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Workaholics on the wagon

By Emma Jacobs

By 3pm every day, Michele used to feel mentally and physically exhausted. Rather than pause to recuperate, the 50-year-old entrepreneur from Texas psyched herself up for a new work project. “I was addicted to the adrenalin. I was ramped up all the time,” she says. It took its toll, however. “I felt depressed and physically was shutting down.”

So six years ago she attended her first Workaholics Anonymous meeting. A 12-step programme founded in 1983, it follows the group meeting model of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. In this case, however, rather than giving up liquor or cocaine, participants want to stop working compulsively.

Michele (not her real name) found that the group helped her to change the way she worked. It involved working less but she also found her energy levels increased by working more intelligently. “Multitasking and technology make it hard to focus. I focused on one thing and did better.” She also transformed her attitudes to work. “People use work to avoid emotional intimacy. I didn’t believe I was worthwhile unless I was productive.”

The WA groups helped her to trace the problem back to her childhood. “My parents are lovely people but they didn’t do parenting very well. The only time I got attention was when I did well at school.”

The stereotype of workaholism, Michele says, is of a stressed-out businessman in a suit. But she believes this is not the only model. She had previously been addicted to voluntary work, while even stay-at-home parents may also suffer from workaholism by needing to “always be busy and not comfortable relaxing". "Workaholism is more widespread than just burnt-out executives. Just as an alcoholic isn't just the drunk sleeping under the bridge."

Despite Michele's self-diagnosis of workaholism, there is no clinical definition and Workaholics Anonymous has never gained the traction of AA. The term was coined in 1968 by Wayne Oates, an American psychologist and religious educator, in an essay in which he confessed that his own addiction to work (he wrote 57 books) was similar to alcohol abuse.

The notion of being addicted to work is also prone to ridicule. "People laugh if you say you are a workaholic," says Michele.

Michael Sinclair, a consultant psychologist who is based in the City of London, deems the term "pop psychology".

Yet the compulsive component to excessive working and its harmful consequences have prompted more psychologists to change their view. Last year, for example, researchers in Norway and the UK created the Bergen Work Addiction Scale, a tool to measure workaholism based on the key addiction traits.

Bryan Robinson, a therapist and author of *Chained to the Desk* , has long championed the concept of work addiction. Describing himself as a "recovered workaholic", he says that like an alcoholic, he used to conceal his work excesses. He recalls a holiday during which he pretended to have a nap while his family went for a walk so he could do some work. He knows of one woman who used to drench her gym kit with water so that she could use a sweaty exercise class as an alibi for long hours at the office.

Excess work can prove harmful to more than just the worker by placing a burden on their partner and children. Some studies have shown that children of workaholics have a higher rate of depression and anxiety than those of alcoholics.

Even among those psychologists who dismiss work addiction, excess working is seen as a sign of emotional turmoil. "There are disorders connected to working too hard," says Mr Sinclair. Hard work may be associated with "perfectionism" and "Type A behaviour" (highly strung and competitive). Underlying these problems, he says, are "feelings of rejection".

Nonetheless, he notes that not everyone who works long hours has a problem. "There is a difference between people devoting themselves to their career and enjoying it [and] compulsive working in order to block out feelings," he says. "It's all about excess. We all possess some of the workaholic traits. Work is important to our identity. It's important financially but also psychologically. It can be healthy – it gives us a role and a routine. It's excess that's the problem."

Mark Griffiths, professor of gambling studies at Nottingham Trent University, believes that for short periods working 12-to-16-hour days is nothing to worry about. He adds, however, that everyone reacts differently. Two people working 14-hour days for

How to tell if you are a workaholic

The Bergen Work Addiction Scale was presented last year in the Scandinavian Journal of Psychology and uses seven basic criteria to identify work addiction. The questions are scored on the following scale: (1) Never; (2) Rarely; (3) Sometimes; (4) Often; and (5) Always.

- You think of how you can free more time to work.
- You spend much more time working than initially intended.
- You work in order to reduce feelings of guilt, anxiety, helplessness and depression.
- You have been told by others to cut down on work without listening to them.
- You become stressed if you are prohibited from working.
- You de-prioritise hobbies, leisure activities and exercise because of your work.
- You work so much that it has influenced your health negatively.

According to the study, scoring "often" or "always" on at least four of the seven questions suggests you may have a problem.

a month may be exhibiting similar behaviour but, he argues "they are very different in terms of their psychological motivation and the meaning and experience of work within their lives". For one person, working hard might be "entirely positive", for example bringing about a promotion, whereas for another "it is entirely negative" because it is a way of blocking out everything else around them.

Yehuda Baruch, professor at Neoma Business School in France, believes workaholism should not be dismissed automatically as a vice but rather as a trait that can lead to positive outcomes for individuals, business and society. We are lucky, he asserts, that "The Beatles were workaholics".

Last year Wilmar Schaufeli, professor of work and organisational psychology at Utrecht University, coined the term "engaged workaholic", defined as having a healthy, positive passion for work. Prof Schaufeli believes the crucial difference is between those who feel "pulled" through the enjoyment of work and those who feel "pushed" by negative feelings, such as wanting to escape intimacy with a partner or family member.

As Prof Baruch puts it: "If you love it, go for it. If you don't love it, do the minimum."

Excess working is entirely subjective, he argues. "I love chocolate. I can eat a lot of it and not get fat. But if I did get fat eating too much it would be a problem. Not every addiction destroys your life."

It is also subject to cultural difference. What is overworking in France, he suggests, might not feel that way in China.

For those who do feel they have a problem, Mr Sinclair says the key is to address the emotional issues that underlie the compulsion to work excessively. He does not believe it needs to be fixed simply by working fewer hours. "It's not about carving out more holidays," he says. "It is about avoiding the work-holiday cycle, where you burn yourself out working and refuel on holiday. You should be able to create space within work and notice how you're feeling. Take time to notice your behaviour."

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