

Mood, in psychological terms, generally refers to our general emotional well-being. We speak about people being mellow or crabby, good-natured or irritable, and we apply these terms to their overall personality. Moods refer to one's general traits while feelings refer to one's temporary emotional state. Moods are considered to be more long lasting than feelings or emotions, and they colour all of what we think, feel, and do.

Psychology has given us more words to describe bad moods than good moods, but consider terms like zest, vitality, contentment, ebullience, enthusiasm, and exuberance. These terms describe our very best moods, when we are content or cheer-ful. Good moods infuse not just our minds but also our bodies. They put a spring in the step and a twinkle in the eye. In a good mood people feel alive and positive about most activities.

The ability to experience positive moods has been termed *positive affectivity* by psychologists who research these things. Research supports the notion that peoples general level of positive or negative affectivity remains pretty stable across weeks, months, years, and even decades. Grumpy old men may well have been testy young men, petulant youths, whiny children, and difficult babies.

Another interesting finding about moods, or positive affectivity, is that not only does it remain relatively stable across time, so too does its variability. Some people show more of a range in their moods than do other people, and they do so consistently. In other words, people's moodiness remains consistent too.

In relation to good moods, psychologists have also studied why people choose certain activities for "enjoyment". Researchers studied chess players, rock climbers, dancers, artists, and sports people and discovered a phenomenon they called *flow*. *Flow* is what happens to people who are engaged in enjoyable activities. If you think of something that you really enjoy doing you will realize that when you are doing it your attention is solely on the activity itself, time passes quickly for you, and your sense of yourself as an 'actor' is lost. The aftermath of the flow experience is uplifting or even invigorating. It is usually non-emotional and often unconscious. Any sports person will identify with the description that "You lose track of time, you don't hear the crowd, and you don't even know how many points you have. You don't think. You are just playing. Everything is instinctive." *Flow* is the experience of working at full capacity.

You are in *flow* when the challenge you face meet's your skills. For this reason you don't have to be an expert at what you do to experience this. Being a bad golfer does not mean you don't get absorbed by it and enjoy it. For these reasons watching TV or just hanging out with friends, fail to produce flow because they do not match up challenge with skill.

In everyday life we encounter what we might call *junk flow* – that is activities that are absorbing but not especially challenging – like watching reality TV, playing video games, or engaging in gossip. Junk flow absorbs you but does not challenge you, does not push you to the edge of yourself.

*Flow* can be experienced in all kinds of activities, at work or play, but is usually an activity experienced as voluntary. Homework for most young school children strikes a good balance between challenge and skill though by the time they reach adolescence the voluntary aspect of it diminishes and they experience less flow.

People differ in the degree to which they experience timeless enjoyment in activities that produce flow but it does appear that adolescents who experience more flow in certain activities show positive consequences in terms of concentration or creativity. For these reasons, learning to master any challenge like sport, music, reading, or art builds what you might call psychological capital. In these kinds of activities you build up a store of well-being and self-esteem that can be drawn down when needed.

Every child, adolescent, and adult has to learn what his/her skills are and to find an appropriate challenge that inspires and absorbs the individual. Try to restructure your day to include some flow experiences. Non-challenging routine does not promote well-being. You never hear someone boasting “I am getting very good at watching TV, I am looking forward to tonight to perfect my TV watching skills.” We are at our best when we meet a challenge with our skills, no matter how big or small. Sport is a great way to achieve this, but so too can DIY, adult learning, crosswords, bridge, reading, good conversation, and writing articles for the Echo.

The interesting conclusion that can be drawn from this is that you do not have to be a happy person to enjoy life! If you can experience flow, you are alive. Great artists, writers, chessmasters, and sportspeople have discovered this. So too the young woman from an unhappy home who is transformed by the music of her violin. The soul can always sing.