

THE BIG IDEAS

What Is Creativity?

Domain + field + person.

Attention

+ Being kinda weird.

Complexity

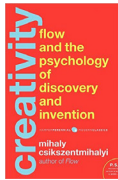
+ Resolving dichotomies.

Rhythms

Your ideal days?

Creativity + Flow

The 9 elements.



Creativity

The Psychology of Discovery and Invention

BY MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI · HARPER PERENNIAL © 2013 · 480 PAGES

“This book is about creativity, based on histories of contemporary people who know about it firsthand. It starts with a description of what creativity is, it reviews the way creative people work and live, and it ends with ideas about how to make your life more like that of the creative exemplars I have studied. There are no simple solutions in these pages and a few unfamiliar ideas. The real story of creativity is more difficult and strange than many overly optimistic accounts have claimed. For one thing, as I will try to show, an idea or product that deserves the label ‘creative’ arises from the synergy of many sources and not only from the mind of a single person. It is easier to enhance creativity by changing conditions in the environment than by trying to make people think more creatively. And a genuinely creative accomplishment is almost never the result of a sudden insight, a lightbulb flashing on in the dark, but comes after years of hard work.”

~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi from *Creativity*

Creativity with a *capital C*—the type of Creativity that changes the world.

How can we go about cultivating it in our lives? That’s what this book is all about.

Our guide is [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#)—one of the founders of the positive psychology movement. Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced “cheeks sent me high”) is a professor at Claremont Graduate University and the former Chair of the Department of Psychology at the University of Chicago who wrote the classic book [Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience](#) (see Notes).

This book features the wisdom gained from over three decades of research along with over one hundred interviews with extraordinary people—from scientists and business leaders to artists and poets.

Warning: Although deeply insightful, it’s not an easy read. If you’re looking to understand creativity at a deeper level via one of the world’s leading (and legendary) psychologists then I think you’ll enjoy it as much as I did. (Get the book [here](#).)

It’s packed with Big Ideas. I’m excited to share a few of my favorites so let’s jump straight in!

WHAT IS CREATIVITY?

“So the definition that follows from this perspective is: Creativity is any act, idea, or product that changes an existing domain, or that transforms an existing domain into a new one. And the definition of a creative person is: someone whose thoughts or actions change a domain, or establish a new domain. It is important to remember, however, that a domain cannot be changed without the explicit or implicit consent of a field responsible for it.”

Being the brilliant, precise scientist he is, Csikszentmihalyi takes the time to establish what he means by creativity and who qualifies as a creative person.

There are three aspects to his systems definition: the *domain*, the *field* and the *person*.

“ Like the climber who reaches the top of the mountain and, after looking around in wonder at the magnificent view, rejoices at the sight of an even taller neighboring peak, these people never run out of exciting goals.”

~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

"Indeed, it could be said that the most obvious achievement of these people is that they created their own lives. And how they achieved that is something worth knowing, because it can be applied to all our lives."

~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

First, we have a *domain* that has been changed. Mathematics, physics, biology, art, philosophy. These are domains. Creative individuals substantively change (or create!) a domain thereby changing culture in the process.

Second, we have the *field*. These are the gatekeepers who decide which ideas are accepted in the domain. Without the field integrating the new ideas, a domain has not been changed.

Then, of course, there is the individual *person* who actually uses the existing symbols of the domain to create something new. But, very importantly, Csikszentmihalyi stresses the fact that this type of creativity can only exist via the system that includes the domain and field.

Which leads us to an important distinction. We often call an interesting or witty individual "creative." But, unless they're making a unique contribution that substantively changes culture, Csikszentmihalyi would call them "brilliant" rather than creative. This book isn't about them.

FOCUSING YOUR ATTENTION + BEING KINDA WEIRD

"Another consequence of limited attention is that creative individuals are often considered odd—or even arrogant, selfish, and ruthless. It is important to keep in mind that these are not traits of creative people, but traits that the rest of us attribute to them on the basis of our perceptions. When we meet a person who focuses all of his attention on physics or music and ignores us and forgets our names, we call that person 'arrogant' even though he may be extremely humble and friendly if he could only spare attention from his pursuit. If that person is so taken with his domain that he fails to take our wishes into account we call him 'insensitive' or 'selfish' even though such attitudes are far from his mind. Similarly, if he pursues his work regardless of other people's plans we call him 'ruthless.' Yet, it is practically impossible to learn a domain deeply enough to make a change in it without dedicating all of one's attention to it and thereby appearing to be arrogant, selfish, and ruthless to those who believe they have a right to the creative person's attention."

Csikszentmihalyi kicks off the book talking about ATTENTION and creativity. He makes the incredibly important points that a) our attention is finite and b) it takes a TON of it to master and then change a domain.

And... c) An unfortunate by-product of that is the fact that the most Creative among us are often considered odd because they so fiercely immerse themselves in their chosen domain—channeling so much of their precious attention in pursuit of what matters most to them.

Get this: "For example, Leonardo da Vinci, certainly one of the most creative persons... was apparently reclusive, and almost compulsive in his behavior. If you had met him at a cocktail party, you would have thought that he was a tiresome bore and would have left him standing in a corner as soon as possible."

Hah! I think that presupposes da Vinci would have even shown up at that party, eh?! My hunch is Leo would have appreciated [Laurie Helgoe's](#) (author of [Introvert Power](#)) quip: "I like to party and by party I mean read books." :)

Back to this important point: "It is practically impossible to learn a domain deeply enough to make a change in it without dedicating all of one's attention to it."

Spotlight on YOU. What Domain are *you* committed to mastering? Is it business? Art? Science? Parenting? Whether you aspire to be Creative with a Capital C or just more personally creative, it's *essential* that you dedicate your precious attention to that which you aspire to master. Are you? And, are you willing to be viewed as a little weird by those who don't quite get why you're so committed to focusing your attention on what matters most to you?

P.S. Csikszentmihalyi conducted 100+ interviews of exemplary Creators. He sent out invitations to the individuals he hoped to interview. Many declined for various reasons. The great

"To change personality means to learn new patterns of attention."

~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

"After creative energy is awakened, it is necessary to protect it. We must erect barriers against distractions, dig channels so that energy can flow more freely, find ways to escape outside temptations and interruptions."

~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

management thinker Peter Drucker was one of those who declined. He did so via this note:

"I am greatly honored and flattered by your kind letter of February 14th—for I have admired you and your work for many years, and I have learned much from it. But, my dear Professor Csikszentmihalyi, I am afraid I have to disappoint you. I could not possibly answer your questions. I am told I am creative—I don't know what that means. . . I just keep on plodding. . . ."

. . . I hope you will not think me presumptuous or rude if I say that one of the secrets of productivity (in which I believe whereas I do not believe in creativity) is to have a VERY BIG waste paper basket to take care of ALL invitations such as yours—productivity in my experience consists of NOT doing anything that helps the work of other people but to spend all one's time on the work the Good Lord has fitted one to do, and to do well."

#VERYBIGwastepaperbasketfordistractions

P.P.S. Keep this in mind: "It is often surprising to hear extremely successful, productive people claim that they are basically lazy. Yet the claim is believable. It is not that they have more energy and discipline than you or I; but they do develop habits of discipline that allow them to accomplish seemingly impossible tasks. These habits are often so trivial that the people who practice them seem strange and obsessive. At first many people were mildly shocked that the great Albert Einstein always wore the same old sweater and baggy trousers. Why was he being so weird? Of course, Einstein wasn't trying to upset anybody. He was just cutting down on the daily effort involved in deciding what clothes to wear, so his mind could focus on matters that to him were more important. It may seem that choosing slacks and shirts takes so little time that it is pretentious to worry about it. But suppose it takes only two minutes each day to decide how to dress. That adds up to 730 minutes, or twelve hours a year. Now think of the other repetitive things we have to do throughout the day—comb hair, drive cars, eat and so on. And then think not only of the time it takes to do each of these things but of the interruption in the train of thought they cause, both before and after. Having to choose a tie could derail a whole hours' worth of reflection! No wonder Einstein preferred to play it safe and wear the same old clothes."

#HABITS101 (<— Seriously.)

And... This reminds me of [Adam Grant](#)'s "idiosyncrasy credits" from [Originals](#) (see Notes). This is worth keeping in mind: "*Idiosyncrasy credits accrue through respect, not rank: they're based on contributions. We squash a low-status member who tries to challenge the status quo, but tolerate and sometimes even applaud the originality of a high-status star.*"

COMPLEXITY + DICHOTOMIES

"Are there then no traits that distinguish creative people? If I had to express in one word what makes their personalities different from others, it would be *complexity*. By this I mean that they show tendencies of thought and action that in most people are segregated. They contain contradictory extremes—instead of being an 'individual,' each of them is a 'multitude.' Like the color white that includes all the hues of the spectrum, they tend to bring together the entire range of human possibilities within themselves.

These qualities are present in all of us, but usually we are trained to develop only one pole of the dialectic. We might grow up cultivating the aggressive, competitive side of our nature, and disdain or repress the nurturing, cooperative side. A creative individual is more likely to be both aggressive and cooperative, either at the same time or at different times, depending on the situation. Having a complex personality means being able to express the full range of traits that are potentially present in the human repertoire but usually atrophy because we think one or the other pole is 'good,' whereas the other extreme is 'bad.'"

The personalities and behaviors of creative people vary widely.

"Therefore, the novelty that survives to change a domain is usually the work of someone who can operate at both ends of these polarities—and that is the kind of person we call 'creative.'"

~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

"One thing about creative work is that it's never done. In different words, every person we interviewed said it was equally true that they had worked every minute of their careers, and that they had never worked a day in all their lives. They experienced even the most focused immersion in extremely difficult tasks as a lark, an exhilarating and playful adventure."

~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

He tells us: "One can be creative by living like a monk, or by burning the candle at both ends. Michelangelo was not greatly fond of women, while Picasso couldn't get enough of them. Both changed the domain of painting, even though their personalities had little in common."

Got it. Creators have different personalities. But if we're looking for one word to capture the essence of what makes them unique? *Complexity*. Like the color white, creative individuals "tend to bring together the entire range of human possibilities within themselves."

Let's take a quick look at ten of these dialectical poles creative individuals are able to integrate without internal tension:

1. "Creative individuals have a great deal of physical energy, but they are also often quiet and at rest." <— In other words, they MAKE WAVES #smokeybot style!
2. "Creative individuals tend to be smart, yet also naive at the same time." Csikszentmihalyi tells us that beyond a certain basic threshold, IQ isn't that important and reminds us of Goethe's wisdom that "naïveté is the most important attribute of genius."
3. "A third—paradoxical trait refers to the related combination of playfulness and discipline." Creators have a "bounce" of playfulness AND a tenacious work ethic.
4. "Creative individuals alternate between imagination and fantasy at one end, and a rooted sense of reality at the other." Sounds a lot like Mental Contrasting/WOOP to me! (See Notes on [Rethinking Positive Thinking](#) if you haven't yet; re-read, tattoo on brain if you have! :)
5. "Creative people seem to harbor opposite tendencies on the continuum between extroversion and introversion." "Hello ambivert!"
6. "Creative individuals are also remarkably humble and proud at the same time." Csikszentmihalyi tells us these individuals don't spend a lot of time thinking about the past as they're so excited about the future. As Emerson advises: "Genius appeals to the future!"
7. "In all cultures, men are brought up to be 'masculine' and to disregard and repress those aspects of their temperament that the culture regards as 'feminine,' whereas women are expected to do the opposite. Creative individuals to a certain extent escape this rigid gender role of stereotyping." Csikszentmihalyi describes this as a sort of "psychological androgyny" where one can be simultaneously aggressive and nurturing.
8. "Generally, creative people are thought to be rebellious and independent. Yet it is impossible to be creative without having first internalized a domain of culture. And a person must believe in the importance of such a domain in order to learn its rules; hence, he or she must be to a certain extent a traditionalist." Think: Being both traditional + conservative AND rebellious + iconoclastic.
9. "Most creative persons are very *passionate* about their work, yet they can be extremely *objective* about it as well." Simultaneously attached and detached. ALL IN *while* open to feedback to optimize!
10. "Finally, the openness and sensitivity of creative individuals often exposes them to *suffering and pain yet also a great deal of enjoyment*." To want to change things, we must be sensitive to what's not working—and be willing to endure that pain. AND... We need to have fun. Creative individuals LOVE what they do and feel blessed to be able to do it!

P.S. In many ways, this book reminds me of Maslow's work. Rather than "self-actualizers" having "peak experiences," Csikszentmihalyi studied "Creative" people in "flow." One of the 19 characteristics of his self-actualizers that Maslow talked about in [Motivation and Personality](#) (see Notes) was a "resolution of dichotomies" such that: "The dichotomy between selfishness and unselfishness disappears altogether in healthy people because in principle every act is both selfish and unselfish."

"Creative persons differ from one another in a variety of ways, but in one respect they are unanimous: They all love what they do. It is not the hope of achieving fame or making money that drives them; rather, it is the opportunity to do the work that they enjoy doing."

~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

P.P.S. How about a little Whitman? *"Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself. I am vast. I have multitudes!"*

WHAT ARE YOUR BEST RHYTHMS?

"Most creative individuals find out early what their best rhythms are for sleeping, eating, and working, and abide by them even when it is tempting to do otherwise. They wear clothes that are comfortable, they interact only with people they find congenial, they do only things they think are important. Of course, such idiosyncrasies are not endearing to those they have to deal with, and it is not surprising that creative people are generally considered strange and difficult to get along with. But personalizing patterns of action helps to free the mind from the expectations that make demands on attention and allows intense concentration on matters that count."

→ *"Most creative individuals find out early what their best rhythms are for sleeping, eating, and working, and abide by them even when it is tempting to do otherwise."*

Dilbert-creator Scott Adams would agree.

He's ALL (!!!) about creating the systems to crush it. (Which is the only way you can create nearly 10,000 (!) comic strips.)

Here's how he puts it in [How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big](#) (see Notes): *"One of the most important tricks for maximizing your productivity involves matching your mental state to the task. For example, when I first wake up, my brain is relaxed and creative. The thought of writing a comic is fun, and it's relatively easy because my brain is in exactly the right mode for that task. I know from experience that trying to be creative in the midafternoon is a waste of time. By 2:00 P.M. all I can do is regurgitate the ideas I've seen elsewhere. At 6:00 A.M. I'm a creator, and by 2:00 P.M. I'm a copier."*

Everyone is different, but you'll discover that most writers work either early in the morning or past midnight. That's when the creative writing juices flow most easily."

So... That begs the question: What are YOUR best rhythms?!

When are you most on? Are you structuring your days to optimize your energy + attention and sticking to it even when you're tempted to do otherwise?! Let's do that.

P.S. We talk about this a lot in [MASTERPIECE DAYS 101](#). If you haven't watched that/ downloaded the Workbook + Daily Journal sheet, I think you'll dig it.

P.P.S. Oh, yah. There's that "creators are often seen as kinda weird" thing again. Yep. That theme comes up a lot. Gotta own it if we want to crush it! :)

"Paradoxically, the self expands through acts of self-forgetfulness."

~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

CREATIVITY + FLOW (THE 9 ELEMENTS)

"The flow experience was described in almost identical terms regardless of the activity that produced it. Athletes, artists, religious mystics, scientists, and ordinary working people described their most rewarding experiences with very similar words. And the description did not vary much by culture, gender or age; old and young, rich and poor, men and women, Americans and Japanese seem to experience enjoyment in the same way, even though they may be doing very different things to attain it. Nine main elements were mentioned over and over again to describe how it feels when an experience is enjoyable."

Flow.

Understanding this state of optimal experience is what Csikszentmihalyi is best known for and what he dedicated his career to understanding. (Again, see Notes on [Flow!](#))

Let's take a quick look at the nine main elements of creating flow in our lives:

"But if you don't learn to be creative in your personal life, the chances of contributing to the culture drop even closer to zero. And what really matters, in the last account, is not whether your name has been attached to a recognized discovery, but whether you have lived a full and creative life."

~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

1. "There are clear goals every step of the way." Quite simply: You CANNOT have flow without starting with a clear goal/target/focus for your attention. Period.
2. "There is immediate feedback to one's actions." The rock climber knows if they're doing well b/c they're still on the mountain. The musician knows if his last note was on.
3. "There is a balance between challenges and skills." Too much challenge = anxiety. Too little challenge = boredom. Find the flow channel right at the sweet spot where challenge = skills.
4. "Action and awareness are merged." In short, we're focused. We have one-pointed attention. We're not thinking of one thing while doing another.
5. "Distractions are excluded from consciousness." We're in DEEP WORK mode. Our attention isn't splintered by a million distractions. We're all in and intensely present.
6. "There is no worry of failure." We're too focused and engaged to think of failure.
7. "Self-consciousness disappears." There's no room for self-consciousness when you're truly ALL IN. Sure sign you're out of flow is when you're wondering how you're looking.
8. "The sense of time becomes distorted." It can feel shorter or longer than it was but: "Clock time no longer marks equal lengths of experienced time."
9. "The activity becomes autotelic." Autotelic is Greek-speak for something that is an end in itself. Most of the time we do things as a means to an end. In flow, the activity itself is its own reward. <— Making our entire lives one little autotelic moment after another—from the most mundane dishes to the most sublime experiences = true mastery.

Well, there we go. That's a super quick look at this great book. Time to get our flow on as we tap into our Creativity and optimize + actualize!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.