



The Athena Wellness Podcast  
Episode 065 – How Creative Flow Enhances Well-being  
August 22, 2021

00:05

Welcome to the Athena Wellness podcast, the show that invites you to take a seat around the community fire and listen to stories that inspire. I'm your host, Kathy Robinson, author, coach and founder of Athena Wellness, a company that's dedicated to supporting you on your journey to live more wholeheartedly.

00:30

Hello and welcome to Episode 65. Thanks so much for joining me.

I was having a conversation with my accountability partner, Robyn, earlier this week. You may remember Dr. Robyn from Episode 21. One of the questions she asked me was, "Where do you get your ideas for the podcast?" And I answered without thinking. I said, "I'm in an ongoing conversation with my business."

We both paused for a moment and then I clarified that I wasn't walking around talking to the business. But I do feel a call and response relationship with Athena Wellness. And it's rooted in creative energy.

And I've found that the deeper I go with anything, a business, a partnership, a writing project, nature - the more I set the stage to enter creative flow.



We've talked about creativity on the show before with our guests, as well as in standalone Episode 27 that covered creativity as a wellness practice. But today, we'll explore how to build your creative capacity in all aspects of your life and encourage creative flow. We'll cover:

- What creativity and creative capacity are and why they're beneficial to your well-being;
- What happens when you enter the state of creative flow; and
- How to encourage creative flow in your everyday activities.

So sit back, take a nice long breath to ground yourself in presence, and let's get started.

02:19

So what do you think about when you hear the word *creativity*? Maybe it's art, or music, or dance. And while creating art has been shown to promote psychological, physical and emotional health, the creativity we'll be talking about today is broader. It's the ability to think and act differently by asking questions, making observations, experimenting, or connecting disparate concepts to make something new, something better.

Creativity can be expressed in many ways. Some people are creative through art, like Pablo Picasso or Jimi Hendrix. Or something their thinking, like Albert Einstein. And then there were those who are visionaries, or innovators. Some are creative through their adventures. And others like to make things whether they be computer coders, or start-up entrepreneurs, or inventors. And then there were those who make their dreams come true, like building a rocket and traveling to outer space.

03:36



The creative possibilities are endless. And research has shown that when we flex our creative muscles, we build capacity to deal with experimental failure, to adapt, and to problem-solve, which leads to stronger mental, emotional and physical well-being.

I came across a letter written by the president of the Interlochen Center for the Arts in Michigan. He wrote this letter to his students. Now this Academy prides itself in developing well-rounded students who are prepared to lead positive change beyond the arts. I'll link the letter in the show notes. But here's an excerpt that highlights why building creative capacity is a critical life skill.

04:27

“In a world increasingly influenced by artificial intelligence and automation, creative capacity will remain essential and enduring across all professions. It's a mindset that allows you to tap into your own wellspring of creative thought, not just through the arts, but as an approach to life. The more you exercise this core capacity, the more you'll reflexively draw upon creativity to meet both challenges and opportunities.

Creative solutions will generate the breakthroughs we need to solve many of the complex challenges our world faces. And as the path toward your vision is anything but a straight line, let creativity guide you toward your ultimate goals.”

Pretty insightful, huh? I should also note that creative capacity is the second principle at this Academy. The first is *mindfulness, wellness and resilience as a way of encouraging flow in creative response*. That's so wise.

05:43



And should these graduates find their way to the business world, they'll be well equipped. It's been found that business leaders who are considered creative or more likely to be comfortable with ambiguity and disruption and have a willingness to innovate. And business teams who brainstorm and innovate together function at higher levels of well-being while innovating for the company.

What happens when you enter the state of creative flow? If there's one person who's credited with formulating the theory of creative flow, it's psychologist, Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who wrote a book entitled *Flow, the Psychology of Optimal Experience*. He gave an overview of his theory in a TED talk in 2004. And I'll link both the book and the talk in the show notes.

Dr. Mihaly theory is that people are happiest when they're in the state of flow - that is, when they're completely immersed and absorbed in a situation. This is a highly focused mental state where performance and productivity soar effortlessly and we get lost in the creative activity.

I'm sure you can recall a time when you've witnessed this - a pro athlete who's in the zone and can't seem to miss or a musician who's just dialed into the groove and seems unaware of anything but the music. Perhaps you can bring to mind a time when you felt or feel the same - while physically training, during an awe inspiring experience, or in the flow with your business or creative pursuit when things felt effortless, spontaneous, and enjoyable.

07:45

When we're in that state, time slows, perception sharpens and we're unaware of anything else. As Dr. Mihaly describes it, being in flow is when we're "Completely involved in an



activity for its own sake, the ego falls away. Time flies, every action, movement and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved and you're using your skills to the utmost.”

So here are some characteristics of the flow state:

- There's complete engagement and involvement in the task with high levels of focus and concentration;
- There's a sense of transcendence, that is, the ecstatic feeling we get when we're just outside of our regular sense of reality;
- There's an inner knowledge we tap into giving us a sense of what needs to be done and how to do it;
- That knowing comes from practicing the skills needed to perform the activity and then knowing it's doable, even if it's a stretch and there's an egoless sense of inner peace in that knowing.
- There's no sense of time or awareness of physical needs, like hunger; and
- There's no goal beyond the activity itself.

09:16

There are physical reasons for this enhanced state, in particular, in brain function. When we enter flow, brainwaves slow down and the mind quiets. Much like when we meditate or practice yoga. Also, a mood enhancing cocktail of chemicals are released. Endorphins, serotonin and dopamine, which impact creativity, as well as pleasure and well-being - think of a runner's high kinda feeling.

And there are a number of benefits for those who can enter this state. They include:

- The willingness and intrinsic motivation to learn, develop and master skills;
- Increased positive mental state;



- An enhanced ability to manage emotions;
- Access to more inspiration and creativity; and
- Greater life engagement, fulfillment and happiness.

Before we talk about how to encourage the flow state, let's talk about what can hinder it.

10:24

Five things come to mind:

1. Distraction: email, phone, too noisy or for some, too quiet;
2. Overcommitment;
3. Self-awareness, meaning the inner critic, or there's some sense of self-editing or censoring while you're performing the activity;
4. Fatigue; and
5. Disengagement.

Here's how I handle these hindrances to flow.

Distraction is my number one derailer - hands down. I'm constantly finding ways to keep my focus, such as writing with a virtual group each weekday from 8 to 9am. I routinely get lost during these writing sessions and I'm always surprised when 9 o'clock comes around.

For the inner critic, I think the best way to deal with that is practice. The more time you spend doing an activity, the better you get at separating the creative process from the improvement process, which is the editing and the evaluation phase.

Regarding overcommitment, fatigue and disengagement - there were numerous times in my corporate career when I was dealing with all three yet I still could get lost in a work



project, especially later in the evening after everyone else went home. I would look up from my computer and be shocked at how much time had passed. And while it's good to keep overcommitment, fatigue and disengagement in mind, it's been my experience they don't preclude the flow state.

12:13

When we create, our spirit is engaged and it brings presence and well-being into our lives. When we enter flow state, we become more productive and creative. So it's worthwhile to think about how to invite creative flow into our everyday activities and even redesign how we operate, so we can feel and perform at our best.

Here are five things to consider:

1. **Focus:** As I mentioned, this is the one I wrestle with the most. Some of my strategies include preparing for the activity in advance and scheduling the time. For example, I prepare for my morning writing sessions the night before. I decide on the topic and I have my writing materials near my computer. I set the coffee pot, lay out my workout clothes, and know what time I need to wake and work out so I'm ready to write at 8am. All of this helps me not to expend unnecessary mental energy in the morning.
2. **Structure:** As someone who thrives with organization and simplicity, I love this one. It may seem counterintuitive - you may think that structure would dampen flow. But for some, myself included, having a clear game plan gives the left brain something to latch onto while the right brain roams. The framework can be as simple as the activity and start and stop times or more involved, like the morning writing process I just shared. With the right amount of structure, my mind is free to think beyond the tactical.



3. **Stretch:** This is about continuously raising the bar so you can go deeper with your activity. If things get too routine, our minds will wander instead of staying present. Overcoming new challenges encourages us to keep learning and be in the moment. And that engagement fuels flow.
4. **Practice:** When we see people in flow, like sports icons or musicians, what we're witnessing is the result of thousands of hours of practice. This is because when knowledge, skills, and practice align, flow states are not uncommon. Training in improvisation techniques, like the ones actors, musicians, and creators use, can get us in the flow quickly while having some fun.
5. **Choose something you love:** Even though it's not critical to love an activity to experience flow, it's helpful if you're newer to the flow concept. While choosing something you love is not essential, it certainly makes the time spent doing the activity more enjoyable.

15:28

What I love about inviting flow into the everyday is that creativity makes our activities, even our work and chores, more fun and engaging by connecting with our creative channel. Challenges become problem-solving opportunities, and our activities bring a sense of newness and aliveness as we connect with deeper currents in our lives.

And yes, you may even find yourself entering into a conversation with your business or your life, to get a sense of what's working, what's not working, new ideas, new connections, new possibilities, and new ways of being in flow.





I'd like to leave you with three quotes today. The first is from author Mary Lou Cook, who said, "Creativity is inventing, experimenting, growing, taking risks, breaking rules, making mistakes and having fun."

The second is from author Julia Cameron, who said, "When we open ourselves to our creativity, we open ourselves to the creator's creativity within us and our lives."

And the third is from Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, who said, "Be still like a mountain and flow like a great river."

17:03

Thank you so much for joining me today. I know there are many ways you can spend your time. Thank you for choosing to spend it with me. Until our paths cross again, be kind to yourself and show your Warrior Spirit some love.

If you know anyone who could benefit from today's episode, please pass it on. And many thanks for supporting the show by subscribing and leaving a review. It means a lot and it helps others find their way to our circle.

If you'd like to access the show notes, have a question you'd like addressed on a future episode, or would like a transcript of this episode, visit [www.AthenaWellness.com/podcast](http://www.AthenaWellness.com/podcast).

Until next time, be well!