

Characteristics of Workaholics

1. It is very difficult for us to relax. We often, if not always, perceive the need to get just a few more tasks done before we can allow ourselves to feel good and take a break. When we complete our list, however, we just seem to find more to do. These uncontrollable desires often result in frantic multitasking and the accompanying fragmented attention. We operate out of the mini-crisis mode as an escape from our core issues. Our inability to pace ourselves leads to breakdown and burnout as we rob ourselves of the enjoyment of conclusion and rest.
2. Many of us grew up in chaotic homes where the stress and intensity of an adrenaline high was normal, so we seek out a similar workplace or create crisis where none exists because it feels familiar and comfortable. With no issues to resolve, we suffer withdrawal—becoming anxious and depressed. Such mood swings destroy our peace of mind.
3. We have an obsessive desire to make sense of everything in our lives, including our every thought and feeling. We cannot allow ourselves to experience things over which we cannot maintain a sense of control. We have an underlying fear that if we surrender and allow our emotions to surface, we will become raving lunatics for the rest of our lives.
4. We are so used to doing what is expected of us that we are often unable to know what it is that we really want and need to do for ourselves. We often betray ourselves by giving in to the demands of people whom we perceive as being “in authority.”
5. We often feel that we must complete certain tasks even though we do not want to, but we are too afraid to stop. We feel resentment at perceived external forces as we tell ourselves we would choose to relax or play if we had a choice. At these times we often procrastinate, wallowing in self-pity but also self-condemnation for our lack of discipline. We cannot concentrate and yet refuse to fully surrender for a moment to allow ourselves the space we need.
6. Our self-esteem is based largely on how others judge our performance at work and in other areas of our lives. Accordingly, our self-concept is highly unstable. We often think of ourselves as either the most intelligent, capable people we know or the most worthless, hopeless people we know. It is hard to see ourselves honestly and accept reality when we are always trying to look through the eyes of others rather than trusting our own perceptions. We often go on intense work binges with the illusion that we need to get the praise of our coworkers and bosses to be safe or happy.

7. When we do judge ourselves, we generally look only to our tangible accomplishments—believing that we must always be in the process of achieving something worthwhile in order to feel good about ourselves. We find it hard to love and accept ourselves otherwise. Our work has become an identity and a means for justifying our existence.
8. We have the illusion that people will not respect us unless we appear more competent than we actually are in reality. When praised by others, we often tend to discount ourselves as unworthy of such affirmation. We tend to schedule ourselves for more than we can handle—striving to do more and do it faster. We are often dishonest about our past experiences and present capabilities, tending to avoid mentioning our failures and to exaggerate our successes. We think that looking busy will make people think that we are important and garner their admiration.
9. We are perfectionistic. We do not accept mistakes as part of being human and find it hard to ask for help. Because we believe no one can meet our standards and that we are indispensable, we have difficulty delegating and end up doing more than our share. Our unrealistic expectations often cheat us of contentment. We are not aware of any difference between job-imposed and self-imposed pressure.
10. We tend to be too serious and overly responsible. All activity must be goal-oriented. We feel guilty and restless when not doing something “productive.” Because we often work at our play, we rarely experience such activities as recreational. We neglect our sense of humor, failing to enjoy the healing power of laughter.
11. We use our compulsion to cope with the uncertainties of life. We lie awake worrying. We compulsively plan and organize. By being unwilling to surrender control, we lose the ability to be spontaneous, flexible, and creative. We cannot feel joy.
12. Waiting is hard for us. We are more interested in results than process, focusing on quantity rather than quality. Our impatience often sabotages our work by not allowing for proper timing.
13. We are in denial about aspects of our work and activity. We lie to ourselves and to others about the amount we do. Often subconsciously, we hoard projects to be sure that we are always busy and never bored. We fear free time as breaks and vacations often seem painful rather than refreshing.
14. Even when we are not working, we are thinking of our next task. Most of our activities are work-related. We neglect our spirituality, health, and relationships. We deny ourselves the enjoyment of a balanced and varied life.

15. Instead of a haven, our home is an extension of the workplace. Our families and friends often struggle to arrange themselves around our schedules, vainly hoping that we will finish our tasks and spend more time with them.

(Workaholics Anonymous Book of Recovery, 2nd ed., 2015, pp. 3-5)