

Turning Work into Play

Attitudes

As workaholics, we have used work and activity to deny our being and escape our feelings. Overdoing may have been our only means of gaining approval, finding a sense of identity, and justifying our existence. Any loose commitment to play, as compared to the seemingly all-important obligation to work, may have seemed somewhat frivolous. We may have felt so guilty enjoying ourselves that we made recreational activities into a series of profitable or otherwise useful projects so that we could feel productive. Or, perhaps we were raised with the idea that work is respectable drudgery (the daily grind, the rat race) and that play should be allowed only as a reward for immense effort.

In either case, we have difficulty assigning intrinsic value to play for its own sake. Work is what we feel we must do for money and a sense of self-worth. In fact, the more painful it is, the more we prove to ourselves that we have earned our keep. Play is seen as self-indulgent procrastination. The idea of being paid for something effortless or fun may sound ridiculous.

If we are self-employed, we probably have the idea that we cannot charge much if we love what we do. We might suppose that we are justified only by our suffering; however, buyers do not value our struggles when making decisions. Consumers simply want to know that a product or service is going to meet their needs. In fact, when something is created or otherwise rendered in a blissful state, that feeling often shines through and attracts a market on that primary basis.

Some of us have realized that spending a majority of our time fixated on the achievement of status and material wealth—while simultaneously sacrificing opportunities for pleasure—is absurd. We have since come to understand that our attitudes toward work and play can be the same. No matter what we do, we can approach the activity with presence, openness, and light-heartedness rather than focusing on outcomes for our peace of mind.

Rewards

Some of us find ourselves working in the wrong fields—failing to capitalize on our interests and natural talents. Or, we may be pursuing our passions but in a workaholic setting or manner. In all cases, we came to WA because, whether we realized it or not, we were working from our egos rather than our hearts. We worked to be stimulated and distracted; to be validated, respected, and loved; and to take pride in how much we could push ourselves to do. Sometimes we subconsciously worked to sabotage ourselves because proving we were failures made us feel comfortable and in control.

Sometimes upon striving we received extrinsic rewards: a partnership, a second house, or just a bigger paycheck. We may have begun the work because we liked it—but once we connected what we did with accolades and awards—those markers of success gradually became more important than what we had to do to get them.

Whatever our situations, we had destructive attitudes towards work. We set impossible deadlines and forced projects before their time. We refused to take breaks, working through pain and exhaustion, and then we wondered why we resisted what we once looked forward to doing. We sometimes found ourselves unable to work at all—paralyzed by perfectionism and taking refuge in other compulsive behavior.

Recovery

In WA, we know that a Higher Power is our employer. Through the Twelve Steps, we turn our life over to the care of something greater than ourselves. We ask for guidance on what to do, when, and how. We realize that our bodies and our minds have limits; that we must nurture them with rest, a healthy diet, and exercise. We learn that any activity, no matter how pleasurable, can become tedious if overdone. We understand that tired work is wasted work because we often have to redo it.

Enjoyment of the process becomes our criterion. Often, we can use our will to continue working but without enthusiasm. Instead of concentrating on output, we can ask ourselves if we can keep going without sacrificing a positive attitude. We will find that the answer is often no. Once we grasp the idea that we deserve to savor what we do, we will no longer have to ask. We won't have to wait until our eyes droop and our neck aches. We'll know long before that to turn off the computer, put down the phone, or close the book: to stay in the present and truly experience our feelings. What we are doing is growing a healthy self, one that savors life right now instead fantasizing over future rewards. Once we get in touch with ourselves, we become clearer about what really matters.

Workplace Changes

This clarity changes how we see our environment. Suddenly, we notice others in the workplace who do the same tasks—but with peace and serenity. We realize that we don't have to overdo or try to become indispensable to keep our jobs. We are treated differently as we begin to establish boundaries and no longer allow others to reinforce our addiction. Even if we are responsible for setting the pace, we are often amazed at how the level of creativity and cooperation increases as our expectations become more realistic.

Or, we may realize that we must leave. If we aren't using our talents, work may now feel even more alienating and meaningless. We may find that our values have changed and that we are no longer willing to act in unethical or self-abusive ways. We may work for a cause we believe in but in a way

that contradicts Recovery principles. We now believe that in order to be of the greatest benefit to society, we must set healthy examples by choosing healthy workplaces and modeling sane behaviors. Instead of flogging ourselves and forcing a project before its time, we work refreshed, at the moment of ripeness, and everything falls into place. We begin to shift our focus from achieving results to behaving in accordance with our moral code in every situation. In this way, we have a new standard for success. Work, like play, has become its own reward.

Outside the Workplace

Whether we have made peace with our situations, found the healthier positions that were looking for us, or created a saner environment ourselves, these shifts have also affected the rest of our lives. Because we are satisfied, we no longer feel compulsively driven to accomplish things in general or to reward ourselves for enduring unsatisfactory work. Our health improves when we believe we are always entitled to excellent self-care.

Contentment becomes a natural part of living. Ironically, we achieve more and we do it more easily. We don't need to acquire more or do more in order to feel that we are enough. The feeling of inner emptiness and the craving for ego inflation disappears. A sense of self-worth is no longer achieved through work alone.

Our relationships change. We attract people who have firm boundaries—those who like themselves, are independent, and are not controlling. We no longer need to be needed or to earn friendship through caregiving. When we do service, it is after we are truly grateful and happy with our own lives. What we provide is of a higher quality because it is given freely and without resentment.

("Turning Work into Play," © 2014 Workaholics Anonymous World Service Organization, Inc.; *Workaholics Anonymous Book of Recovery*, 2d ed., 2015, pp. 210-213)