

Lawyers who do too much



Ontario Lawyers' Assistance Program



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 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 practise competently but complain, without strategies, about how to manage their time better. Many lawyers literally try to talk to a client on the phone while simultaneously sending an email and reviewing a contract or separation agreement in front of them on their desk. They may even have another document set up on their computer screen, or even on split screens with a chat box in the corner and a favorite website minimized in another corner.

Although many people say that multitasking makes them more productive, research shows that multitaskers have trouble focusing while trying to shut out irrelevant information. In the process, they experience higher levels of stress. Instead of actually doing many things at

the same time, they switch attention from one task to another extremely quickly, which results in taking more time to get the tasks done and with a high probability of errors. Scientists say that, even after the multitasking ends, fractured thinking and lack of focus persist. One writer calls multitasking a habit akin to an addiction!

When the Apple iPad was launched, a website proclaimed in March, 2010 that it was “a disappointment for the legal profession” and that it had “missing features.” The criticism was summarized in a blog response to Apple – “Multitasking – For me, this is huge. The ability to run multiple processes is critical as a work device. I typically have 6 – 10 programs or windows open on my desktop. It isn’t unreasonable to conceive of needing a few different applications running to use the iPad OS 4 as a true working device.”

In April 2010, the iPhone garnered this comment: “Multitasking – This feature allows you to move slow-moving apps to the background while you continue using other apps.”

These “problems” have been rectified to now keep us active, multitasking,

and, arguably, counter-intuitively less productive.

But this focus on multitasking highlights and at the same time overlooks the underlying issue of workaholism.

At what point do hard work and extended hours become unhealthy? In substance addictions, that point is fairly clear. Persons can use, misuse, abuse and then become dependent on alcohol or other drugs in a growing succession of tolerance and volume of usage. The addiction 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.

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 involve a workaholic’s family, friendships and physical and emotional health and finances as well.

The workaholic quiz

Dr. Barbara Killinger, author of *Workaholics, The Respectable Addicts* provides a quiz to identify attitudes and behaviours that indicate a workaholism problem.

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 behaviours 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."

How to achieve balance?

Working on achieving balance for workaholism or other process addiction means working on beliefs and behaviours. To achieve balance, Dr Killinger suggests you try to be

- Humble
- 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

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 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 file,

give yourself a time limit and then take those hours worked and mark them out of your book as compensation for yourself as soon as the immediate pressure of the file is off.

- Take at least two weeks off twice a year for holidays. Do not take work with you. “Forget” your cellphone. 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. Videos of the event do not count! Trite as it sounds – you will only have one opportunity to participate in these historical family events.
- Make a date with your partner at least once a week, leave the cellphone at home and talk about everything other than work.
- 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.
- 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.

For tips on dealing with multitasking, consider the following:

- Cultivate the art of paying attention.
- Only check email a few times a day and on a scheduled basis.
- Turn off the “auto-notification” sound/box to avoid disruptions to your concentration.
- Exercise judgment about what is worthy of your attention right now until the task is completed.
- Limit the number of websites you visit.
- Create stronger divisions between work time and social time.
- Simplify and shorten messages.
- Use “Reply All” with care.

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. Talk to another lawyer who understands. Professional help and counseling can be arranged.



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