

Workaholism

The law is a profession with a culture of hard work with long hours, demanding clients, loads of files, due diligence, trial preparation, and more importantly, unrealistic demands lawyers put on themselves. Some lawyers revel in the hours they log in by bragging, as if it were a badge of honour, about the late nights and the volume of output. Others bemoan the sheer quantity of work that must be done to practice competently but complain without a plan on how to manage their time better. Some believe either directly or by presumption that there are high billing targets and time that must be put in. Whatever the attitude or approach, make no mistake that the law requires time dedication.

At what point do hard work and extended hours become unhealthy? In substance addictions, that point is fairly clear. Persons can use, abuse and then become dependent on alcohol or other drugs in a growing succession of tolerance and volume of usage. Dependence becomes a serious and life-altering problem when most things in a person's life are negatively affected – family, work, friendships, physical and emotional health, finances, etc. A substance is easy to identify and there are 12-step support groups to assist in abstinence and daily recovery.

However, a process or behavioral, addiction such as workaholism is harder to identify and treat. (Other process addictions include internet addiction, gambling addiction and sex addiction). Work is a vital part of our daily activity so that we do not seek 12-step recovery groups to abstain from work. Somehow, we are expected to know innately how much is enough. After all, we have all heard that hard work never killed anyone, haven't we? So how much work is too much or is there never too much? How do we know when we have a problem with work boundaries and dependence? Interestingly, the same negative effects for substance dependence affect a workaholic's family, friendships and physical and emotional health and finances as well.

Dr. Barbara Killinger gives some help in her book *Workaholics, The Respectable Addicts*, 1991, Key Porter Books, Toronto, Ontario. She starts her book with the following quiz to identify attitudes and behaviours that indicate a problem with a workaholism problem.

The Workaholic Quiz

1. Is your work very important to you?
2. Do you like things done "just right"?
3. Do you tend to see things as black and white, not grey?
4. Are you competitive and often determined to win?
5. Is it important for you to be "right"?
6. Are you overly critical of yourself if you make a mistake?
7. Are you afraid of failing?
8. Are you restless, impulsive and easily bored?
9. Do you drive yourself, and have high levels of energy and stamina?

10. Do you suffer periodic bouts of extreme fatigue?
11. Do you take your briefcase home and work nights and/or weekends?
12. Do you feel uneasy or guilty if there is nothing to do?
13. Do you think you are special or different from other people?
14. Do you read work-related material when you eat alone?
15. Do you make lists of things to do and keep a daily diary?
16. Do you find it harder and harder to take long vacations?
17. Do you often feel hurried, rushed, or a sense of urgency?
18. Do you keep in touch with your office while you're on holidays?
19. Do you "work" at play, and get upset if you don't play well?
20. Do you avoid thinking about your retirement?
21. Are you responsible at work, but not in personal matters?
22. Do you try to avoid conflict instead of dealing with it?
23. Do you act on impulse without considering the effect on others?
24. Do you fear rejection and criticism, yet judge and criticize?
25. Is your memory for what others have said getting worse?
26. Do you get upset if things don't work out as you expected?
27. Does being interrupted at work or at home annoy you?
28. Do you create pressure situations with self-imposed deadlines?
29. Do you concentrate on future events instead of enjoying the present?
30. Do you forget or minimize family occasions or celebrations?

The more "Yes" answers to these questions can help you identify thinking or behaviors that indicate that you should get help.

Consider these other observations that Dr. Killinger makes:

- "The obsession with work grows out of the workaholic's perfectionism and competitive nature"
- "Workaholics cannot *not* work without becoming anxious"
- "Workaholism is a major source of marital breakdown"
- "Work is a substitute "religious" experience for many workaholics"
- "Denial is the ultimate defence that protects this addiction"
- Workaholics see themselves as "Mr. Nice Guy" or "Ms. Nice Gal"

Are any of the things above resonating with you? Do you feel that you have a healthy balance of physical care, emotional connectivity to others and a spiritual sense of who you are and how you fit into the big picture? Or, do you feel that your life is out of control and you just don't know why? Or you just don't know or are not sure? Or do you just not care?

Working on achieving balance for workaholism or other process addiction means working on beliefs and behaviors. Dr Killinger gives us guidelines for Mr. or Ms. Real to work on to achieve balance. As opposed to the above-noted workaholic indicators found in the quiz, try to be -

- "Humble
- Self and other centered

- Realistic - able to understand limits
- Thorough
- Valuing of harmony
- Self-directed
- Competent
- Patient
- Accepting
- Tolerant
- Flexible, open
- Responsible at work
- Objective, aware
- Peaceful, calm
- Contemplative
- Easy-going
- Keeping things in perspective
- Open, available
- Having a gentle sense of humour”

If you feel that you need some further guidance, try this approach to work and life balance –

- Try to be more open and receptive to others
- Go beyond your own subjective point of view and try to see that of others
- Ask for feedback and listen to it!
- Express yourself clearly and with a personal, feeling component – “I had an idea the other day that got me excited!” rather than “Here’s my thoughts”
- Encourage discussion
- Give up control by being more spontaneous and stop second guessing others
- Be generous, be receptive and show appreciation of others
- Avoid criticizing other people; use only constructive comments
- Foster harmony; learn to apologize
- Smile

Practically, there are small and simple things that can be done to get some semblance of balance back:

- Put yourself, your family, exercise and your outside interests into your appointment book first in pen, not pencil. Fit work around your life and what matters most instead of the opposite. This is a principle of Franklin-Covey, the time-management people
- Leave your briefcase at the office
- If you must work at night or on a weekend because of an extraordinary project, give yourself a time limit of the hours to be worked and then take those hours worked and mark them out of your book for yourself as soon as the immediate pressure of the project is off

- Take at least two weeks off twice a year for holidays. Do not take work with you. “Forget” your cell phone. Have your office refuse to accept calls from you when you are away
- Read non-legal stuff out of the office – history, murder mysteries, sports books or romance novels. Let your imagination soar
- Get involved with activities that you really enjoy – swimming, dancing, stamp collecting, choir. Set up a lesson one evening per week to pursue your interests. Love your passions; it makes work more enjoyable and keeps it in perspective
- Play golf or some other competitive sport you like (even bridge) without keeping score
- Work out a realistic retirement plan to take the pressure off of not knowing where you are financially to give yourself options for the future that do not include work
- Go to every family birthday, anniversary, baptism, bar/bat mitzvah, baseball game, dance recital or anything that will not be repeated until you are ready to attend. It is trite to say that you will only have one opportunity to participate in these historical family events
- Make a date with your spouse at least once a week, leave the cell phone at home and talk about everything other than work especially about her or him
- Talk to your parents about their lives and notice that they will talk very little about work but mostly about family
- Pray in the sense of taking a personal inventory of who you are, where you are, where you want to be and how you fit into the big picture of life and other service
- Do something or volunteer to help others through a service club, major charity or church
- Sleep eight hours per night and eat three meals a day
- Remember not to sweat the small stuff and that it’s all small stuff

As with other things in our lives, work obsession can get out of control. Putting it into perspective along with everything else is not easy to do but it can be done. Talking to someone else who is living a life of balance helps. Call your provincial or state lawyer assistance program to talk to another lawyer who understands.

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