

Participate and Flow

Marsha Linehan says, “participating is the ultimate goal.” Participating is one form of optimal or “peak” experience. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is a psychologist who has made it his life’s work to describe the optimal experience, flow. Csikszentmihalyi says, “Flow denotes the wholistic sensation when we act with total involvement.” Compare this to Linehan’s description of participate, “Participation is entering wholly into an activity, becoming one with an activity. It is throwing yourself into something. It is spontaneous behavior to a certain extent, although you can also do it mindfully.” I have taken Linehan’s descriptions of participate (italicized and bolded) and integrated them with Csikszentmihalyi’s descriptions of flow.

Enter into your experiences.

Imagine entering into your experiences through a door. When you step through the door, you enter a world of participate and flow. In this world, your reality changes from fragmented and disconnected to whole and connected. Your thoughts and feelings combine to form Wise Mind. In this world, you cope with whatever comes along with confidence. You do the best you can and that is good enough. Your goals are clear, but reaching the goal is not as important as the steps you take along the way.

Time disappears once you step through this door in this place and the only thing that matters is NOW. Your concentration deepens and you are completely

involved with what you are doing. Although you may experience serenity, or even joy, you are not aware of these feelings at the time. Often people describe their experience of flow as satisfying, gratifying, rewarding or stimulating. This is the kind of experience that recharges your batteries.

Once you cross this portal, every activity is an opportunity to practice skills, and practicing skills is its own reward. In this world of total involvement, you completely forget yourself, your problems, and the time.

Let yourself get involved in the moment, let go of ruminating.

The present is what matters. The gateway to flow is focusing your attention to the NOW. Ruminating is part of that running commentary from which you are trying to free yourself. Worries, problems, preoccupations, and other nagging issues separate you from being involved in the present moment. Rumination, the distracting dialogue of preoccupation, splits your awareness from your actions. Distraction detracts from flow. Stepping into the moment pushes away distractions. Use your interest, curiosity, and intuition to turn your mind back to your endeavor. Let your curiosity and intuitions guide you back to your undertaking. Throwing yourself into the task engages you in the moment.

“Willingness” is spontaneously doing just what is needed in a situation. In your Wise Mind you have to believe what is needed is doable (it is). Do what is needed and get involved in the moment. You can deal with any situation. The proof? You have so far.

Become one with your experience, completely forgetting yourself.

Have you ever been so immersed in an activity that you have forgotten the time, where you were, past problems, and future worries? Forgot yourself? Perhaps, you were puttering around the house, working in the garden, or reading a thriller. Some forget themselves and their surroundings while playing the piano, painting, or some other hobby. These activities generate flow because the effort seems easy and playful. Concentrating on these tasks seems natural almost effortless. Doing your taxes or your first day on a job are not going to result in flow. An easy, playful activity has more self-forgetting potential because your attention is focused completely on the activity.

The closer you get to flow, the more you concentrate and focus your attention. It is much easier to become one with your experience when the task is doable (like chores, grooming, playing games, crafts, or routine activities). Practice becoming one with your experiences as you go through the daily activities by focusing all your attention on your tasks.

With observe & describe you are aware of your awareness (noticing and putting words on your experience). In flow, you are aware of your actions but not aware of your awareness. Your attention is undivided.

When you become one with your experience, you are aware of your experience (actions) but not aware of your awareness (forgetting yourself). Control is no problem because the activity feels so intuitive and natural. This strong sense of control pushes out thoughts not directly related to your experience. Your focus is on your actions. Worries don't matter. Happiness is forgetting yourself.

Act intuitively from Wise Mind.

The five words of this heading just about sum up DBT.

Remember, Wise Mind is the integration of what you think and what you feel. Intuition goes beyond your thoughts and feelings to what you know. Such intuitive knowing is an expression of your inner wisdom or Wise Mind. You practice expressing Wise Mind when you skillfully meet your problems and challenges.

To be wise you have to practice being wise. Surprisingly, flow is more likely to happen during tasks that stretch your mental and physical capabilities than during relaxation, entertainment, or leisure. More people get flow from their jobs than from their free time activities. The ideal job for creating flow would have a challenge requiring skills, a chance of completion, the opportunity to concentrate, clear goals, and immediate feedback. Even mundane activities allow you to merge your actions and awareness - driving, reading, dressing, grooming, talking or walking. When performed whole-heartedly, the mundane (and free-time activities) can become the time-stopping activities of flow.

You ignore distractions by engaging your intuition and curiosity. Intuition leads you past distractions by focusing on doing the next right thing. Curiosity and flow often go together. When you are in the flow of curiosity, you have the desire to know, a lust for learning, and a thirst for knowledge. Curiosity is a powerful motivation for flow.

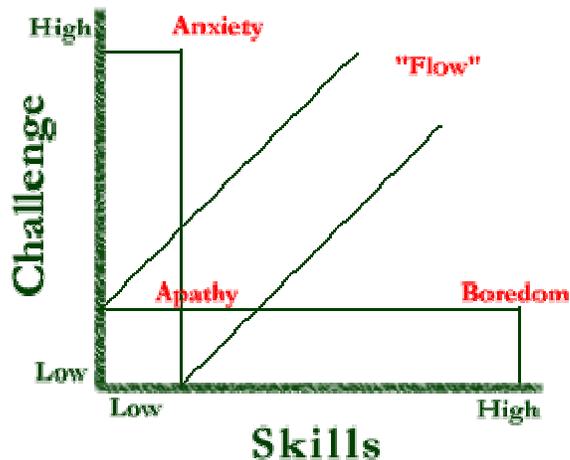
Do just what is needed in each situation – a skillful dancer on the dance floor, one with the music and your partner, neither willful or sitting on your hands.

“Willfulness” is sitting on your hands when you need action. Giving up (refusing to make needed changes) and refusing to tolerate the moment (refusing to accept the unchangeable) are examples of willfulness. The dancer accepts the music and her partner and willingly makes changes.

The skillful dancer has centered her attention on the music and her partner. She is focused on doing just what she needs to do. Her problems and preoccupations are excluded from awareness. Past and future aren't relevant to the moment by moment actions and adjustments needed to skillfully dance. Dancing with flow is a reward by itself. What activities have you mastered that offer you opportunities for flow? Start with your present abilities and strengths to develop your skills to participate and flow.

Actively practice your skills as you learn them, until they become part of you, and you use them without self-consciousness.

Learning skills takes practice, practice, practice. You are going to have to make an effort to study, learn, and practice them. The secret to learning skills is applying skills to appropriate challenges. Apathy, anxiety, and boredom are great challenges to practice skills.



If you are apathetic, do not care, or generally lack enthusiasm - find a challenge or engage your skills. Get active. Make it a game. Set a goal.

If boredom is the problem, increase the challenge. Do something, anything to make better use of your skills. Basically, put some stress on yourself like setting a deadline.

If you are anxious, decrease the challenge by taking some of the pressure off and increase your skills by engaging your curiosity, being mindful to your emotions, or practicing acceptance.

Practice:

- 1. Changing harmful situations***
- 2. Changing your harmful reactions to situations.***
- 3. Accepting yourself and the situation as they are.***

Linehan's final advice on participate.