

Workaholics: Understanding and Changing Work-Addicted Behavior¹

INTRODUCTION

Americans are among the most work-obsessed people in the world. American workers use 2 days less of annual vacation time than they are given, often feeling, with considerable evidence, that taking a vacation gives a negative message to employers. American workers have less vacation time and far less maternity leave and sick leave than their European counterparts. They also work a longer week than Europeans, where the average is 35 hours per week compared with 40 in the US. The pressure on workers to produce, to put in an increasing number of hours, and to stay late in a pressure cooker atmosphere of produce or be downsized, has resulted in an increasing number of workaholics, often not by their own choice.

Linn (2009) reports that a combination of good health, inability to deal with spare time, continued interest in their jobs, economic necessity, and the other rewards of work are pushing some Americans to stay in the workforce long past traditional retirement age. Approximately 7% of people age 75 or older were in the labor force as of June, 2009—up from 5% a decade ago. That translates into more than 1.1 million people working past age 74—up from 750,000 a decade ago.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF WORK ADDICTIONS

Griffiths (2005) writes that “the most obvious sign that someone is a workaholic is when work and work-related concerns preoccupy a person’s life to the neglect of everything else in it. What starts out as love of work

¹ Portions of this chapter first appeared in the senior author’s book on workaholics in retirement (Glicken, 2010).

can often end up with the person developing perfectionist, then obsessional traits” (p. 97).

Machlowitz (1980) reports that workaholics share the following six traits: They are intense, energetic, competitive, and driven; they have self-doubts; they prefer work to leisure; they work anytime, anywhere; they make the most of their time; and, they blur the distinctions between business and pleasure. As a consequence, it is not uncommon for workaholics to have major health problems including stress-induced illnesses, chronic fatigue, and increased anxiety levels.

Perhaps it would be useful to clarify the difference between positive work addiction and unhealthy work addictions, or workaholism. Workaholism can be defined as valuing work over any other activity when, and this is important, it affects physical and emotional health, the quality of work, and family, loved ones, and friendships. There are a number of very hard-working people who put in long hours, but, when they are free, they give back to their loved ones and enjoy relationships and outside activities. When work becomes all-consuming and someone goes well beyond what is necessary to do the job well and has no other interests or activities beyond work, we might call it a negative addiction to work. Without constant work, a true workaholic becomes anxious and depressed. A negative work addiction is a recurring obsession with joyless work.

It is true that many aspects of work are joyless and unpleasant but we put up with them by getting pleasure from other aspects of the job and from our outside activities and loved ones. And certainly, in this down economy, many people work hard just to keep their jobs. It’s not a work addiction when someone is trying to survive. Real workaholics have few, if any, outside interests. They let family life fall apart. They often have health problems and suffer from depression and deep insecurities. Like any addiction, they repeat behaviors that are destructive, even though they know better and find it difficult or impossible to change.

It’s important to keep in mind that work addicts should not be confused with people who are simply hard workers, love their work, and go the extra mile to finish a project. By contrast, workaholics constantly think about work and, without work, feel anxious and depressed. They’re often difficult to get along with and push others as hard as they push themselves. Saul (2009, p. 1) suggests the following differences between hard workers and workaholics:

1. Hard workers think of work as a required and, at times, a pleasurable obligation. Workaholics see work as a way to distance themselves from unwanted feelings and relationships.
2. Hard workers keep work in check so that they can be available to their family and friends. Workaholics believe that work is more important than anything else in their lives, including family and friends.
3. Workaholics get excitement from meeting impossible demands. Hard workers don't.
4. Hard workers can take breaks from work whereas workaholics can't and think about work regardless of what they're doing or who they're with.

An interesting way of understanding the difference between hard workers and workaholics is found in research by [Douglas and Morris \(2006\)](#), who argue that what we typically call a workaholic, with its negative connotations, may more correctly be understood when we look at that person's motivation to work. The researchers found that people work hard for four reasons:

1. Because they want the financial rewards of hard work—Douglas and Morris call these people hard workers who are “material goal seekers;”
2. Because they find little enjoyment from leisure activities—they might better be called “low leisure” hard workers;
3. Because they love the perks and might more reasonably be called “perk-aholics” than workaholics—perks are the intangibles of work and might include friendships, an easy commute to work, great working conditions, good health plans, etc.
4. Finally, there are those who work long hours for its own sake—these might properly be called workaholics.

We would add a fifth type of motivation: people who work a great deal because they simply love what they're doing. We know many university professors who can't wait to work on projects when they get up in the morning. They have a love affair with the work they do and consider it a blessing to have the time and support to work on special projects in addition to their teaching responsibilities. This isn't to say that some of them aren't workaholics. Most of them are like everyone else but they love their jobs and work for salaries far below what they could make in the business world. Many of them continue to work full-time or

part-time well beyond normal retirement age, not for the money or because they need to stay busy, but because they love what they're doing and leaving the academic life would be unthinkable.

TEN TYPES OF WORKAHOLICS

Robinson (2001) suggests four types of workaholics:

- **Type 1: The Relentless Workaholic.** Relentless workaholics work all the time. They believe that work is more important than relationships or anything else in life. According to Robinson they are perfectionists who demand perfectionism in others, have many projects going at once, and are admired for their hard work and competence by others outside of their families.
- **Type 2: The Procrastinating Workaholic.** The procrastinating workaholic waits until the last possible minute, goes into a panic, and then works frantically to finish a task. Unlike relentless workaholics whose productivity is usually quite high, procrastinating workaholics go through long periods where they do not work. Robinson believes that the reason they go through long periods of non-activity is that they are so preoccupied with perfection that they cannot start a project.
- **Type 3: The High Stimulus-Seeking Workaholic.** A third type is the workaholic who is easily bored and constantly seeks stimulation and excitement. Robinson believes that some workaholics seek excitement in a relatively safe way by “creating tight work deadlines, keeping many projects going at one time, taking on big challenges at work, and having the chronic inability to relax without intense stimulation. Others live on the edge and engage in high-risk jobs or activities, such as playing the stock market, parachute jumping, or working triage in a hospital emergency room” (p. 43). High stimulus-seeking workaholics are easily bored with detail, have difficulty following through, and get their satisfaction by creating new projects.
- **Type 4: The Bureaupathic Workaholic.** Bureaupathic Workaholics are the folks we all hate to be on committees with. There isn't a rule, policy, standard, or ploy they won't use to control projects, committee meetings, or work assignments. Their primary function is to set up road blocks to the completion of projects. They think they bring order and rationality to the process but what they really bring is chaos and disruption, and they make easy projects impossible. The term

“bureaupathic” is used to imply the worst qualities of top-down organizations: that they are slow to change, illogical in the way decisions are made, primarily concerned with the quality of life of those who work in the organization and not the customers and clients supposedly served by a company or agency, and are endlessly rule and policy driven with little sense of the need to change even when the organization is in deep trouble. Bureaupathic workaholics prolong assignments and create additional work. Others may be ready to move on, but these workaholics hold everything up by overanalyzing, tearing ideas apart, and getting bogged down in minute detail. They drive everyone a little crazy.

The following six additional types of workaholics are suggested by Glicken (2010):

- **Type 5: The Loner Workaholic.** Type 5 is the withdrawn workaholic, who prefers to work alone. They work hard and want to be needed and approved of as well, but they do not want to be controlled or dominated. They prefer to keep their emotional distance from others. The loner workaholic prefers to be left alone to do their work.
- **Type 6: The Frightened Workaholic.** This type of workaholic is afraid of losing their job and, rather than having clear ideas of how to complete a task, worry constantly that the task isn't going to be done correctly or completed on time. While they work very hard it takes them much longer to do the job because much of their energy is spent being anxious and fearful about their work.
- **Type 7: The Burned-Out Workaholic.** This type of workaholic is so burned out they can hardly muster the energy to do the job but, out of a lack of other interests and activities or a dismal or non-existent personal life, they keep working hard at jobs that give them no satisfaction and which they may actually dislike to the extent of becoming physically ill while they work. Without help, these people often develop depressions and anxiety-related problems that make work exceedingly difficult.
- **Type 8: The Incompetent Workaholic.** We like to think of workaholics as hard working and super productive but some workaholics have to work that much harder because, truth be told, they just don't have the ability to do the job. We've all known workaholics like this. They never take lunch breaks, stay late, come in over the weekend, but never seem to get much done. Rather than looking for psychological reasons for their work addiction, it might be better to think of

them as lacking competence. Moving into a less-demanding job would probably minimize their work addictions.

- **Type 9: The Dictatorial Workaholic.** This type of workaholic gets sadistic pleasure out of working others to death and uses insults and threats to get others to work more than is necessary. They use intimidation and put downs to eliminate rewards and never give positive feedback. While they thrive on the pain they inflict on others, including family, they also benefit from the hard work and achievement of others. Since they never give others credit for their achievement and make it their own, they often look highly competent to outsiders. This type of workaholic often rises to the top of organizations. It comes as a surprise to others not familiar with how the dictatorial workaholic functions that they create such unhappiness and often are so disliked by others in an organization.
- **Type 10: The Manic-Depressive Workaholic.** Occasionally we find people who achieve at a very high level because they have manic episodes that last long enough for them to get incredible amounts of work done. During manic highs, they may work for days without sleep before succumbing to the inevitable low they experience as the chemical nature of their condition shifts to depression. Some people have manic highs all of the time. What distinguishes them from other types of workaholics is that there is often something very troubling about their behavior and the work they produce. They appear to be high on drugs (and sometimes they are). We've read work written by students and employees during manic phases that is often just gibberish.

THE IMPACT OF WORK ADDICTIONS ON RELATIONSHIPS AND FAMILY LIFE

The negative impact of workaholism on families and relationships has been written about at length. [Oates \(1971\)](#) observed that workaholics are socially inadequate in their home lives and have difficulties with personal relationships. [Robinson \(1989\)](#) suggested that excessive work often prevents workaholics from forming and maintaining intimate relationships. [Killinger \(1991\)](#) found that workaholics have limited intimacy with spouses and use work as a substitute for all other relationships. Other researchers have found that workaholism results in much higher levels of spousal dissatisfaction and divorce rates ([Klaft & Kleiner, 1988](#)), less

frequent sexual intercourse (Pietropinto, 1986), and a lack of sensitivity to the feelings of others (Engstrom & Juroe, 1979). Jackson (1992) found that workaholics tend to be far more irritable at work and in their personal lives than those who were not work addicted.

In terms of the effect of the workaholism of parents on children, Oates (1971) found that children saw their parents as preoccupied with work, always in a rush to get somewhere, were often irritable and lacked a sense of humor, and seemed to be depressed about their work. Robinson (1989) found that many adult children of workaholics suffer greater depression, higher anxiety, and greater obsessive-compulsive tendencies than adult children of non-workaholics. A study comparing adult children of workaholics with adult children of alcoholics (Carroll & Robinson, 2000) indicated that adult children of workaholics had higher scores on depression than adults from alcoholic homes and adults from non-workaholic homes.

To be fair, O'Driscoll and Brady (2004) reported that, although the literature tended to suggest that workaholics have problems in their personal lives, the authors' research failed to find a great deal of difference between the personal lives of workaholics and those of non-workaholics. They point out that it's often difficult to differentiate between people who are work addicted and those who just work hard because many of us work very hard. Further, the term workaholic is often vague and may not be used correctly. Our observations of retired people who exhibit workaholic characteristics is that many of them, if asked, have satisfying personal relationships, but, when spouses and children are asked, they often talk about the negative side of trying to maintain a relationship with someone who puts all of his or her energy into work, and how little is left over for them. Because there are certainly benefits of work addictions, including affluence and status, many spouses and children put up with work addictions because there is so much to gain from the labor of the workaholic spouse and parent.

CHANGING WORKAHOLIC BEHAVIOR

Workaholics are sometimes not the best candidates for counseling and psychotherapy because they deny they have a problem. Cochran and Rabinowitz (2003) argue that people with addictive personalities have been culturally programmed to repress the emotional aspects of their problems. This pertains to all aspects of problems, including those in the

workplace, in relationships, with children, with parents and siblings, and in intimate relationships.

However, people with addictive personalities often respond positively to help when it is offered in a collaborative way. Rather than being critical of their beliefs and attitudes, something they've heard throughout their lives, most people with work addictions want counselors to understand how well they've done in their lives and how successful they've been, even if the results of their success are sometimes problematic. Chapter 11 goes into more detail about additional approaches to help people with work-related problems, including the use of self-help groups, but two helping approaches are briefly outlined here: brief counseling and guided reading.

Brief Counseling

Brief counseling assumes that people are having problems now because of a number of reasons and tries to sort out the major ones and help the person resolve them in five to ten sessions. Most brief counseling uses cognitive therapy, a form of counseling that tries to get people to understand the irrational things they say to themselves that end up getting them into trouble. Some irrational ideas by workaholics to reinforce their behavior include the following:

- 1. Work is the most important thing in my life.** It's true that some people involved in very important work believe their work trumps everything else, but for most of us, when it's more important than our health, our families, and the pleasures we might get out of life, it's an obsession. Making work the most important thing in our lives tends to push people away, inhibits real intimacy with others, and makes children and family secondary. When work is no longer available, as in forced early retirement or being laid off, it leaves us with nothing to take its place.
- 2. I won't succeed unless I work harder than anyone else around me.** That's possible, but how do you measure working harder than anyone else? Some people don't need to work as hard, because they work smart. Others are naturals at the job or have more ability. Working harder doesn't necessarily mean that you'll be successful. The better idea is that you learn the job and work smart and hard but not to the extent that putting in more hours than anyone else will actually lead to more success.

3. **If I don't succeed I'll be a failure.** It's possible to fail but it doesn't make one a failure. Failing is part of the human experience. We all fail at some point or another but we needn't then define ourselves as failures.
4. **Unless I work very hard, everything at work will fall apart.** This irrational idea is what therapists call catastrophizing, or the idea that unless we can control everything in life by working hard and being eternally vigilant, everything will fall apart. People who try to control everything are often prone to anxiety problems or have what we've come to call OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder). For many people with OCD, the work required to keep anything bad from happening often leads to more time spent in repetitive behavior than in actual work.
5. **If I can't do it the right way, there's no point in doing it at all.** This is the perfectionist's motto but, in reality, we do many things each day that we don't do well. The fact is that, whatever we do, there's always someone who does it as well or better than most of us. Demanding perfection in everything we do is a recipe for unhappiness.
6. **It's essential that everyone like me.** The reality is that most people might like us but, for reasons we can't explain, some people won't. Trying to be liked is one of those no-win approaches to life that gets many people into difficulty. While we hope we can get along with everyone and have good working relationships, we can't expect everyone to like us.
7. **Work is the only way I have of dealing with the demons that haunt my life.** Better to get some good help to rid yourself of demons from the past than to work yourself to death trying to get rid of them. Many workaholics use work to deal with feelings of insecurity and lack of self-esteem, but the workplace is only part of your life. When you get home at night, the demons are still there. Work has done nothing to drive them away.
8. **If I don't continue working very hard, I'll become bored, depressed, and anxious.** In fact you might, but the time to start dealing with fears about the future is now. What's irrational about this idea is that nothing is inevitable. If you feel that way then surely you'll experience all of the unhappiness you've been predicting for yourself.
9. **It's not *what* you know, it's *who* you know.** Of course, this is sometimes true but, for most of us, it isn't. Even if we have special relationships with people who can make things happen for us, we don't always want to ask favors for fear of alienating them. Giving

people that much power over us is also a mistake since we assume they can, and will, do us favors if we ask. Often they won't. And finally, most of us know that calling in a favor can sometimes be costly. It's not who we know, it's what we know and how we use it that impresses people and gets us the rewards we desire.

- 10. It'll never get done right unless I do it myself.** This is one of the cardinal rules followed by most workaholics. It's irrational because there are many things we're not good at and other people are. Not using others means that you might do the job more poorly than they would. It's also irrational because, in any job, doing everything means that you've loaded yourself down with heaps of work because you don't trust people to do their jobs. Not being able to delegate is inconsistent with the way most organizations operate, and it tends to offend people. Further, it's an indication that you think so little of your co-workers that you dismiss their capabilities—never a good way to be, in most organizations.

An Example of Brief Counseling

Nelson Byers is a 63-year-old executive in a manufacturing company who has just been told that, because the company is facing severe financial problems, he is being given a generous severance package but will no longer have a job. Nelson is experiencing anxiety about the future and depression over the loss of his job well before he thought it was time to retire. Nelson sought out a licensed psychologist who specializes in short-term cognitively oriented counseling.

The psychologist explained his approach to Nelson, who thought it made sense. He also said that he expected Nelson to do a good deal of reading and that, in any event, he could only provide 10 or fewer sessions. In the type of help he provided, the person receiving help had to do a lot of the work, so Nelson shouldn't expect the psychologist to do it for him. The more Nelson read and asked questions the sooner he'd stop feeling so badly.

The psychologist asked Nelson to discuss his feelings about the loss of his job. Nelson replied, "I worked my ass off for that company. I put in longer hours than anyone should ever be asked to work and look what they did to me." The following is a verbatim dialogue between Nelson and the psychologist.

The psychologist asked, "What did they do?"

Nelson (N): "They fired me, for God's sake, the S.O.Bs."

Psychologist (P): "That's really tough and I can imagine how upsetting it is after all the years you spent working for the company but isn't the

company going bankrupt? I'm hearing you say they should have kept you on even though the company is going under."

N: "I was important. I was a big deal in the company. I should have been one of the last ones to go not one of the first."

P: "Why do you think you were one of the first?"

N: "Because the bastards never did appreciate my hard work."

P: "By hard work do you mean the number of hours you worked or what you achieved?"

N: "Everyone knows that I worked my butt off."

P: "But you haven't answered the question."

N: "I mean I worked hard. Are you saying it didn't accomplish much?"

P: "I'm asking."

N: "Yeah, you're going to say I was a workaholic, right? Work hard but accomplish little."

P: "Are you a workaholic?"

N: "I've heard that before. Some people thought so."

P: "What did those people say?"

N: "That I worked hard but didn't do much."

P: "Is it true?"

N: "No way but you can see what they did to me. They must have thought my work wasn't so red hot."

P: "But you equate hard work with accomplishment. Might that be the way you approached the job?"

N: "I was always very cautious at work. I didn't want to make mistakes."

P: "In this helping approach I use, we try and figure out the illogical things people tell themselves that get them into trouble. It sounds like you've been telling yourself that the harder you try not to make mistakes, the more you'll control the outcome, but it doesn't lead to better work. It's just a way to protect yourself."

N: "That's what my wife says. She says I can't make decisions and that I always do the most cautious thing possible."

P: "Who taught you that caution beats risk?"

N: "My dad. He never took a risk in his life. He figured the more cautious you were, the more you had control and were vigilant, the better things would be."

P: "And did it work for him?"

N: "He was a failure at everything he ever did including being a father."

P: "And you? How would you assess yourself?"

N: "Hell, I tried but my kids hate me and my wife's been talking divorce after 35 years of marriage. I guess you could say I haven't

been so successful but at least I made better money than the old man and I had higher status.”

P: “That’s certainly something to be proud of but as you move to this next stage in your life, might it be good to think through the strategies of caution that you’ve used at work with the many extra hours you put in to make certain everything was controlled for and perhaps use some different strategies, particularly as they relate to your family?”

N: “Looks like I’ll have lots of time to be with my family if they’ll let me. What should I tell them?”

P: “Were it me I’d explain what you did at work, and why, and how you know it pushed them away from you and that you apologize from the bottom of your heart and want to make things a lot better.”

N: “You don’t think they’d laugh at me?”

P: “Would you laugh knowing what you’ve just gone through at work?”

N: “No, I surely wouldn’t.”

The psychologist gave Nelson some material to read about cautious and controlling behavior as well as the type of counseling he was using—cognitive therapy. He asked Nelson to read the articles and email back his take on the material and how it applied to him. At first Nelson used excuses or gave feedback that was intelligent but didn’t really apply to him. Nelson also had trouble getting into his own reasons for the job loss and kept blaming the company, but after a few sessions he got down to work and started understanding his own involvement in the problems at work. He also had a family session and, much to his amazement and surprise, his family was very understanding. Nelson broke down and cried during the family meeting. For once in a long time he felt the deep connection he once had with his children and wife. It was a very moving experience for him.

Nelson has enough money to retire early and live well but he wants to continue working. Over the years he has developed a network of colleagues and, after contacting them, found many of them were also the victims of the recession. They banded together as a cooperative and, after 6 months of working at it, he now has enough work to keep him occupied. He struggles with putting too much time into making things perfect so he won’t make mistakes but he’s doing better and his wife helps. They’ve agreed that, no matter what, Nelson will have dinner with his family every night, go to social and cultural functions together, and never work on Sundays, which is a designated family day.

In a follow-up meeting with his therapist, Nelson said, “You introduced me to a new way of thinking. I had a hard time with it at first because it was a lot more comfortable to keep doing what I always did. . .

throw work at any problem. I'm not sure any workaholic can ever say that they're really happy, but I keep pinching myself to make sure I'm telling myself the truth, and you know what? I'm a lot happier than I've been in a long, long time."

Guided Reading

Many people use the Internet to gather information about emotional problems. The purposes of finding information about one's problems are: (1) to provide information; (2) to gain insight; (3) to find solutions; (4) to stimulate discussion of problems; (5) to suggest new values and attitudes; and (6) to understand how others have coped with problems similar to one's own (Pardeck, 1995).

Novels, poetry, music, films and videos can also be particularly useful because they often depict issues that many of us are trying to resolve in our own lives (problems with children, problems at work, relationship problems, and problems with drinking and other addictions, for example).

When we work with clients, we help them find articles online that will give them some understanding of their problem and will also help them resolve it. We try to use articles that are written in a clear and understandable way. Many professional articles are written for other professionals and are difficult to understand if you have no background or training in the mental health profession.

Case Example

Jenny Blair is a 62-year-old accountant and a workaholic. She works 80 hours a week and sometimes more. The amount of work she gets done isn't at all in keeping with the number of hours she works, and Jenny has begun to realize that much of the time she puts into her work is wasted. She doesn't understand this at all, and the anger her long hours have produced in her husband threatens their marriage. I helped Jenny find a number of useful articles about workaholics. One in particular about perfectionism hit a core in Jenny, and she began to talk about her perfectionistic mother who was also fearful and anxious much of the time. Jenny wondered to what extent her mother's perfectionism had affected her. The more articles she found on her own the more she was able to self-diagnose and treat the problem. She told the counselor:

"I've always been able to figure out what to do when I have a problem but in the past 5 years as I get closer to retirement I've begun putting in many more hours than are needed to do the work. The articles I read suggested that this was a form

of anxiety and that letting go of work was difficult for many people as they got older. I guess many of us start wondering if we're going to be useless when we stop working. I found the articles very helpful and talking to them with my counselor sort of helped use the information in the articles to focus on my problems”.

“I found many articles just using the word ‘workaholic’ in a Goggle search. I also used words like ‘perfectionists’ and ‘adult anxiety.’ Once I got proficient at using the Internet I was able to use my husband’s website at his work which allowed me to read professional articles on a browser called ‘EbsoHost,’ a social science and psychology website. I also found good material on ‘Psych Abstracts.’ Some of the articles were a bit difficult to understand but my husband, who’s a statistician, helped me out. Knowing that I was trying to do something to help myself really motivated him to help me.”

“Counseling is usually just 50 minutes long once a week. That doesn’t mean you can’t do some work when you’re away from counseling. I did and what was a really upsetting and intrusive problem began to resolve itself in less than 10 weeks. I think that’s pretty good considering how nutty I was getting and how angry my husband was starting to get. I work normal hours now and enjoy my marriage and I’m actively looking forward to retiring in a few years. I’ve worked hard all my life and I deserve some quality time. I may work part-time or I may not. Right now it just feels good to be normal again.”

SUMMARY

One of the more common workplace problems in America today is that of workaholic behavior. As the chapter notes, hardworking individuals should not be confused with workaholics, and neither should people be thought of as workaholic if their jobs are demanding and require a great deal of time spent on work. Workaholics are those individuals who work hard for reasons that are dysfunctional and often include using work to fill in lonely time rather than dealing with loneliness, perfectionism, fear of failing, and a host of other problems that are better dealt with in counseling than through long, often unproductive hours spent on work. Ten types of workaholics are noted in the chapter. Irrational ideas that often lead to workaholic behavior are also provided along with several types of counseling that have potential to reduce workaholic behavior. Several case studies are provided that demonstrate how specific types of counseling can help change workaholic behavior.

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