aspects of personality, and importantly, life satisfaction, suggesting that Dispositional Flow may contribute to self-regulation of activities for optimal success and enjoyment.

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