

Workaholism1

**Ex 20:1-3 NAS Then God spoke all these words, saying, 2 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 3 "You shall have no other gods before Me.**

## Workaholism: The 'Respectable' Addiction

**If work consumes you and destroys your personal life, there could be more going on; you could be a workaholic.**

By [Sid Kirchheimer](#) WebMD Feature Reviewed by [Louise Chang, MD](#)

In Japan, it's called *karoshi* -- "death by overwork" -- and it's estimated to cause 1,000 deaths per year, nearly 5% of that country's stroke and heart attack deaths in employees under age 60.

In the Netherlands, it's resulted in a new condition known as "leisure illness," estimated to affect 3% of its entire population, according to one study. Workers actually get physically sick on weekends and vacations as they stop working and try, in vain, to relax.

And here in the U.S., workaholism remains what it's always been: the so-called "respectable addiction" that's dangerous as any other and could affect millions of Americans -- whether or not they hold jobs.

"Yes, workaholism is an addiction, an obsessive-compulsive disorder, and it's not the same as working hard or putting in long hours," says Bryan Robinson, PhD, one of the nation's leading researchers on the disorder and author of *Chained to the Desk* and other books on workaholism.

### The Difference Between Hard Work and Workaholism

"Hard work put us on the moon and discovered vaccinations and built this country," he tells WebMD. "But hard workers generally have some balance in their lives. They sit at their desks and think about skiing. The workaholic is on the ski slopes thinking about work."

Their obsession with work is all-occupying, which prevents workaholics from maintaining healthy relationships, outside interests, or even take measures to protect their health.

"These are people who may have children, but miss Little League games and school plays when they don't have to, not because they *have* to be at work but because they feel they *need* to," says Tuck T. Saul, PhD, a psychotherapist in Columbus, Ohio, who frequently counsels workaholics. "They neglect their health to the point of devastating results and ignore their friends and family. They avoid going on vacation so they don't have to miss work. And even if they do go on vacation, they aren't fully present because their mind is still on work."

"As with any other 'aholism,' there is often a lack of understanding as to how their work addiction affects themselves and others," Tuck tells WebMD. "Often, they only realize their problem when

something catastrophic happens to them -- their health completely fails or their marriage or relationships are destroyed."

### Addicted to Adrenaline

Such was the case with Cheri, a 52-year-old nurse in California. Several years ago, she realized she was a workaholic and has since attended Workaholics Anonymous (WA) meetings once a week -- which like Alcoholics Anonymous -- has its own 12-step recovery program. Now, she volunteers to help others in the group's Menlo Park headquarters.

"I was wildly successful in my career, a very effective worker and my employers loved me," she tells WebMD. "But outside of work ... well, there was no outside of work. I never thought I had a problem until I tried to get into a close relationship, for something like the fifth time. That was my wake-up call, and it probably helped that my partner was in his own 12-step recovery for another addiction at the time. I took the 20-question quiz at the WA web site and 16 [of them] described me to a T. He was getting better and I realized I had my own addiction -- to adrenaline."

Don't laugh. Workaholics can have a physiologic need for that adrenaline rush, says Robinson, a psychotherapist in Asheville, N.C., and professor emeritus at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte.

"One thing that we do know is that workaholics tend to seek out jobs that allow them to exercise their addiction," he says. "The workplace itself does not create the addiction any more than the supermarket creates food addiction, but it does enable it. Workaholics tend to seek high-stress jobs to keep the adrenaline rush going."

This is true even if they don't work outside the home.

"We're seeing more women workaholics now because women are more visible in the workplace. But it's my belief that even before this trend, workaholics were doing this in the home," says Robinson. "It could be in their parenting to the point where there is nothing else to balance their lives, no hobbies or fun or spirituality, because they spend all their time as the PTA president, running the youth sports league, and being a Scout leader."

### Disorders Often Stem From Childhood

Research shows that the seeds of workaholism are often planted in childhood, resulting in low self-esteem that carries into adulthood.

"Many workaholics are the children of alcoholics or come from some other type of dysfunctional family, and work addiction is an attempt to control a situation that is not controllable," he tells WebMD. "Or they tend to be products of what I call 'looking good families' whose parents tend to be perfectionists and expect unreasonable success from their kids. These children grow up thinking that nothing is ever good enough. Some just throw in the towel, but others say, 'I'm going to show I'm the best in everything so [my] parents approve of me.'"

The problem is, perfection is unattainable, whether you're a kid or a successful professional.

"Anyone who carries a mandate for perfection is susceptible to workaholism because it creates a situation where the person never gets to cross the finish line, because it keeps moving farther out," says Saul.

That is why despite logging in mega hours and sacrificing their health and loved ones for their jobs, workaholics are frequently ineffective employees.

### Workaholic Styles

"Overall, workaholics tend to be less effective than other workers because it's difficult for them to be team players, they have trouble delegating or entrusting co-workers, or they take on so much that they aren't as organized as others," says Robinson.

In fact, his research indicates four distinct workaholic "working styles":

- **The bulimic workaholic** feels the job must be done perfectly or not at all. Bulimic workaholics often can't get started on projects, and then scramble to complete it by deadline, often frantically working to the point of exhaustion -- with sloppy results.
- **The relentless workaholic** is the adrenaline junkie who often takes on more work than can possibly be done. In an attempt to juggle too many balls, they often work too fast or are too busy for careful, thorough results.
- **The attention-deficit workaholic** often starts with fury, but fails to finish projects -- often because they lose interest for another project. They often savor the "brainstorming" aspects but get easily bored with the necessary details or follow-through.
- **The savoring workaholic** is slow, methodical, and overly scrupulous. They often have trouble letting go of projects and don't work well with others. These are often consummate perfectionists, frequently missing deadlines because "it's not perfect."

### Getting Help

What can be done? Counseling is often recommended for workaholics, and support groups, such as Workaholics Anonymous, are beneficial, say the experts.

"It really comes down to recognizing a need for balance in your life," says Robinson. "Working hard is great, but you need to be able to turn it off and savor the other parts of your life -- friends, family, hobbies, and fun."

But many companies often confuse workaholics for hard workers, in essence enabling them on their path to self-destruction.

"I wouldn't say that corporations cause workaholism, but I think they truly support it," says Diane Fassel, PhD, president of Newsmeasures, Inc., a Boulder, Colo., business consulting firm, and the author of *Working Ourselves to Death*.

"Even though workaholism is the addiction de jour in American corporations, I'm not sure that many companies offer employee-assistance programs for it, as they do for alcohol or drug abuse," she tells WebMD. "Instead they often reward it."

## All Work and No Play Is Bad for Your Health

By [Denise Mann](#)

WebMD Medical News

May 5, 2000 (New York) -- We all know at least one: The techie who works 12 hours a day at a dot-com start-up. The lawyer who sweats every last detail of every last contract. The store owner who hasn't taken a vacation in 10 years. The doctor who spends every free moment in the lab. The stockbroker whose heart rate fluctuates with the Nasdaq.

Workaholics come in all shapes and sizes, and the health-related problems associated with work addiction cost an estimated \$150 billion per year. Still, 30 years after the term "workaholic" was coined, no clear definition exists.

One thing is clear, though: More research is needed on the physical and psychological effects of work addiction on the worker and his or her family, Bryan E. Robinson, PhD, writes in an article in the *Journal of Employment Counseling*. Interventions are also needed to recognize work addiction and find ways to deal with it, says Robinson, a professor of counseling, special education, and child development at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

"Workaholism is a very serious problem. It's a compulsive disorder that not only affects the workaholic but also his/her family, and their workplace," Robinson tells WebMD. But rarely have researchers taken a hard scientific look at the human effects of this often-misunderstood issue.

Early research suggests that workaholics are more likely to be depressed, anxious, and angry than their nonworkaholic counterparts. They also tend to have more health complaints.

The chronic stress of constant work can lead to significant physical and mental health problems, Redford B. Williams, MD, tells WebMD. Williams is director of the Behavioral Medicine Research Center at the Duke University Medical Center in Durham, N.C.

"They are always trying to succeed, and if they begin to perceive that their rewards, whether pay increase or promotion, are not commensurate with how hard they are trying, they begin to experience high stress and its related health problems," Williams says.

High stress can lead to high blood pressure, which is a risk factor for heart disease and heart attack. In addition, stress takes a toll on the immune system, making workaholics more vulnerable to other illnesses. In Japan, 10,000 workers a year drop dead at their desks as a result of 60- to 70-hour work weeks, a phenomenon known as *karoshi*.

But it's not just the workaholics who are affected. Their spouses often report feeling ignored and resort to attention-seeking measures to get their partners to notice them, while children often report being resentful of a workaholic parent, Robinson explains. "Children are affected by parental work addiction in ways that are mentally unhealthy and can cause problems well into young adulthood," he writes.

In a soon-to-be-published study of 1,000 women, Robinson found that those who were married to workaholics had higher divorce rates, greater rates of marital estrangement, fewer positive

feelings about their marriage, and felt less in control of their lives and marriages. The study is to appear later this year in the *American Journal of Family Therapy*.

These are some of the reasons counselors and therapists need to "consider the devastating effects of workaholism in the workplace and in the family, screen for it just as alcoholism is screened, and be prepared to intervene," Robinson writes. In addition, he says, managers need guidelines to identify workaholics.

"The workplace does not create workaholism, the same way a bar does not create alcoholism -- but it does enable it," says Robinson, the author of "Chained to the Desk: A Guidebook for Workaholics, Their Partners, Their Children and the Clinicians Who Treat Them."

One preventive measure employers and managers could take would be to hold seminars on healthy working vs. workaholism, how to avoid job stress, and the importance of the healthy balance between career and family, he says.

Research is crucial to help develop a better definition of a workaholic, Robinson writes. For example, the research on work addiction so far has mostly ignored women. "As women have entered more positions of authority in the corporate hierarchy, the prevalence of work addiction among women has increased."

### **Vital Information:**

- Workaholism has not been extensively researched and does not have a clear, clinical definition, but it can be a serious problem.
- A person who is addicted to work may experience depression, anxiety, anger, high blood pressure, and a weakened immune system as a result of the high stress.
- Spouses and children can also be affected, with workaholics having a higher divorce rate than others.

## **Twenty Questions: How Do I Know If I'm A Workaholic?**

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1. Do you get more excited about your work than about family or anything else?
2. Are there times when you can charge through your work and other times when you can't?
3. Do you take work with you to bed? On weekends? On vacation?
4. Is work the activity you like to do best and talk about most?
5. Do you work more than 40 hours a week?
6. Do you turn your hobbies into money-making ventures?

7. Do you take complete responsibility for the outcome of your work efforts?
8. Have your family or friends given up expecting you on time?
9. Do you take on extra work because you are concerned that it won't otherwise get done?
10. Do you underestimate how long a project will take and then rush to complete it?
11. Do you believe that it is okay to work long hours if you love what you are doing?
12. Do you get impatient with people who have other priorities besides work?
13. Are you afraid that if you don't work hard you will lose your job or be a failure?
14. Is the future a constant worry for you even when things are going very well?
15. Do you do things energetically and competitively including play?
16. Do you get irritated when people ask you to stop doing your work in order to do something else?
17. Have your long hours hurt your family or other relationships?
18. Do you think about your work while driving, falling asleep or when others are talking?
19. Do you work or read during meals?
20. Do you believe that more money will solve the other problems in your life?

If you answer "yes" to three or more of these questions you may be a workaholic. Relax.  
You are not alone.

***Col 3:22-23 NAS 22 Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men,***

***Ps 127:1-2 NAS Unless the LORD builds the house, They labor in vain who build it, Unless the LORD guards the city, The watchman keeps awake in vain. 2 It is vain for you to rise up early, To retire late, To eat the bread of painful labors; For He gives to His beloved even in his sleep.***

