

Healthy Work Habits: Avoiding Workaholism

Key Points

- Workaholism is an addiction, with significant health consequences.
- There are questionnaires a person can complete to know if they are a workaholic.
- There are multiple options for preventing and treating workaholism, including using mindful awareness, planning discrete times for recreation, learning about others' work patterns, asking loved ones for opinions, joining a 12-step program, learning to trust others and delegate at work, and/or entering a treatment program.
- With the advent of technology that allows work to follow us everywhere, the focus has moved from trying to balance work and the rest of the life to recognition that work actually might be better thought of as 'blended' or 'integrated' with all the other aspects of our lives.

Work is one aspect of health, often classed as part of our Surroundings on the Circle of Health. In addition to asking about the safety of the work environment, it is also worth asking, "How much work is too much?"

Being a hard worker is highly valued in modern society. "Work engagement" is considered by many to be a positive behavior. It is defined as extensive involvement in work, and this is usually equated with a work week that is 50 hours or longer.¹ Work engagement is related not only to excellent job performance but also to positive emotional states and a sense of empowerment. It has also been linked to better health.² Finding a balance when it comes to work-life blend is essential.

What is Workaholism?

There is a fine line between work engagement and its dark side, workaholism, which is associated with harm to oneself or others that arises through work behaviors.³ Oates first coined the term "workaholism" in 1971, defining it as "the compulsion or the uncontrollable need to work incessantly."⁴ This captures two elements that are used in most definitions: 1) work is excessive, and 2) work is compulsive. Workaholics have a strong—even irresistible—inner drive and tend to "devote an exceptional amount of time to work and... work beyond what is reasonably expected to meet organizational or economic requirements."⁵ They frequently think about work even when they are not working, and they often find it impossible to delegate work to others, usually because they do not trust others to work at the same "level" as they do. In short, workaholics behave as other people with addictions behave, and they often need help addressing their addictive behaviors.

In some North American studies, as high as one-third of the adult working population has self-identified as being workaholics, and most estimates place the prevalence of workaholism somewhere between 8-17.5%.¹ For attorneys, physicians and psychologists/therapists, studies reveal that the prevalence is as high as 23-25%.¹ Workaholism is more likely for people with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and anxiety.⁶

Workaholism has many negative effects, ranging from damaged family dynamics to impaired physical health. While work engagement increases well-being and performance, workaholism is tied to lower life satisfaction and contributes to illness.³ Burnout, with all of its related health challenges, is strongly linked to workaholism. Burnout occurs, in part, because a person's work spills into other spheres of life and because he or she works to a point of emotional and physical exhaustion.

Other negative health effects of workaholism include:^{1,7}

- Sleep problems
- Weight gain
- Hypertension
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Physical pain
- Fatigue

Many workaholics also experience what is known in Denmark as "leisure illness." That is, whenever they stop working on weekends or vacations, they tend to become physically ill.

How can I tell if I or someone else is a workaholic?

Robinson lists 10 warning signs that suggest workaholism.⁸ These include:

1. Hurrying and staying busy
2. A strong need for control
3. Perfectionism
4. Difficulty with relationships
5. Work binges
6. Difficulty relaxing and having fun
7. Forgetting about conversations or other events because of exhaustion or preoccupation with work
8. Impatience and irritability
9. A sense of being inadequate
10. Self-neglect

It is useful, for the sake of formal screening, to assess the degree of workaholism a person experiences by having them complete an online version of the [Work Addiction Risk Test \(WART\)](#).⁹ Also available is a [printable version](#) with scoring notes at the bottom. The WART is 25 questions long. A [one-page brief history and description](#) of the test may be helpful.

How can workaholism be prevented and treated?

Workaholism can be addressed at the societal, organizational, and individual levels.¹ *Societal change* would potentially require an alteration in how a society or culture reinforces healthy work-life integration. (To learn more, refer to the "[Work-Life Integration](#)" tool.) Work closings for holidays can help with this, as can employee assistance programs that specifically incorporate supportive measures for workaholism. Required vacations and routine assessments of levels of

employee work satisfaction and burnout are all potentially useful *organizational-level interventions*.

For *individuals* struggling with workaholism, consider adding some of the following to their Personal Health Plans (PHP's):¹

1. **Create a concrete plan for restoring life balance.** This is critical. For example, a PHP should emphasize the various aspects of proactive self-care, including moving the body and leisure activity, as well as time with loved ones. Complementary and Integrative Health approaches have been suggested.¹⁰ These might include mind-body techniques, acupuncture, and other approaches.
2. **Bring in mindful awareness.** Mindful awareness has the potential to make a positive impact.¹¹ An important priority is to explore, very intentionally, why one overworks.¹² Is fear involved? Insecurity? Was there a childhood role model who encouraged these behaviors somehow? In a 2017 study of 73 people with workaholism, eight weekly sessions of 2 hour-long meditation trainings were offered. The meditation group's workaholism symptoms, job satisfaction, how much they worked, psychological distress, and work engagement had improved compared to the waitlisted controls.¹³
3. **Formally plan recreational time.**¹ It may help to have guidance from a Whole Health Coach or other facilitator.¹
4. **Educate people about peer norms.** A workaholic may not be aware of how different their patterns are from others'. How many hours is the person in the office next door working? Of course, drawing comparisons only helps if coworkers are not engaging in the same dysfunctional work patterns.¹
5. **Encourage them to ask for their family members' and close friends' opinions.** This is important, because many workaholics are unaware of how their behaviors are perceived by others.⁸
6. **Recommend joining [Workaholics Anonymous](#).** It is a 12-step program modeled after Alcoholics Anonymous. The group offers a *Workaholics Anonymous Book of Recovery*, which is available for purchase on their website. There are Work-Anon groups for family members as well.¹
7. **Engage them in cognitive behavioral therapy.** This can help with reducing compulsive and "hard-driven" tendencies and enhance a person's capacity to enjoy non-work activities.¹
8. **Use motivational interviewing.** While not yet studied in great depth for this specific area, it is often suggested as an intervention to try.¹
9. **Improve interpersonal skills at work.** This includes learning to delegate and working effectively with subordinates. Micromanagement and distrust of colleagues leads to greater dysfunction.¹
10. **Focus on quality of work, rather than quantity.** Exploring how to become more efficient at work may help some workaholics. Cultivate trust –through firsthand experience - that workers can actually become more efficient if they honor their needs for relaxation time, family time, and self-care in general. One recent study found that executives who worked an average of 52 hours a week were more effective than those working over 70 hours weekly.¹²



11. **Create clear boundaries when away from work.** Unplug cell phones, be clear about when email will or will not be answered, and do not take computers (or other devices, or paperwork) on vacation.¹
12. **Be patient.** Healing workaholism requires patience and time.
13. **Seek residential treatment if necessary.** [Recovery.org](http://www.recovery.org) offers a helpline at 1-888-299-5213. They help callers choose a work addiction recovery center.¹⁴

Workaholism can jeopardize health, but if people have support with recognizing and addressing it, they can take any number of different steps to help themselves find balance.

Author(s)

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