

■ OFF CAMPUS ■

The ins and outs of flow state

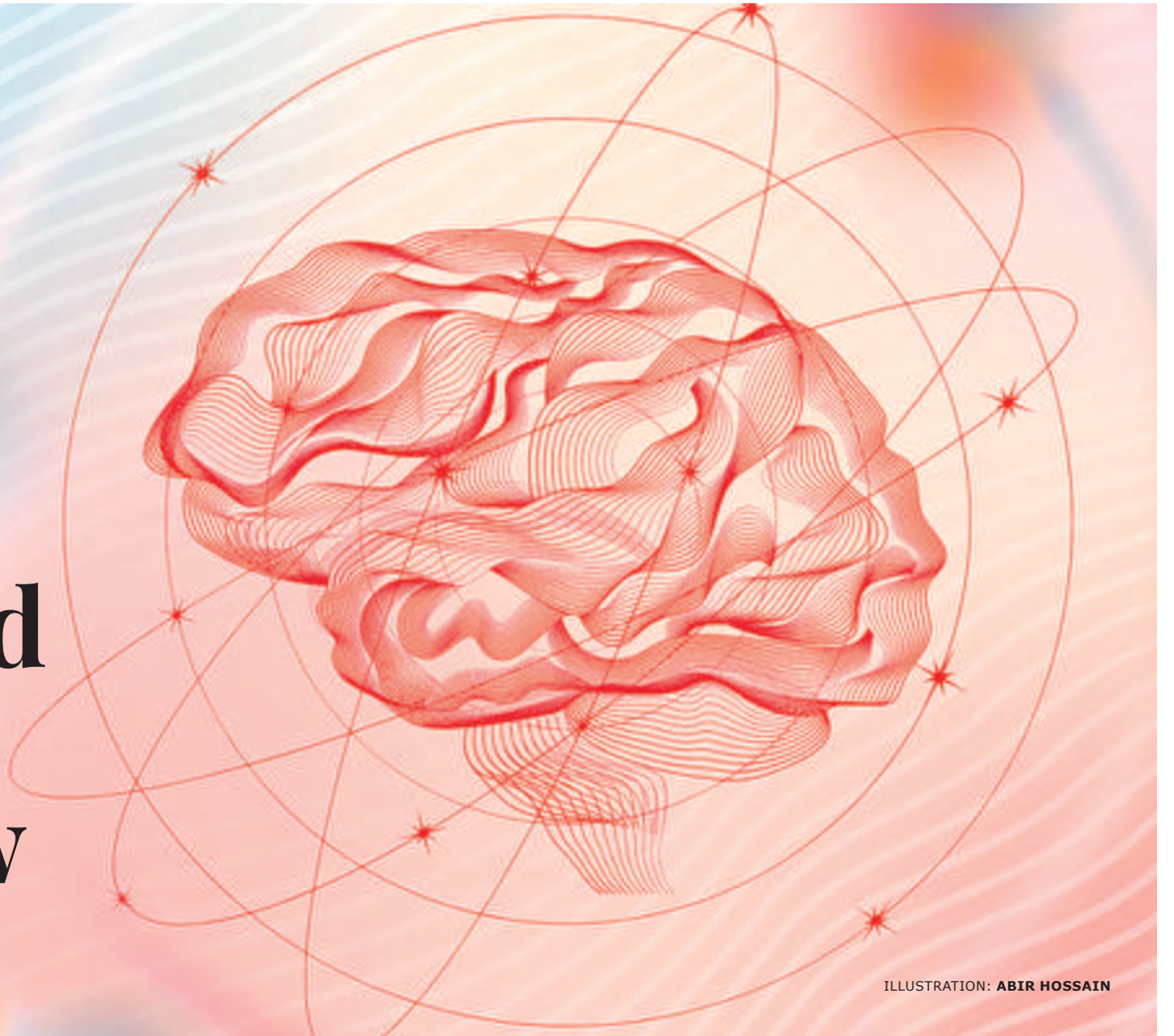


ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

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It's 2 AM, and your room is cleaner than it's ever been. Heaving slightly from the exertion of rearranging all your furniture, and aching all over, you stand at the entrance feeling both incredibly smug and a little hazy — it has just dawned on you that hours have passed by.

Flow state is the intense mental state experienced by a person completely engrossed in their work, such that it feels effortless, inevitable, and immensely enjoyable. Occurring regardless of whether a person is doing routine work — like cleaning or organising — or tackling challenging creative pursuits like writing, cooking, or dancing, flow state is a feeling akin to ecstasy that is accessible to everyone, and therefore, can be considered one of the true joys of living.

One cannot possibly comprehend the many different activities during which people can genuinely reach flow state unless they are on the “#flowstate” side of TikTok. Some people have apparently reached flow state while matching pairs of socks together, or when walking through crowded hallways with friends.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, commonly recognised as “The Father of Flow”, coined the term in the 1970s and popularised it through several of his publications, wherein he distinguished certain conditions often present during flow state. These include, but are not limited to, an all-encompassing concentration on the task, clarity regarding goals, a balance between challenge and ability, and the perception that time has become elastic, with hours stretching and flying by all at once.

Most prominent, however, is the overwhelming giddiness that comes with working with rapt competence, at your prime, without any doubt or fear. It's the assurance

that you're in your element and that the pending assignments haunting your nights with seemingly murderous intent no longer stand a chance.

Though most first encounters with flow are likely both enamouring and unintentional, it quickly becomes apparent that flow state is frustratingly elusive. Unfortunately, no number of insults-disguised-as-motivation reels can force us to lock in. It simply cannot be switched on or off; rather, flow state is considered only a stage in “The Flow Cycle”.

Described extensively by Steven Kotler, an American author and entrepreneur, it divides the process of flow into four stages: Struggle, Release, Flow, and Recovery.

Given that the cycle begins with Struggle, we can comfortably deduce that flow state isn't easy to achieve. Most of us can remember the hours we've spent toiling away trying to understand complex topics in our curricula, only to either give up or to have things suddenly, miraculously *click*.

During flow, work can become hypnotic, rendering us spellbound and completely unfazed by external factors. Miracles such as ignoring the irresistible social media notification and exercising our attention spans beyond their current goldfish capacities become far more common during flow. All of this has meant that corporations and self-help influencers alike have latched onto the phenomenon and given it a spotlight bigger than ever before.

Despite its growing pervasiveness, it is still going to take a miracle of divine proportions to help the person whose algorithm is not aware of the fact they have exams coming up. Once it does become aware, only then will they be recommended hours upon hours of content exclusively about productivity.

This was the situation I found myself in. Though it was occasionally upsetting to watch such content, especially when I was desperately trying to avoid mock preparation, those reels introduced me to the concept of flow, one of life's most rewarding experiences.

While doing so, they also highlighted the best ways to achieve flow, including removing distractions and choosing work that is both within the realm of our capabilities while simultaneously challenging enough not to bore us. Moreover, flow is encouraged in work or activities that provide immediate feedback. This can include cases where every washed dish feels like an achievement, every good serve is rewarded by points on a scoreboard, and every sentence is one step closer to a word limit being met. Also, like many things in life, flow state is best experienced alongside friends, on group projects or joint study sessions.

Flow state can be exhilarating. It is the extraordinary state of consciousness we exist in when we live and work beyond the horizon of our potentials, and so much fulfilment can be derived when working in flow. Knowing about flow state may allow us to spend more of our lives in the bliss of creation and accomplishment.

References:

1. Big Think (2015). *Hack Your Flow: Understanding Flow Cycles, with Steven Kotler*.
2. The Guardian (2025). ‘An optimal state of consciousness’: is flow the secret to happiness?
3. TED-Ed (2023). *How to enter flow state*

Elma Tabassum spends too much time watching pencil case reviews and so cannot remember what sleep is like. Send her white noise recommendations at elmatassum2020@gmail.com