



**Chained to the Desk: A Guidebook for Workaholics, their Partners,  
and Children, and all the Clinicians who treat them.**

Notes by Frumi Rachel Barr

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**Notes:**

Many clinicians do not recognize work addiction as a problem. The author feels this book is a first on the topic and is much needed to make work addiction recognized as a problem that needs treatment. It is the first book on work addiction to show not only the devastating effect on workaholics, but also its effect on those who live and work with workaholics - their partners, offspring and business associates. Workaholism and work addictions are used interchangeably in this book. Work addiction is defined *as an obsessive-compulsive disorder that manifests itself through self-imposed demands, an inability to regulate work habits, and overindulgence in work to the exclusion of most other life activities.*

Men and women are trying to figure out how to integrate work and family in their lives. As we try to achieve this balance, our lives become a sea of errands, appointments, and chores. To make things worse, the line between home and work has been erased. Technology, instead of freeing time for leisure pursuits has become an appealing trap.

Achieving the work-family balance is one of the big challenges of this century for Americans. Many over invest in their jobs making us become a nation that enables workaholics - unbalanced and out of control and unable to slow down to nurture ourselves

and our loved ones. More and more people use their jobs as an anesthetic to relieve emotional pain, help them forget their worries, boost their self esteem, gain comfort and safety, entertain themselves and provide intimacy and silent companionship. In the same way that alcohol or food provide comfort and escape for some, work is the drug of choice for millions, providing them with an emotional sanctuary while distancing them from loved ones and friends.

Working long hours alone, to be able to meet financial commitments, does not make one a workaholic. True workaholics are driven by deeper, internal needs, rather than by external ones - the process of working satisfies an inner psychological hunger. Workaholics tend to be separatists, preferring to work alone and focusing on the details of their work, to which their egos are attached. In contrast, healthy workers can see the bigger picture and work cooperatively with others toward common goals. While workaholics often create or look for work to do, healthy workers enjoy their work, often work long hours, and focus on getting the job done efficiently. Healthy workers think about and enjoy whatever they are engaged in at the present moment; workaholics think about working a disproportionate amount of time, even during social activities or leisure times, when their minds wander and obsess about work.

Partners of workaholics find themselves lonely, isolated, and guilty in these vacant relationships and frequently question their own sanity even as friends and employers applaud the workaholics for their accomplishments.

There are different degrees of workaholism. Obviously, the more severe it is, the more serious the emotional and physical side effects. The purpose of this book is to help find the proper integration of work and personal time to support all parts of a person's life. The key is balance.

The author compares workaholism to alcoholism. Progressive in nature, these addictive behaviors are unconscious attempts to solve unmet psychological needs that have roots in the family of origin and can lead to an unmanageable every day life, family disintegration, serious health problems, and even death. Work highs, reminiscent of the alcoholic euphoria, run a cycle of adrenaline-charged binge working, followed by a downward swing. Euphoria eventually gives way to work hangovers characterized by withdrawal, depression, irritability, and anxiety. Like other addictions, there is a point when workaholics hit bottom.

Work addictions infect other family members, causing them to experience a whole set of mental health problems of their own. The author uses an addiction model, throughout the book to show the downside of work addiction and its impact on the individual, as well as the workaholic family as a whole. The purpose of this book is to provide an inside look at work

addiction that debunks myths, refutes false claims, and sets the record straight, using the clinical, empirical, and case studies currently available.

### **Work Addiction: Myths & Realities**

Conditions That Enable Work Addiction: There are four levels of enabling:

1. *Daily surroundings* - the immediate context in which we come face to face with factors that directly affect our daily lives, such as family, school, work, or church. The families we grew up in, the families in which we live now, and the jobs we currently hold - are all potential enablers of work addiction. E.g. family wanting material things can send mixed messages.
2. *Interconnections between settings* - between two contexts at the first level such as between home and work e.g. technology enabling home as workplace trend.
3. *Media and community*- enabling comes from the larger contexts of neighborhood and community resources such as media & newspaper - stereotypes support positive portrayals of workaholics.
4. *Embedded beliefs of culture and society* - occurs in the overall patterns and ideology of the society, culture, politics and economy. Disenfranchised groups such as women and gay men and lesbians often unwittingly become workaholics to prove to a society that devalues their worth. Our society depicts the ideal woman as the one on the fast track who can do everything. Because they can't deliver, super moms feel guilty about everything. Men try to live up to the image of the ideal Dad.

### Myths and realities about work addiction

*The job makes me do it* myth

Reality: The source of work addiction is inside us. The workaholic who blames the high-pressured workplace for his or her work addiction is as much a stereotype as an alcoholic who blames a "nagging" spouse for his or her alcoholism.

*Workaholics are better workers* myth

Reality: Workaholics create stress and burnout for themselves and for their fellow workers, creating negative fallout in the form of low morale, disharmony, interpersonal conflict, lower productivity, absenteeism and tardiness due to stress-related illnesses, loss of creativity, and lack of team cooperation. Work addiction, therefore, is not a positive quality.

*The superhero myth* - the envy of their peers, accomplished, responsible, and able to take charge of any situation.

Reality: Workaholics suffer from a compulsive disorder that masks a range of feelings, from anger to depression, and maladjustment in the forms of feelings of poor self-worth, difficulty with intimacy, and fear of loss of control.

*The Messiah myth*- workaholics swear they are working hard for their families.

Reality: workaholics overextend themselves to fill an inner void to medicate emotional pain, and to repress a range of emotions.

*The wedded to work myth* - they must enjoy their jobs to be work addicted because they spend so much time working.

Reality: Although most workaholics say they enjoy their jobs, work satisfaction is not necessarily a prerequisite to work addictions.

*The imposter myth* -holds that work addiction is not a legitimate addiction because it doesn't have a physiological basis as do the chemical and food addictions.

Reality: The release of adrenaline, like other drugs, creates physiological changes that lead to "work highs" that become addictive and potentially fail.

*The stepchild addiction myth* is a general belief that work addiction is not a true member of the addiction family because it is secondary to the more serious primary addictions.

Reality: Work can be a primary addiction or it can be secondary, blending with other addictions.

*The Gainfully employed myth* holds, that if you are not gainfully employed, you cannot be work addicted.

Reality: Work addiction is not limited to paid gainful employment. It can manifest itself in many forms by consuming the workaholic's identity, time, energy and thoughts.

*The Slacker Myth* - workaholics fear that if they moderate their work habits, they will be perceived as slack or remiss in their responsibilities.

Reality: Workers who live balanced lives are more efficient and productive and bring better quality and productivity to their work because they are less stressed and clearer minded.

*The I'll quit tomorrow myth* is a mistaken belief that recovery from work addiction requires simply cutting back on work hours.

Reality: Like other addictions, recovery from work addiction goes deeper than simply measuring the number of work hours. It requires insights into unresolved emotional needs, difficulty with intimacy, and need to control.

Clinicians can help clients with resistance, challenge them with boundary settings, help with time management, and teach workaholics to blend work with play and labor with leisure.

### **How to recognize work addiction**

1. They are always in a rush and superbusy

2. They play the control game. Workaholics fear that delegating tasks or asking for help will be perceived as signs of weakness or incompetence. There is a tendency to over plan and over-organize through work so that condition feel predictable, consistent, and controllable, which inhibits spontaneity and flexibility.
3. Nothing is ever perfect enough for them. Perfectionist workaholics are difficult to work for, and even more difficult to live with. Because of their superhuman standards, failure and anger at others for not meeting high standards are constant companions.
4. Their relationships crumble in the name of work.
5. They produce work in binges. Workaholics create personal deadlines that mandate binging on every project.
6. They are restless, no-fun grumps. Workaholics feel guilty and useless when they do something that does not produce results
7. They experience work trances - they literally tune out the here and now.
8. They are impatient and irritable. They hate to wait (e.g. in lines). In the long run their impatience can result in impulsivity.
9. They think they are only as good as their last achievement. Self worth is sought through performance and achievement.
10. They have no time for self-care. Little attention is paid to physical needs like nutrition, rest, and exercise.

#### **Classifications of workaholics:**

*Relentless workaholics*, work compulsively and constantly day and night, holidays and weekdays.

*Bulimic workaholics* have out-of-control patterns that alternate between bingeing and purging. Faced with a time crunch, bulimic workaholics create adrenaline as they engage in frantic productivity followed by inertia.

*Attention-deficit workaholics*, adrenaline-seeking workaholics who are easily bored and constantly seeking stimulation. They live on the brink of chaos.

*Savoring workaholics* are slow, deliberate, and methodical. They are consummate perfectionists. Their detailed and self-absorbed approach makes it hard for them to work on a team.

*Careaholic* workaholics have a compulsive need to be overly responsible for others, to feel the feelings of others, and to overdo for them. It is work addiction veiled in noble intentions.

The author developed the Work Addiction Risk test (WART) as a tool to screen for the symptoms of work addiction. It statistically has high reliability and validity. Different workaholic types experience different kinds of job and family problems. Clinicians and clients work together to set therapeutic goals that match the clients type of work addiction. Work moderation plans are set up which include specific activities and time commitments. In producing a self-care plan clients imagine their lives in four parts: self, family, play, and work.

## **Treating Work Addiction as a Family Disease**

Over the course of time, family members develop certain behavior patterns in response to their loved one's work addiction. Their spouses often try to get them to curb their compulsive behaviors and spend more time in the relationship. The author describes this as "circularity" as workaholics react to these demands by distancing themselves further. Feeling lonely, unloved and emotionally and physically abandoned, family members align against the workaholic and retaliate with verbal resentments and emotional distance. Family behavior patterns or roles in response to work addiction have the effect enabling it. Family members are further inhibited in their attempts to deal with work addiction, and the workaholic is enabled because of this good-looking camouflage, which is echoed and supported by the larger societal system.

Children of workaholics can become "parentified". These children often become surrogates for the missing parent. The void left inside when children have to forfeit their childhood - bereft of feelings of approval, reassurance, love, and comfort and protection from adult pressures - shows up years later as an often described "empty hole inside".

Triangulation across generations can occur when spouses become competitive or the parental bond becomes more valued than the marital bond, as when a mother aligns with a child by secretly despairing over the workaholic father's emotional absence.

The author describes his research on the workaholic family system; suggestions for clinicians; initial screening and family contracts; confronting the enabling; Twelve Steps and referral to support groups as well as support groups for family members.

## **Inside the Workaholic Mind**

"I work therefore I am" is the reasoning of workaholics. Work defines the identity of workaholics, gives their life meaning, and helps them gain approval and acceptance. It becomes the only way they know to prove their human value and to numb the hurt and pain that stem from unfulfilled needs. Often it is shame that is at the bottom of work addiction. Workaholics believe they can earn respect and their place among others if they can just work hard enough. Motivated by low self-worth, they define themselves by their accomplishments. The more they do, the better they feel about themselves. Outward manifestations of their success and importance include how much money they can make, how many sales accounts they land, etc.

When incoming feedback from people around them conflicts with their perceptions of themselves, they change to fit with their belief system. In other words, they turn positive

situations into negative ones. They tell themselves that their successes are accidents and that their failures are the living proof of their inadequacies.

The first step in dealing with work addiction is to identify the rigid thinking from which the self-inadequacy originates. There are twelve types of rigid thinking that are characteristic of the workaholic mind set and that are present in each workaholic to varying degrees.

1. *Perfectionist thinking* tells workaholics to bite off more than they can chew which lead again to feelings of failure and self defeat.
2. They engage in *all or nothing thinking* - thinking in extremes instead of shades of gray.
3. *Telescopic thinking* occurs when the workaholic mind acts like a telescope, blind to anything that raises the person's self-worth and zooms in on and magnifies the negative.
4. With *blurred-boundary thinking*, workaholics show a lack of clear boundaries. They often sacrifice their own needs leading to self-neglect.
5. *People-pleasing* thinking causes them to be indecisive and overly agreeable, because they are always using the opinions of others to gauge their actions.
6. When friends or coworkers do praise workaholics, their *pessimistic thinking* discounts the praise, and they continue to feel unworthy and unfulfilled.
7. Workaholics feel helpless and unable to change their lives. When they engage in *helpless thinking* they view their lives as determined by high-pressure lifestyles, how much they can accomplish and how much praise they get.
8. They externalize their responsibilities and blame other people for their problems and thus engage in *self-victimized thinking*. The more victimized they feel, the more resentment builds up as is expressed through bitterness and cynicism toward a life where they feel trapped.
9. *Resistance thinking* causes workaholics to perceive life as a struggle. They wear too many hats, push themselves too hard, and become impatient with others not moving as fast as them.
10. Workaholics engage in *wishful thinking*- wishing they had more of something to make them feel more finished, more complete.
11. *Serious thinking* tells workaholics that life is all grim determination and that fun and joy are taboo.

### **The Mind-Body Link and The Workaholics Health**

This section discusses the benefits of optimism and hope related to health and pessimism and workaholism, which causes various chemical reactions in the body leading to ill health as a result.

Helping Clients connect with themselves.

While the information is mostly for clinicians, coaches can share the following tips with clients so they can develop a better internal relationship with themselves.

### Change how you think about yourself

- Learn to identify your feelings and to accept the facet that you're angry or frustrated
- Give yourself pep talks
- Please yourself instead of pleasing others
- Learn to accept your human limitations instead of feeling flawed.
- Recognize that less is more
- Work smarter not longer.

### **Work Addiction in the Company**

Everything you have read so far about workaholics is carried into the workplace: their rigid thinking, their compulsive work habits, and their way of relating to people, even their families of origin. Because the workplace is so often a replication of the family of origin, some adults who have a higher tolerance for stress and chaos and who seek out high-stress jobs unwittingly re-enact unresolved issues in the form of rampant work addiction. The work environment can breed workaholics, and after a certain point, these work habits and patterns hurt not only the workaholics but also the company.

As workaholics continue to over-invest in their jobs, fatigue sets in, and rates of errors and accidents increase. Thus many workaholics are less efficient than their coworkers who put in fewer hours planning and working toward a job goal. In contrast to the workaholic, the optimal performer has warm, outgoing relationships and a good collaborative sense and is a master at delegating.

The following are six characteristics of companies that promote work addiction on the production line, in boardrooms, or in sales meetings:

1. The mission of the organization is denied, ignored, or forgotten.
2. Corporate survival reigns supreme
3. Profit is the driving force of the workaholic company
4. The workaholic environment is self-centered and has no boundaries or respect.
5. Crisis management is the norm in workaholic organization.
6. Intimacy does not exist in the workaholic environment.

Workaholics are attracted to and thrive in jobs that have any or all of these six characteristics. They insinuate their way into the rank of management positions in these companies and perpetuate work addiction at every level. Efficient workers are less willing to sacrifice their whole lives for unreasonable works demands and in some cases are making drastic changes in their work lives. Businesses too, are taking a stand against work addiction and are structuring more humane working environments.

**The author also has the following additional chapters:**

The Childhood of Workaholics

Spouses and partners of Workaholics

The Children of Workaholics

All of these chapters are more pertinent to clinicians than to coaches so I am not including them here



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Frumi and Deborah Gaal are co-founders of the Leaderly Learning Center, a leadership development company specializing in women. We get results because our workshops are led by women who have been CEO's, entrepreneurs and certified coaches. We walk the walk.

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