

Work Addiction (Compulsive Working)

Work addiction is counted among the non-substance dependent addictions and compulsions along with pathological shopping, sexual behaviour, and gambling. For these patients, work is the highest priority and all private concerns, social contacts not connect to their job, and hobbies are given much less value. As the addiction progresses, life outside of work is increasingly neglected by the patient. Over time, the work addict continues to take on more and more assignments and duties, does not trust any one else to get jobs done, and is sure that no one else could do the work as well as he/she does. This perfectionism reaches a point where the patient no longer gives any value to his/her private life. The consequences of such an exaggerated work regime are very serious. The most common direct consequences include heart failure, heart attack, and stroke. Additionally, workaholics usually do not take the time to eat a healthy diet or exercise creating a further cause of cardiovascular diseases.

In Japan, where there are statistically the most workaholics, death as a consequence of work addiction is called “karachi” which, loosely translated, means “death through overwork.” As a result of the high number of people who suffer from this problem, over 350 treatment centers for compulsive work habits exist in Japan. Work addiction appears most often in people in leadership positions and among the self-employed whereas employees and other workers seldom suffer from this condition.

At the Psychological Institute of the University of Bonn, different types of work addicts were determined to create a better overview of the spectrum of this condition. It became evident that this addiction is actually a many-layered condition that requires more detailed characterization and treatment. The following types were determined:

1) The Border Line Work Addict

Although the people in this group perform a large quantity of work, they still have more free time than those in other work addict subgroups. They can hence be thought of as at risk for work addiction.

2) The Overextended, Inflexible Work Addict

People in this group are characterized by strong feelings of overextension and anxiety in addition to a lack of spontaneity and inflexibility both in their work and private lives. They also show a prominent impairment concerning their health and in their social surroundings.

3) The Stubborn Work Addict

Those in this group tend to implement their convictions and intentions with all the force they can muster and at every price. They work long hours, both for their job and for household, are inclined toward perfectionism, and have noticeably little free time. They will not give up responsibility or delegate jobs because they think that they are the only ones capable of doing the job right. Problems in interpersonal and partner relationships are noticeable and occur often.

4) The Overextended, Compulsive Work Addict

This type of work addiction is characterized by the highest level of compulsive behaviour in comparison to the other groups. Feelings of overextension and anxiety, difficulty in making decisions, stubbornness, and compulsive, ritualized work habits are typical. Interestingly, people in this group have a relatively large amount of free time, but they are unable to enjoy it because they are preoccupied with thoughts of tasks still to do and

those already done. They tend to be very unsatisfied with their own performance and set extremely high standards for themselves.

Regarding the treatment of work addicts, behavioural therapy is recommended as by other non-substance based addictions. Regular, self-help meetings following the example of Alcoholics Anonymous are also common in many areas (“Workaholics”). However, more professional examination of this addiction should come in the next years, because it has recently become the focus of scientific interest.