

A LINE ON LIFE

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Workaholics *

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Almost all addiction is viewed in negative terms. The only exception is an addiction to work – being a **workaholic**. In our culture, a single-minded dedication to work – to the point of excluding all else – is seen as worthy of praise. On the positive side, hard workers are perceived as mature, responsible, virtuous and even patriotic. Not only do they have more money and power, but they have the respect of co-workers and the approval of their employers. The assumption is that a selfless, productive employee is a happy employee. Is that right?



Dedication to work also has its costs. At a personal level, it can lead to lost relationships, impaired health, and emotional and spiritual collapse. Workaholics can undermine their own work. Their desire for perfection can lead to inefficiency and waste. As they strive to control the situation, the weaken chances for collaboration and compromise. They often fail to nurture co-workers. They rarely delegate responsibility or give credit to others, when it is deserved. This leads to less productivity and creativity, which can cause society as a whole to suffer.

However, the reinforcements given to workaholics boost their self-esteem – leading them to work even harder. However, if your only source of self-esteem is your work, you are unlikely to learn how to cope with life's setbacks.



The addiction to work was first referred to as "workaholism" on the late 1960s. In contrast to **substance addictions** – alcohol and drugs – it is more like a **process addiction**, similar to sex and gambling. It is a mood-altering experience. The person becomes compulsive about work, ultimately losing control. But workaholism has been called the "*cleanest of all the addictions*," because it is supported by business, education and religion.

Although similar to an addiction, it also fits the description of an **obsessive-compulsive disorder**. The workaholic has a very narrow focus of attention and is engaged in endless activity and ritualistic controlling behavior. If they try to change, they often revert. They need encouragement and support to try again.

A management consultant, Diane Fassel, has written a book about work addiction, *Working Ourselves to Death* (1990). Fassel sees three stages of work addiction.

- **Early.** Constantly busy, the work addict takes on more work than can be completed. The work addict thinks about work all the time. S/he is a compulsive list maker, regularly works overtime, and refuses to take days off.
- **Middle.** Personal relationships are pushed aside until a social life essentially no longer exists. Fleeting attempts to quit the addiction typically fail. They are physically exhausted

and may have trouble sleeping. They may have blackouts or spend time just staring into space.

- **Late.** Stress symptoms increase. They can have chronic headaches, backaches, high blood pressure, ulcers and depression. When a stroke or heart attack occurs – if the workaholic survives – this may scare the workaholic into making a life change.

Our society encourages us to work. Work can serve as an avenue of psychological development and fulfillment. Among other things, it gives us a sense of purpose. If we work only for financial reasons, we will look for fulfillment outside of our jobs. In addition, we are asked to take on more work. Although technological advances have made some tasks easier, they have increased performance expectations on many jobs. With pagers and cellular phones, it is difficult to escape the call of work.

Just because people work too much does not necessarily mean they are workaholics.

However, we shouldn't go overboard in labeling people as workaholics. People can love their work, be satisfied with achievement, and work long and hard without being addicted to work. Working overtime for a deadline or important project is not necessarily addiction either. How can we tell the difference?



Workaholics think about work all the time. They miss the excitement of their work. For example, when a task is completed or a family emergency requires absence from work, the workaholic becomes depressed or panicky. They tend to emphasize logic and intellect over feelings. Even with their family, they emphasize task performance. They set high standards and are intolerant of weakness. Rather than collaborating, they like to run the show themselves.

Like drug or alcohol addiction, workaholics deny their addiction. They say that they can stop anytime they want. They may justify their work to provide for their families. However, family members are usually willing to do without the unneeded luxuries to have more time together.

If we think we are becoming addicted to work, we need to identify our priorities in life. If we could do *anything* with your life, what would we want to do? Once we identify our most important goals, we need to take steps to achieve them. We need to seek – and accept – support from family, friends and co-workers. Recommended changes include learning how to relax, to exercise regularly, to consider the needs of those closest to us, and to take care of our own personal needs.

Controlling work addiction can reduce family tensions, avoid family crises, and lessen the risk of health problems. Balancing our personal life with our work can also enrich our quality of work too. Wouldn't that be a nice way to start out a New Year?

* Adapted from Robert Conroy's "Addiction to work proves harmful," *The Menninger Letter*, May, 1995, pages 5, 7. Another source of information is Joan Kofodimos' *How Managers Can Integrate Successful Careers and Fulfilling Personal Lives*, Jossey-Bass, 1993.