Get Into “The Zone” More Frequently with This Subtle Mental Adjustment

Description

> Everything else goes away. It almost happens in slow motion, even though you’re doing things at the correct time with the music and everything. Nothing else matters; it is just such an eerie, eerie feeling. The audience fades away, except for the brief moment when they were clapping so loudly – actually that was just a part of us. It was all a part of our experience; it never took us out of our focus.
>
> -A figure skater’s description of flow, from *Flow in Sports* (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999)

Once in a while, we’re lucky to have transcendent moments like this on stage.

Where everything feels effortless and things just click. And we enter that magical state of deep engagement that’s known as “flow.”

Like in the figure skater’s recollection above, descriptions of flow often highlight a heightened state of focus. It’s like we enter into a kind of trance, completely immersed in the present, and irrelevant details (like the audience) and worries (like memory or shaky bow) just fade away.

The research on flow does suggest that our attention is optimized when we’re in “the zone.” But is attention something we can manipulate to get into flow states on command? Or is optimal attention just one of the side effects of being in the zone? It’s an interesting question to explore, as just because two things are related doesn’t mean one causes the other.

For instance, the amount of cheese consumed in the US is highly correlated with the number of people who died by becoming tangled in their bedsheets (.947). And the number of people in the US who were killed by misusing a lawnmower is correlated with military defense spending in the UK (.974).

But eating more cheese didn’t cause an increase in the number of people who got tangled in their bedsheets. And the number of people who were killed by their lawnmowers in the US can’t possibly have caused an increase in defense spending over in the UK.

So what about focus and flow? Might getting into “the zone” be something we can control, by adopting a particular kind of focus?

Xbox time!

A team of researchers recruited 33 undergraduate and graduate students to participate in a driving

simulation study (Harris, Vine, & Wilson, 2018).

Specifically, the participants were set up in front of a 50-inch TV, with a racing chair, steering wheel, accelerator and brake pedals, all hooked up to an Xbox running Forza 5.

5 races

Everyone started out by completing 3 practice races[1] to get used to the game and the setup.

Then, it was time to race for real. Where each participant completed two "official" races for time.

However, to test the effect of different types of focus on flow states, half were instructed to adopt an *internal* focus, while the other half were asked to use an *external* focus.

The **internal group's** instructions were: "As you drive, keep your eyes on the road and maintain your focus *on your hands on the steering wheel*. This should help you steer more smoothly."

The **external group's** instructions were: "As you drive, keep your eyes on the road and maintain your focus *on where you are heading*. This should help you become less distracted."

And after each race, participants completed a 10-question flow assessment to see how "in-the-zone" they felt during the race. With questions like "I feel just the right amount of challenge" and "I am totally absorbed in what I am doing," rated on a 1-7 scale where 1=not at all and 7=very much.

So did focus type have any effect on flow states?

Focus and flow

Well, yes, indeed it did.

With an average flow score of 46.88 (out of 70), the external focus group reported significantly higher flow ratings than did the internal focus group (32.91).

In terms of race performance, however, it's a little surprising that the external and internal groups performed about the same, with no statistically significant difference in their race times.

But the researchers note that even though the internal group was instructed to focus on their hands, they were also told to keep their eyes on the road. Which did add an external focus component to the task, and may have resulted in a semi-internal/semi-external type of focus, rather than a more purely internal focus.

Nevertheless, there *was* a significant relationship between flow and performance. Meaning, regardless of which group you were in, the more in flow you were, the better your performance tended to be.

So what does this all mean for life outside of Forza 5?

Takeaways

Well, a driving simulator on the Xbox and a full recital in front of an audience may be two different things, but the findings do suggest that flow states are more under our control than we might think.

That the heightened focus we experience in flow states is not just something nice that happens in those moments of awesomeness, but could be a key skill that allows us to *get into* the zone in the first place.

In the last few weeks, you might recall that we actually explored a few studies on how shifting your focus externally when performing, can help increase the level of your playing (like here and here).

Looking back at your experiments with this, do you remember feeling a little more zoned in, and immersed in your playing too?

If you haven't already experimented with shifting to an external focus, give it a try the next time you do a run-through, mock audition, or any sort of performance (tl;dr version: focus on the sound you want as opposed to your fingers or the mechanics of playing your instrument).

Hopefully you'll find that with a bit of practice, this small tweak to your mental focus will help you have many more of those good days on stage!

Reference

Harris, D. J., Vine, S. J., & Wilson, M. R. (2018). An external focus of attention promotes flow experience during simulated driving. *European Journal of Sport Science, 1–10*.

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