

A New Way to Understand Flow and Anxiety and States In Between for Hospice Palliative Care Volunteers

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One of the great pleasures we experience as human beings is to be in that marvellous state of flow when everything seems to be connecting for us, we're focused, completely involved. Anxiety, at the other end of the spectrum, is a terribly unpleasant state for anyone to be in. So the question arises: can we get better at cultivating states of flow and alleviating states of anxiety, for ourselves and others?

Hospice and palliative care workers who want to explore interesting and practical answers to this question may find Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's extensive research into the concept of "flow" both illuminating and wonderfully helpful. (See his 1990 book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* and his 2003 book *Good Business*)

Essentially, Csíkszentmihályi (pronounced ≈ cheek-sent-me-ha-ee) has developed a framework that reveals how the relationship between our challenges and our skills as human beings tends to affect the quality of our experiences, for better or worse.

If our challenges in life are highly engaging (singing a new choral piece for example) and we have high level of skills for meeting them, we may find ourselves in a state of flow. However, if the challenges are high (family conflict) but our skills for dealing with them are low, we are likely to find ourselves in a state of anxiety. Low challenges plus low skills lead to boredom and apathy.

All told, his model identifies 8 states of mind (arousal, flow, control and relaxation on the 'up' side; boredom, apathy, worry and anxiety on the 'down' side).

As individuals we can immediately see examples in our own lives of our being in most of these states. What's interesting is to begin to see how building skills and knowledge can relax us and give us more control.

The implications for anyone involved in palliative and hospice care—where boredom, apathy, worry and anxiety may be particularly apparent—are well worth reflecting on and discussing with peers. For me and other volunteers I've shown it to, Csíkszentmihályi's "flow" chart has been an understanding and empathy builder. It gives us new ways of understanding and honouring our own experience and gaining insight into others.

To see an illustration of this model and a practical way to use it for self-development, visit www.chpca.net → Volunteer Connection → Resources/Links. For more information on Csíkszentmihályi, please visit http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mihaly_Csikszentmihalyi