Commentary: Flow State (Trading the Sweat Spot for the Sweet Spot): A Roadmap to Measure and Enhance Workplace Growth and Well-Being

Physician dissatisfaction is a well-known reality that seems to be getting worse, not better. In a recent survey of 17,236 physicians, close to 50% of the respondents reported frequently or constantly feeling professionally burned-out, whereas only 11% reported no such feelings. Some of the findings from this survey that speak to this growing discontent are shown in Figure. Perhaps an even stronger indicator of the profession’s dissatisfaction is the fact that nearly half of all practicing physicians report discouraging their children from following in their professional footsteps.

The reasons for such dissatisfaction are surely multifactorial and unique to each physician, although a number of factors seem to be commonly experienced. These include (1) a burdensome and complex reimbursement system that fails to appreciate and fairly value the full scope of services physicians provide to patients, (2) electronic medical record systems that can be confusing and challenging to use because of the voluminous amount of data entered in each patient’s file—at the same time, diminishing eye contact with patients to enter that data, which inevitably diminishes the quality of a physician’s connection with patients, and (3) juggling various responsibilities within a practice, including clinical care, administrative responsibilities, continuing education, and research interests. Such multitasking can lead to long—yet less efficient—hours during which physicians seem to spend less time on what they like to do. This can result in diminished personal and professional satisfaction.

Patient satisfaction has had considerable attention in light of newer reimbursement protocols; however, little attention seems to be given to physician satisfaction and well-being. Changes that promise to enhance physician satisfaction are achievable with thoughtful planning, based in part on applying well-established concepts from positive psychology, which describes the states of optimal human and organizational functioning and how one can achieve them. Although many of the findings from the study of positive psychology suggest numerous ways in which physician satisfaction can be enhanced, this manuscript provides an introduction to the concept of “flow” (which is one aspect of positive psychology) and its potential to improve workplace growth and well-being for physicians.

An Introduction to Flow

The term “flow” was introduced by the psychologist and researcher, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who defined it as the optimum mental state in which one is completely absorbed in the activity one is carrying out. He described flow as a highly focused state of consciousness that can contribute to a prolonged state of satisfaction and happiness. When a person is in flow, time seems altered and extraneous thoughts disappear. It has been described as a similar mental state when athletes are “in the zone.”

Achieving a flow state involves a balance between the challenge of the task and the skills that the individual possesses. The 8 emotional states that one may experience based on the challenge and skill levels are apathy: lack of interest, boredom: indifference towards a task, relaxation: calm or the absence of excitement, worry: general unease due to focus on disturbing thoughts, control: sufficient skills to comfortably and routinely perform a task, anxiety: fear of taking action (“freezing”), arousal: increased stimulation, and flow: mental state in which people are completely focused on the activity or task (Figure). Although it is natural for each of us to experience these states based on the relative ratio of our skill level for a task vs the challenge level for that task, one can achieve the flow state by understanding one's own signature strengths and maximizing...
time spent on challenging tasks that match one’s strengths, as opposed to spending time on tasks that are less appropriate for one’s skillset.

**Achieving the State of Flow**

Recognizing that the flow model is a function of challenge and skill, there are a number of factors that can be considered to improve the emotional state and achieve the state of flow. Some of the most important factors include the following:

1. *Know Thyself:* Learning to clearly appreciate what one is doing when one is in flow and what helps create that state. Each physician will want to create an individual strategic plan designed to maximize the time they spend using their signature strengths while leveraging available resources to share other tasks with team members (e.g., other neurosurgeons, nurses, physicians, operating room staff) having appropriate skill levels.

2. *Balance Challenge and Skill:* Choosing tasks that suit one’s (and one’s colleagues’) talents and ability levels, stretching oneself to find the perfect balance between one’s skill and the challenges one undertakes. This also involves checking in with team members on a regular basis to address flow dynamics, including where people are, where they need to get to, and what steps need to be taken to get there.

3. *Set Clear Goals:* Setting clear objectives in relation to one’s actions and tasks.

4. *Concentrate on One Task at a Time:* Not allowing multitasking to interfere with one’s state of flow. Instead of mixing “flow tasks” with stressful (or boring) ones, one should enforce unshakeable goals to get the most of one’s high-productivity moments while one stays in the flow.

5. *Develop a Compensation Methodology:* Using one’s strengths to incentivize time. The methodology can incorporate formal job descriptions with clear roles and responsibilities to promote the organization’s approach to intentionally implement and exercise flow states.

6. *Solicit Honest and Immediate Feedback:* Obtaining the feedback necessary to justify making adjustments to compensation and to help align individual skill sets with organizational goals.

**Measuring Flow**

There are several psychometric instruments, such as the Professional DynaMetric Program\textsuperscript{10} or The Clifton StrengthsFinder,\textsuperscript{11} that are available to help individuals more accurately understand themselves and are frequently used by Fortune 500 and other companies to develop better teams, grow productivity, and increase profitability. Such assessments are designed to help people discover their signature strengths and not necessarily fix their weaknesses. These and other such assessments are designed to help people uncover their natural talents and shape them into organizational strengths instead of focusing on understanding an individual’s weaknesses and how to improve upon those.

Similarly, there are some recognized attempts to measure flow,\textsuperscript{5,6,9} however, we are unaware of any attempt to measure the flow state among physicians as a means of creating a more fulfilling work environment. We propose that physicians use...
a graphic model to measure their flow states and identify the conditions that can improve flow; the model is attached as an Appendix.

Based on Csikszentmihalyi’s flow model, our proposed model uses 6 questions (Appendix, Supplemental Digital Content, questions 1–6) to assess the challenge and skill levels that can be plotted on the graphic model to assess an individual’s state of flow. The central point on the graphic model signifies an ideal balance of challenge and skill levels (flow). The closer one’s score lies to that point, the more balanced that individual is in regards to challenge and skill, and hence, the closer one gets to the state of flow. Flow enhances when challenge and skill levels concurrently increase and the maximum flow state occurs when challenges and skills are equally high. The model then uses 4 questions (Appendix, Supplemental Digital Content, questions 7–10) to identify the areas that can be improved upon to potentially achieve the state of flow. A lower score on any of the last 4 questions (Appendix, Supplemental Digital Content questions 7–10) indicates potential room for improvement in that particular area, which can help improve flow.

Why Flow State is Crucial for Better Patient Outcomes
A physician’s well-being can have serious consequences on the quality of the provider’s care and the performance of the hospital systems. Satisfied doctors are less likely to make errors and more likely to provide better patient care and have satisfied patients. In contrast, physician burnout and dissatisfaction can lead to increased individual productivity and provide a sense of fulfillment from jobs and careers. This will in turn translate into better patient care, improved patient satisfaction and outcomes, and growth of healthcare systems as a whole.

CONCLUSION
The following quote is attributed to Hippocrates “If we could give every individual the right amount of nourishment and exercise, not too little and not too much, we would have found the safest way to health.” We propose a corollary to that statement: if physicians find the right balance by minimizing what they need to do but dislike or are uncomfortable doing (the “sweat spot”), while maximizing what they enjoy doing (the “sweet spot”), they are more likely to optimize their experience as professionals and work more effectively, collaboratively, and successfully with their colleagues. This will allow them and their organizations to flourish and positively affect the outcomes of their patients. We hope the suggestions offered above help with that goal!

Disclosures
Dr Friedman is Chairman and CEO of Lippes Mathias Wexler Friedman LLP, a law firm with offices in New York, Florida, Washington DC, and Ontario, Canada, as well as the Founder/Senior Advisor of D21 Partners, LLC (formerly Delphi21 Advisors, LLC and NextGen Advisors, LLC), a consulting company focused on helping medical groups and other partnerships by applying insights from business, human relations, social neuroscience, positive psychology, and behavioral economics. He is the author of seven books and numerous articles, an Entrepreneur-in-Residence at the University at Buffalo, and a frequent speaker on organizational success strategies. Ms Owen is a Principal and Senior Advisor in D21 Partners, LLC, a Life Trustee with the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr Foundation, and an Entrepreneur-in-Residence at the University at Buffalo. Dr Yossler is a Partner at Lippes Mathias Wexler Friedman LLP, a Principal and Senior Advisor in D21 Partners, LLC, and an Entrepreneur-in-Residence at the University at Buffalo. Dr Friedman is an Attorney at Lippes Mathias Wexler Friedman LLP, a Principal and Senior Advisor in D21 Partners, LLC, and an Entrepreneur-in-Residence at the University at Buffalo. The other authors have no personal, financial, or institutional interest in any of the drugs, materials, or devices
described in this article. Dr Levy is the L. Nelson Hopkins III MD Chair of Neurosurgery, Chairman, Department of Neurosurgery, Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, University at Buffalo; Director, American Board of Neurological Surgery; Endovascular Section Editor, Neurosurgery; Executive Committee Member, Congress of Neurological Surgeons; Medical Director, Neuroradiological Services, Gates Vascular Institute; and Co-Director, Gates Stroke Center at Kaleida Health. Dr Shallwani is Neurovascular Research Fellow, Department of Neurosurgery, Jacobs School of Medicine at the University at Buffalo.

REFERENCES


Supplemental digital content is available for this article at www.neurosurgery-online.com.

Supplemental Digital Content. Appendix. Proposed graphic model to measure flow states and identify conditions that can improve flow.