

Recovery from Work Addiction Through Working the Twelve Steps

The Problem

Workaholism takes many forms. Among them: deriving our identity and self-esteem from what we do; keeping overly busy; neglecting our health, relationships, and spirituality; seeing everything as work-related; having no desire to do anything (work avoidance or burnout); procrastinating; postponing vacations and rest; doing unnecessary work; worrying; perfectionism; avoiding intimacy; being controlling. All these are ways we cope with the pain of having lost our sense of being and of not feeling good enough. Overscheduling our lives with activities is how we run from ourselves. We keep busy to blot out our feelings. We enjoy the adrenaline highs that come from intensity 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 a workaholic company which uses praise and promotion to encourage our addiction. Yet we have paid an enormous price for these “rewards.” We have traded self-awareness for burying our pain in work and worry. We have endangered our health and destroyed our relationships. 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 is not limited to our paid work life. We can also be workaholic in hobbies, fitness, housework, volunteering, or in trying to save the world. All of these may appear admirable, but if they mean self-abandonment due to incessant doing, it is work addiction. Since this is a progressive disease, ultimately we become more driven until we hit bottom. Our bottom may come in the form of a serious health problem or an ultimatum from our partner, employer, or a friend. At some point, “workaholic” is no longer a label we prize. We realize that we have to change. To help guide us in our recovery, there are the Twelve Suggested Steps of Workaholics Anonymous. Because our work addiction is so entrenched in our lives, the process seems overwhelming. How much time will recovery take? We are already too busy! What do we do with our commitments and responsibilities?

The Solution

As our pain intensifies, we begin to gain willingness—willingness to admit that we are addicted to work, that our lives are unmanageable, and that our way hasn’t worked; willingness not to have all our questions answered immediately or to expect a quick fix; willingness to say, “I’m sick. I want to recover and I need help.” In Workaholics Anonymous, this admission of powerlessness is Step One. We have found it helpful to take this Step and those that follow with others in WA. From this initial willingness comes more willingness. Step Two tells us that a power greater than

ourselves can restore us to sanity. This power can be God, Higher Power, the Universe, the WA Group—whatever is our source of strength.

Step Three involves making a commitment to turn our will and our lives over to God as we understand God. Letting our Higher Power guide us requires giving up control, not being irresponsible. Our will now becomes a tool to turn self-will into willingness. For those of us who pride ourselves on being self-sufficient and strong-willed, taking this Step involves a new way of thinking.

In Step Four we make a written inventory of ourselves in relation to our workaholism. We include both our shortcomings and our assets. We ask a WA member for help on how to do Step Four. By taking a close look at ourselves, we become acquainted with the lovable person we truly are, the person we have lost in busyness.

Because many of us feel shame about how our work addiction has hurt ourselves and others, it is healing to do Step Five and talk to an understanding person. This person can be anyone we choose. When we share our secrets, we often find that others have had similar experiences.

Steps Six and Seven ask us to prepare ourselves inwardly to make amends to those we have harmed. In Step Eight we list those people and in Step Nine we make amends prudently. After these Steps are completed, many of us discover that a great burden has been lifted, that we have a sense of freedom and peace.

Recovery from workaholism is not a cure, but a lifelong process. We are granted only a daily reprieve contingent upon our maintaining our abstinence and growing spiritually. In Step Ten, we continue the process begun in Step Four—awareness of our feelings and taking responsibility for our words and actions.

Taking Step Eleven strengthens our conscious contact with our Higher Power, begun in Step Two, by having us stay in touch through prayer and meditation.

Step Twelve tells us we can maintain and expand the spiritual awakening we experienced in doing all the preceding Steps. We can do this by carrying the WA message of Recovery to workaholics and by practicing these principles at work, at home, on vacations—everywhere. The best way for us to keep from sliding back into old habits is to share about our WA recovery with others. “We can’t keep it unless we give it away.” We carry the message by being an example of a recovering workaholic in our daily activities as well as by giving service in WA

Following the Steps brings us in touch with our inner wisdom and our spirituality. As we learn to accept ourselves as we are, we experience a new attitude toward work and activity. We enjoy our work more and find ways to work more effectively. When work has its proper place, we find time to have fun and to nurture our health, relationships, and creativity.

We welcome you to our Program and wish for you the recovery, serenity, and self-enjoyment we have found.

(Workaholics Anonymous Book of Recovery, 1st ed., 2005, pp. 107-109)