



# WHEN WORKING TOO HARD IS A DISEASE

**You can be a hard worker, but also suffer from workaholism, i.e. work addiction.**

by PIERRETTE DESROSIERS, M. Ps.,  
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Carole criticizes Martin for only thinking of work. "The best years with the kids are passing him by. He's never there. Even when he's in the house, the farm is all he thinks and talks about. You could say that's all he lives for."

*"When you're a farmer, isn't it normal to work a lot of hours and just think of that? I'm a hard worker,"* Martin answers, with a bit of pride.

Is Martin a hard worker or does he suffer from workaholism or work addiction?

Workaholism is described as a pathological relationship between people and their work. This relationship is characterized by a compulsion to devote increasing amounts of time and energy to their occupation at the expense of other aspects of their lives. It persists even when there are negative consequences on health, family life and social relationships. This dependence, which seems positive and often evokes admiration, can have very serious consequences. Workaholism is the only addiction that is valued.

Workaholics are characterized by three distinct traits of varying intensity, namely, a great need for control, perfectionism and narcissism.

Experts agree that there is a difference between hard workers and workaholics. Hard workers do everything necessary to accomplish their work. They can work long hours for a short, intense period, such as during sowing and harvesting, but the goals and deadlines are clearly defined. When the work is over, hard workers easily disengage and they keep some time for their family and friends... Hard workers do everything necessary to accomplish their work. They can work long hours for a short, intense period, such as during sowing and harvesting, but the goals and deadlines are clearly defined. When the work is over, hard workers easily disengage and they keep some time for their family and friends.

In contrast, workaholics live only for work, sacrificing sleep, food, exercise, family, friends and leisure activities—basically, their lives.



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They are so obsessed that their life is out of balance. Workaholics high performance standards for themselves and do not easily accept weakness, criticism or failure.

Unlike hard workers, if workaholics do not have work or lofty goals, they feel depressed, anxious and worthless. About vacation or times of rest, Martin says, *"I feel like a caged wolf. I have to be doing something. I hate wasting my time. I'm always thinking of the next project, the next task, the next big job."*

This addiction can have severe consequences on health, families and companies.

### **Health**

Workaholics are chronically stressed, which can lead to serious physical and mental health problems. They may suffer from headaches and migraines, high blood pressure (increased risk of cardiovascular disease), muscle pain, indigestion, ulcers, chronic fatigue and insomnia. In addition, stress affects the immune system, making workaholics more susceptible to other diseases.

They may also suffer from irritability, impulsiveness, psychological distress, sadness, anger, hypersensitivity, apathy, hopelessness, insecurity and anxiety. Finally, workaholics are excellent candidates for burnout. To soothe these ills, workaholics will often adopt behaviours to reduce suffering, such as taking medication, abusing alcohol, drugs, etc.

### **Families**

With this disease, all family members suffer. When they are not feeling used, they feel ignored. Spouses are usually very dissatisfied with their relationship, hence the higher incidence of divorce than among the general population. The development of perfectionism and obsessiveness can be observed among the children of workaholics, and they have a greater probability of developing this addiction themselves, later in life.

### **Companies**

You would think that a company with a workaholic boss would thrive the most. This is not the case. As Carole puts it so well, nobody wants to or is able to work with a spouse. "No employee or shareholder ever measures up," she says. Workaholics are normally very difficult, aggressive bosses, who are not very cooperative, have little or no confidence in their employees, are poor team players and burn out their employees.

They tend to take all the credit, find it difficult to say thank you and are quick to criticize. Finally, because they work non-stop, they become exhausted and commit serious errors in judgment.

In short, this disease affects the entire lives of those who suffer from it. The more manifest the disease, the more help they need to recover from it.



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### Some advice for workaholics:

- ❖ Respect your hours of sleep. Lost sleep cannot be regained and only aggravates symptoms.
- ❖ Set aside one day per week for just family and friends, except for real emergencies. (For example, it is going to rain on the hay, or the animals are sick. No, tillage does not constitute an emergency.)
- ❖ Take a balanced approach to eating. Workaholics have a reputation for skipping meals or eating fast food. A poorly maintained body never forgets a neglectful past, and the day of reckoning will come. If you do not take the time to be healthy, you will have to take time to be sick.
- ❖ Separate work and family life as much as possible. Resist the temptation to discuss your business on a regular basis. Get interested in other things and what others around you are doing.
- ❖ Move your muscles. If you work non-stop, your body cannot meet the demands you place on it. Allow yourself 30–45 minutes every day for exercise. Walk, run, swim; it does not matter—just move.
- ❖ Plan your day with a beginning and an end. Rather than trying to do everything at once, set a list of priorities and concentrate on one task at a time until it is done. This habit will enable you to manage your time better. The better organized you are, the more effective you will be.
- ❖ See a psychologist or other specialist if you become overly dependent. Work addiction can be as damaging as an addiction to drugs, alcohol or games. Get professional help before it is too late.
- ❖ Lastly, summon your courage and ask your employees, friends and family members if they are happy in your company. Ask them to read this text and wait for their comments.



Comments or suggestions? Please contact Pierrette Desrosiers.

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