

The Problem

Workaholism can take many forms. Among them: incessantly working or keeping overly busy with other tasks; doing unnecessary work; obsessing about work or compulsively worrying in general; deriving our identity and self-esteem from what we do; being perfectionistic and controlling; avoiding intimacy with ourselves and others by neglecting our spirituality, health, hobbies, and relationships; postponing vacations and rest; procrastinating or having no desire to do anything at all (work avoidance or burnout).

All of these are ways that we cope with the pain of having lost our sense of being and of not feeling good enough. Overscheduling our lives is how we run from ourselves, blotting out reality. We enjoy the adrenaline highs that come from intensity, lack of sleep, and rushing to meet deadlines. Maybe we are praised and promoted at work for being responsible and hard-working. We may even be employed by an institution that deliberately uses such rewards to foster addictive behavior. Yet we have paid an enormous price in trading self-awareness for burying our fears in work and worry. We have endangered our own well-being and destroyed our capacity to truly connect with others. We may have often felt, "Is this all there is?"

Because there are many misconceptions about workaholism, recognizing it may take a long time. It is both a substance (adrenaline) and a process (overdoing) addiction – and, perhaps most importantly, its reach extends far beyond our paid work lives. We can exhibit symptoms in our habits surrounding hobbies, fitness, household chores, and volunteer commitments. Even seemingly admirable

pursuits – like trying to save the world – can constitute pathological work addiction if they foster self-abandonment.

Since this is a progressive disease, ultimately we become more driven until we collapse. Our bottom may take the form of a serious health problem or an ultimatum issued by a partner, employer, or friend. At some point, "workaholic" is no longer a label we prize. We realize that we must change.

At the outset, workaholic attitudes may be so entrenched that the process of recovery itself may appear overwhelming. How long will it take? We are already too busy! How do we manage existing commitments and responsibilities? If we are truly open, however, we will slowly begin to take solace in the experience of those recovered workaholics who came before us – becoming more and more willing to believe that the Twelve Steps might help us too.

The Solution

As our pain intensified, it became easier to admit that we had a problem: we were powerless over work, our lives were unmanageable, and our methods to regain control hadn't exactly been successful. We were ready to sit through the discomfort of not having all of our questions answered immediately and began to accept that there might not be a quick fix. We were able to move out of denial, perhaps saying out loud, "I'm sick, but I want to recover. I need help." In Workaholics Anonymous (W.A.), this is Step One. We have found it helpful to take this step as well as those that follow with others in the fellowship. We no longer have to do everything on our own.

In Step Two, we become open to the idea that a power greater than ourselves – whether we choose to call it God, Higher Power, the Universe, or our W.A. group – can restore us to sanity. In Step Three, we make a commitment to turn our will and our lives over to that power. Allowing ourselves to be guided by such a force requires giving up control, but it does not mean that we are becoming irresponsible. In fact, we are simply aligning our thoughts and actions with our purest soul desires. For those of us who pride ourselves on being self-sufficient and strong-willed, taking this action involves adopting a more flexible way of thinking. We focus less attention on absolute "shoulds" and begin to trust others and our own inner guidance from moment to moment.

In Step Four, we identify the underlying causes of our addictive behavior by writing a moral inventory of ourselves – including both shortcomings and assets. We identify our false beliefs and become acquainted with the lovable person inside that has been lost in compulsive busyness. In Step Five, we heal the shame of having hurt ourselves and others by sharing our story with an understanding person such as a sponsor. When we disclose our secrets, we often find that others have had similar experiences and that we are not alone.

In Step Six, we prepare ourselves inwardly for change. In Step Seven, we ask our Higher Power for assistance in executing a new pattern of behavior. In Step Eight, we list those persons and institutions impacted by our old way of being. In Step Nine, we make restitution to all those we have harmed – to the degree that we are able and so long as we do not further injure ourselves or others in the process. Upon completion, many of us discover that a great burden has been lifted. We finally have a sense of freedom and peace.

There is no cure for workaholism. Recovery is a lifelong process. We are granted only a daily reprieve contingent upon the maintenance of our abstinence and overall spiritual condition. Step Ten urges that we regularly revisit Steps Four through Nine to foster ever-increasing levels of self-awareness. Even though we expect at times to err in our thoughts and actions, we continue to take responsibility for ourselves going forward. Step Eleven implores us to strengthen the conscious contact with our Higher Power through a regular prayer and meditation practice.

In Step Twelve, we expand upon the spiritual awakening experienced upon the completion of the preceding steps by carrying the message of recovery to workaholics that still suffer and by practicing these principles at work, at home, and everywhere else. The best way for us to keep from sliding back into old habits is to concern ourselves with setting an example for others. As we demonstrate our gratitude by giving back to W.A., we simultaneously show others that it is possible to serve in a healthy way. "We can't keep it unless we give it away."

The Twelve Steps put us in touch with our own inner wisdom. As we learn to accept ourselves, we experience a new attitude towards work and activity. We are able to sit still with our feelings. We find greater enjoyment and achieve greater effectiveness in all areas. When work has its proper place, we find the time to have fun and to nurture our health, relationships, and creativity.

We welcome you to our program and wish for you the peace and serenity we have found through this spiritual way of life.

The Twelve Steps*

1. We admitted we were powerless over work—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood God*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Became entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood God*, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to workaholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

**The W.A. Twelve Steps were adapted from the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous © 1939 by A.A. World Services, Inc. They are reprinted with permission by Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.*

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RECOVERY FROM WORKAHOLISM

THE TWELVE STEPS