

Healthy Work Habits: Avoiding Workaholism

What is work engagement?

Work engagement is defined as being committed to your work in a healthy way.¹ To maintain a healthy commitment, researcher Arnold Bakker explains that work needs to be the following:

1. Stimulating
2. Something you want to devote time and energy to
3. Meaningful and significant
4. Something you are able to bring your full attention to

Some people become overly engaged in their work, which can be unhealthy. Obsessing over work is sometimes called “workaholism.”

What is workaholism?

The term workaholism was first defined in 1971.² It means to have an uncontrollable need to constantly work. This definition points out two important features of workaholism. First, the inner drive to work is hard to control. Often workaholics want to keep working even when it causes harm to themselves, family members, friends, or co-workers. They will constantly think about work, even when the workday is done. Second, the amount of work that workaholics do is much greater than what their workplace expects. The large amounts of work involve long hours as well as too much physical and emotional attention.³

One study found that at least 10% of the people in the United States (that is 10 out of every 100 people) suffer from workaholism. This statistic is understandable in a Western culture that often idealizes “work hard, play hard” and “rugged individualism.” Even beyond these cultural beliefs lies the reality of a day-to-day life that may require working 2 or 3 jobs to pay bills or care for family. Consider the following suggestions when facing these often difficult challenges.

Am I a workaholic?

The Workaholics Anonymous website uses a [set of 20 questions](#) to assess the extent to which a person is addicted to his or her work. There are also 13 common warning signs found in workaholics.⁴

- 1) Hurrying and staying busy
5. Need to control
6. Perfectionism
7. Difficulty with relationships
8. Work binges
9. Difficulty relaxing and having fun
10. Memory losses due to being exhausted or distracted by work
11. Impatience and irritability
12. Feeling inadequate
13. Self-neglect

Sometimes these signs are hard to see in yourself. Especially since your relationship with work can change over time. Practicing mindful awareness may help you understand where you fall on the spectrum between work engagement and workaholism. You can also ask close family members or friends about what they have observed. Have they noticed any of the 10 signs of workaholism in your relationship with work? Bringing awareness to your relationship with work may reveal other areas in your life that need more attention. For example, do you work through lunch or eat lunch at your desk? Do you lay awake at night thinking about work? Have you missed family events because you feel pressured to work late?

How can workaholism affect my health?

Workaholism can affect physical and emotional health.³ Physical health may be affected by the following:

- Sleep problems
- Exhaustion
- Weight gain
- High blood pressure
- Physical pain

Several ways emotional health is affected include:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Decreased life satisfaction
- Decreased sense of purpose in life
- Low self-esteem

Workaholism can affect relationships. Studies showed workaholics have more conflicts between their work life and family life.³

How do I prevent or treat workaholism?

The most important first step is developing a mindful awareness of your work habits. (For more information on mindful awareness, refer to the Whole Health handout "[An Introduction to Mindful Awareness](#).") Workaholism involves building up a very strong habit of working too much, often over a lifetime. This habit is hard to recognize and will take time to redirect towards a healthier "work engagement." You can start by practicing the following steps:

- Take **3 deep breaths** at various times throughout your work day.
- After taking these breaths, notice what is going on in your **body**. Do you feel tense? Are your jaws or shoulders tight? Is your stomach twisted in knots or do you have a butterfly sensation? Are you struggling to feel anything in your body?
- Notice what is going on in your **mind**. Are your thoughts racing? Are you having a hard time focusing? Are you judging yourself for taking time to reflect? Are you thinking about what you "need" to do next?
- Notice what is going on with your **emotions**. Are you frustrated or depressed? Are you anxious? Do you feel happy and "in the zone"? Do you feel a sense of purpose or deep joy in your work?

With regular practice, you may notice more and more what workaholism feels like. Eventually, you may be able to develop a healthier relationship with your work. Practicing this can be an important part of your Personal Health Plan (PHP).

The next steps in preventing or treating workaholism can be addressed on 3 different levels.^{3, 5}

1) **Societal level.** Our society values people who work excessively. Nevertheless, some people support a healthier work-life balance. (“Work-life blend” is another term that has been used recently.) Look to them as role models and use time off to focus on self-care, family, and friends. Encourage others to do the same.

i. **Organizational level.** Many work places offer ways to help prevent or treat workaholism. For example, they may

- Provide employee assistance programs
- Encourage employees to use vacation time each year
- Train managers to help employees enjoy their jobs
- Participate in activities to support employee well-being

ii. **Individual level.** As you move through the personal health planning process, ask what you might do to find a better balance between work and other aspects of your life. This can be a great focus when you are creating your PHP. There are several ways to address workaholism for yourself:

- Complete the Personal Health Inventory (PHI) to remind yourself what matters most to you. The PHI may also reveal which areas of self-care you tend to neglect for the sake of work. Take a moment to reflect on potential steps you could take to promote self-care and honor what matters most.
- Create a specific plan to restore balance to your life. This plan could include many things. If you sit a lot at your job, consider ways to move your body more. (For more information, refer to the Whole Health handout “[An Introduction to Physical Activity](#).”) If you are away from home a lot, find ways to dedicate more time with loved ones. If your job is physically demanding and leaves you exhausted, try some mind-body techniques to promote relaxation. Here are some resources that may help you relax:
 - University of Wisconsin Mindfulness Program recordings (<http://www.uwhealth.org/alternative-medicine/mindfulness-class-recordings/44035>)
 - Kaiser Permanente Health and Wellness podcasts (https://healthy.kaiserpermanente.org/health-wellness/podcasts?kp_shortcut_referrer=kp.org/listen)
- Take breaks at work.
- Schedule time for non-work related activities.
- Ask family members and close friends about your work ethic. Often, people close to you will notice workaholism before you do.

- Consider joining [Workaholics Anonymous](#). This is a 12-step program similar to Alcoholics Anonymous.
- Consider Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to help you enjoy non-work activities more.
- Learn to delegate work tasks. For workaholics, this process first involves recognizing and letting go of any distrust of co-workers. Taking time to train others and delegate tasks can improve relationships and help foster appreciation for each other. When we feel appreciated, it helps us know that our work is valued and makes us feel secure in our job.
- Set clear boundaries. Do work in your work setting, and then disconnect once the workday is over. Consider recording an outgoing message on your email to alert people when you are not available to answer emails. Resist the urge to take your laptop on vacation. Try to minimize or eliminate use of phones and email during times of rest.
- If you feel you need more help to manage workaholism, it is possible to seek inpatient treatment. You may look on the website of Recovery.org or call 1-888-299-5213 for resources: <http://www.recovery.org/topics/work-addiction-recovery/>.

For you to consider:

- What is my relationship to the work I do?
- Why do I do the work that I do?
- What aspects of my life bring me the greatest sense of meaning and purpose?
- How can I develop a healthy balance between my work life and my life outside of work?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

For more information

| ORGANIZATION | RESOURCES | WEBSITE |
|--|---|---|
| University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program | A variety of Integrative Whole Health handouts on your surroundings | https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/ |
| Recovery.org | Website that provides definitions, online resources, and local resources to treat workaholism | www.recovery.org |
| Workaholics Anonymous | Website that introduces a 12-step approach to addressing workaholism | http://www.workaholics-anonymous.org/ |



This handout was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by Vincent Minichiello MD, Academic Integrative Health Fellow, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. It is based in part on a document for clinicians, "Workaholism," written by J. Adam Rindfleisch, MPhil, MD. The handout was reviewed and edited by Veterans and VHA subject matter experts.

References

1. Burke Ronald J, Richardsen Astrid M, Mortinussen Monica. Workaholism among Norwegian managers: Work and well-being outcomes. *J Organ Change Manag.* 2004;17(5):459-470. doi:doi:10.1108/09534810410554489
2. Oates WE. *Confessions of a Workaholic: The Facts About Work Addiction.* New York: World Publishing Company; 1971:112.
3. Sussman S. Workaholism: A Review. *J Addict Res Ther.* Jan 10 2012;Suppl 6(1)doi:10.4172/2155-6105.s6-001
4. Robinson BE. The workaholic family: a clinical perspective. *Am J Fam Ther.* 1998/01/01 1998;26(1):65-75. doi:10.1080/01926189808251087
5. Andreassen CS. Workaholism: An overview and current status of the research. *J Behav Addict.* Mar 2014;3(1):1-11. doi:10.1556/jba.2.2013.017

7/13/2018