



Women Workaholics: Driven by Double Duty

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The term "workaholic" was first coined by *The Wall Street Journal* and until recently the addiction was believed to be a male syndrome.

Noted psychoanalyst, Dr. Ethel Person, professor, Columbia University and author of *Feeling Strong: The Achievement of Authentic Power* (Harper 2003), had this to say about work-addicted females: "Women workaholics are more noticeable now as the working

wife and working mother become common societal roles, but females have been workaholics inside the household for centuries."

Michigan's Mary Meade Fuger, then executive director of the Women's Resource Center in Michigan, agreed. "Many of our mothers were workaholics, but they were not labeled as such because they were not out in the business world." Previously overworked women were considered "good moms."

There is a distinction between workaholics and hard workers. The latter may work 15 hours a day as a means to an end--pay the bills, please the boss or receive a promotion. Once that goal is met, though, they know how to relax.

Workaholics, on the other hand, live to work. When one project is complete, they find 10 more to accomplish. They are described as intense, energetic, competitive, driven and "leisure neurotics."

Dr. Charles Garfield, Clinical Professor of Psychology in the Department of Psychiatry at the University Of California School Of Medicine at San Francisco, conducted a 14-year study with workaholics and found that "Workaholics are addicted to work, not results."

The Difference Between Male and Female Work Addicts

There do appear to be differences between male and female work addicts. According to New York psychologist Dr. Marilyn Machlowitz, author of *Workaholics: Living with Them, Working with Them*, women workaholics struggle with the added pressure of "double duty"--maintaining both a job and housework.

One woman wrote in response to a questionnaire on workaholism, "Most women I know feel as strong an obligation to perform in their personal lives as in their professional lives."

Women work addicts, then, may be even more driven than their male counterparts unless they give up their stereotypical roles of Super mom, Super wife, and Superwoman.

Stress Buildup

When a woman believes she must constantly put her nose to the grindstone--always working, never relaxing--she is subject to stresses which typically manifest themselves in psychosomatic illness. Cardiac problems, headaches, weight loss, digestive disorders and chronic fatigue are a few of these physical maladies.

"Women have a tendency to discount their own bodies," said Fuger. "Workaholics never give their body a chance to wind down. When they begin making mistakes on the job, they drive themselves even harder

"It is a continual buildup of stress without any release for it. To take any time off is dangerous, threatening to her. Even a leisurely lunch hour makes her feel guilty."

Psychiatrist Dr. John M. Rhoads conducted studies to determine the link between disease and work habits. He found that workaholics lacked an "inner monitoring device" which could alert them to the need for rest.

"The most striking personality feature of the healthy, hard workers in contrast to the workaholics," insists Rhoads "is that they know when to stop. They could spot fatigue and respond to it promptly."

Dr. Machlowitz, on the other hand, does not totally agree that workaholics are unhappy and unhealthy. She says there are a lot of studies done at the American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association linking job satisfaction to longevity. In general, she found the compulsive workers to be "remarkably satisfied and content with their lives."

It is Machlowitz's belief that the people with whom workaholics live and work suffer more. As workers, these addicts are often demanding, ineffective and their overwork often disrupts family life.

How do workaholics cope with a vacation, a situation which deprives them of their first love--work?

"Poorly," said Fuger. "Some don't take them unless they are mandated by the company, and even then the work addict is miserable.

"For some workaholics, business trips and conventions are their definition of a vacation. It gives them a break of some kind, but chances are they will still carry the same time frame with them. They will get up early in the morning and will be obsessed with doing something all the time.

"The psychology of workaholics is that unless they are busy, they cease to exist."

The Driving Force

What specifically drives the woman workaholic? Research indicates that parental upbringing shapes much of the workaholic's behavior. For instance, it is the belief of Wayne C. Oates, author of *Workaholics: Make Laziness Work for You*, that the

work addict had parents who emphasized "the idle mind is the devil's workshop" The driven and compulsive worker may be trying to please parents who could not be pleased.

Garfield suggests that work-addicted people "equate themselves and their self-worth with their output." Rhoads says, "Workaholics are commonly attempting to solve life's problems by excessive, distracting work." And Oats insists that some of the hidden issues which drive the over workers are a lack of trust in others, the desire for prestige, and the need to control events.

But many confessed work addicts do not feel they live an unbalanced lifestyle or are compensating for personality distortions. Michigan's Donna Douglass claims what motivates her is "a need to achieve, a need to do as much as well as possible. When I asked her if she felt any self-help groups or organizations could help women workaholics cope with their addiction, her response was, "Why?"

Similarly, another female striver wrote to me and said: "Work addiction does affect my social life in that my job is so demanding mentally, that when I arrive home to my family, I crave a few minutes of privacy. But achievement in a work situation is very rewarding. The knowledge that I can earn a living and the desire to learn more about whatever I'm doing is very rewarding."

The experts defend their position about unhappy work addicts by claiming that workaholics deny or refuse to face the real causes of their addiction. It is their belief that anything done to excess is abnormal.

Workaholism is a coping style, says Garfield, and, as such, people will defend their coping style as relevant unless they are willing to see through it.

Contrary to that thinking, Marchlowitz argues that many myths need to be dispelled about workaholics. Her research confirmed that workaholics are surprisingly happy. People who work and love it make non-workaholics uneasy.

"The latter group begins to worry, 'what's wrong with my job?' or worse, 'What's wrong with me?'" In defense of their own lifestyle, they degrade the workaholic behavior and call it abnormal.

Many female workaholics claim they are not "working themselves to death." They want to work. They love to work. And according to Machlowitz, "Some people are happy only when they are really working hard."