Emily Schoen, choreographer and professional modern dancer, is waiting in the wings for her cue to step out on stage, her mind still racing. But as she steps out into the bright lights and begins to move—her body bending and flowing in graceful choreography it knows by heart—the inner chatter goes mute and she feels totally aware. “The sensation is like being able to hear from all of your skin cells, or being able to feel what’s all around you, not just what’s in your vision,” Schoen says. “My sense of time even goes away, and it’s inherently peaceful. I’m elevated and Zen all at once.”

Schoen is the founder and artistic director of Schoen Movement Company, so her 9-to-5 offers regular portals into the mysterious state of altered consciousness scientists call flow. First studied in the ‘70s, the flow state is of utmost interest to modern-day positive psychologists. Deep inside a flow state, you see, you’re a font of creativity and a tireless engine of output. Time seems to slow as a sense of peace rolls through you. Elation kicks in, too, and enough focus and determination to intimidate even the most dedicated obsessive. You’re energetic, happy, focused. The superhero version of yourself.

A direct route to increased innovation? Concentration! Productivity?! All things corporations are on the lookout for; as they fight to retain good workers, boost burnout, and cater to those individualistic, sense-of-purpose-seeking millennials. So it should hardly come as a surprise that during the last decade, the rich and ambitious have sought new ways to hack into flow and juice up their performance. But that has some experts worried: The way flow’s taken off as a buzzy productivity hack might actually suck all the power out of it, and—ironically—make it harder for people to get into a flow state in the first place.

Flow is like high-school popularity: The harder you go after it, the more elusive it becomes. The message for both corporations and the average goal-less, or lack of desire, and that’s hard to do.” In other words, for many people, sitting still, focusing on nothing but your breath, and letting thoughts go as they arise is unnatural, uncomfortable, and, in some cases, anxiety-provoking.

Flow doesn’t have those problems, because there’s an activity—baking, strumming, sketching, what have you—to ground the whole practice: “You have a job and a goal and you’re all wrapped up in that,” Pritikin says. “You still tap into that experience of being one with your body, but with a challenging activity, so that could work better for people.”

In fact, “the research seems to be moving toward a recommendation that you try to get into a flow state regularly—the way we now think about meditation,” Pritikin says.
feel our best and perform our best—"an in-the-zone moment where you’re so focused, everything else seems to vanish and performances soar. For one thing, the systems responsible for thinking and doing automatically are, for once, totally in sync. Flow puts those two sides of the brain back together. You feel integrated, like your body and mind are really doing the same thing." When Schoen, the dancer, does a pirouette or a leap, her brain isn’t working on a grocery list while her legs dance of their own accord; all her attention is focused on the same thing. Which makes it sound like the brain must be firing on all cylinders—activating more neurons than usual and recruiting them all for this focused state, right? Not so: In recent years, neuroscientists have decided that flow state test to mention meditation, RUM sleep, hypnosis, psychedelic highs, and other states of what researchers call “altered consciousness.” Actually, quiet parts of the brain that normally act up. In 2008, Dr. Charles Limb, a Johns Hopkins neuroscientist, put professional jazz musicians in an MRI machine while they improvised—a put professional jazz musicians in an MRI machine while they improvised—and revealed nature of non-ordinary consciousness, “a reference to the vivid, detailed, otherworldly feelings connectedness to all things in the universe.” It’s as if things are channeled into your mind, you’re so clear. You’re not sitting and staring at an email—you’re thinking about solutions and expressing them. It’s easy to see how an in-the-zone work force leads to success: The marketing team bursts with game-changing campaign ideas, the sales team is arse in motivation and energy, the C-suite execu cutes on huge ideas at an astounding speed. And even the customer service team feels passionate about satisfying clients. There’s a clear link between the flow state and the brain. So it should hardly come as a surprise that during the last decade, entre- prise-wide trends in Silicon Valley and elsewhere have sought new ways to bring into flow and jump up their performance. It seems that capitalists to whom output is everything want in on the promises of the flow state, and they’re willing to do almost anything to get there. “We not military officers going on month-long meditation retreats, Wall Street traders zapping their brains with electrodes, trial lawyers stacking off-prescription pharmaceuticals, famous tech founders visiting transformational festivals, and teams of engineers microdosing with psychedelics,” Kotler and Wheel write in Stealing Fire. But some experts worry this is a case of staring at the finger that points to the sky. “Flow is really a beacon in your body that starts beeping with emotional response,” Curtis says. “It may only last a few hours at a time, but it can lead you to your purpose—it helps you understand what you’re meant to do, based on what makes you feel best and what puts you in the flow.” Take Curtis—as a Wall Street trader; he woke up with a rock of coke in his stomach, felt sick on his subway ride to work, and then watched the clock from the stock exchange floor. At night, he came home and started writing—a letter to a friend, a piece of poetry, the beginning of a maybe-someday book. “I felt blank, and it was after midnight,” he recalls. In time, he left his career as a Wall Street trader and plunged himself into a new one in publishing—where, for the first time, the hours flew by every single day. Other experts argue that even link ing the flow state with your day job is an unnecessary leap. “Sometimes, for optimal productivity and creativity, you need all your wits about you as well,” says Scott Barry Kaufman, Ph.D., a cognitive psychologist and co-author of Wired to Com. “You can’t get yourself into a state that reduces your rational facilities and expect that to be a cure-all.” (After all, you don’t want your air traffic controller getting sloppy because he’s all hopped up on creative drugs to avoid airplanes, or your pilot getting so in-the-zone that he doesn’t hear the system calmly blustering “Sink rate—you pulled it up.”) He also points out that over-the-top interventions might not work. Take microdosing, or using tiny, daily hits of psychedelics in order to wormhole into that hypofrontal state: “People under these conditions do report higher levels of openness to experience in the moment,” he says, “but when they’re out of it, they see what they’ve done during that experience as less creative.” But perhaps the biggest problem with pursuing flow to increase your bottom line is that it misses the point. “You don’t get into the flow state while watching a beautiful sunset to increase productivity.” Kaufman says. “You do it to increase your general sense of well-being and connectedness to all things in the universe.” In the end, finding flow may come down to noticing instead of seeking. Mindfulness-enhancing practices such as meditation seem to make it likely: Wherever you slip into a flow state, experts say, all of us are capable of getting into—if we simply notice which activities make us feel amazing and make time fly. “If you’re present and aware, you’ll recognize how to get into flow without chasing it,” Curtis promises. And here he gets a little Yoda on us: “It’s as natural to get into the flow state as it is to breathe, because it comes from within us. It’s not something you chase to go and grab—it’s within.”