

Experiencing flow: A natural shield against mental and cardiovascular disease?

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People often experience flow during artistic activities, for example when making music. Credit: MPI for Empirical Aesthetics / L. Bittner

Can the proneness to experience flow protect against certain health problems? This question was investigated by an international team of

researchers from the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics (MPIEA) in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, and the University of Melbourne, Australia.

[Their findings](#) were recently published in the journal *Translational Psychiatry*. They provide new evidence for a potentially protective effect of flow, but also underscore the need to consider confounding factors when researching probable health benefits.

"Flow" is a term used in psychology to describe a state in which people are completely absorbed in an activity. Previous studies have shown that flow proneness is associated with good mental and cardiovascular health. These associations have generally been interpreted as evidence for a causal protective effect of flow. However, this research has been primarily cross-sectional and based on self-report data.

Co-senior author Miriam Mosing of the MPIEA explains, "In addition, the previous studies have not taken into account reverse causality—i.e., [mental health problems](#) leading to less flow, or potential confounding factors that may underlie both health and flow, such as common genetic influences, [environmental factors](#) or personality traits. Therefore, a [causal relationship](#) has not been clearly established to date."

In the current study, the researchers examined the relationship between flow proneness and health diagnoses using data on more than 9,300 people and their information in the Swedish patient registers. They found that people with a higher flow proneness had a lower risk of certain diagnoses, including depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, [bipolar disorder](#), stress-related disorders, and cardiovascular disease. This effect was most pronounced for depression and anxiety.

The team also investigated for the first time whether [neuroticism](#) influences the observed associations and whether family factors play a

role. Neuroticism is one of the five [personality traits](#) in the "Big Five" model. It describes a person's tendency to be emotionally unbalanced and easily irritated. People with high neuroticism scores are more susceptible to stress and psychological problems, as well as cardiovascular and other somatic diseases.

"Our results show that while neuroticism and family factors are notable confounders, flow proneness remains associated with a significantly reduced risk of depression and anxiety even after adjusting for these factors. These findings are in line with a causal protective role of flow experiences," says co-senior author Laura Wesseldijk of the MPIEA.

However, the team emphasizes that more research is needed to further clarify the relationship between flow experiences and mental and somatic health. In addition, they highlight the importance of controlling for confounding factors, particularly for neuroticism. Nevertheless, the present findings are promising and provide a basis for future interventions to promote flow experiences to improve health and well-being.

More information: Emma Gaston et al, Can flow proneness be protective against mental and cardiovascular health problems? A genetically informed prospective cohort study, *Translational Psychiatry* (2024). [DOI: 10.1038/s41398-024-02855-6](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41398-024-02855-6)

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