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When does hard work become workaholism? It's not simply about the hours you put in

As New Year's resolutions are made on achieving a better work-life balance, it helps to know what truly drives a workaholic

Chong Siow Ann

In his essay When Good Doctors Go Bad, the surgeon and writer Atul Gawande tells the cautionary tale of Hank Goodman, a highly respected and much sought-after orthopaedic surgeon – the sort of doctor whom other doctors would call on for their own family and friends.

As his reputation and popularity grew, so did his list of patients and his earnings. He was busier than any of his partners, which became for him "a key measure of his worth", and he took to calling himself "The Producer". On a typical day, he would be busy shuttling back and forth between his clinic and the operating theatre. For years, he worked more than 100 hours a week and did not see much of his family.

Then things started unravelling; he made terrible mistakes that harmed his patients. The number of malpractice lawsuits against him mounted; some of his colleagues tried to warn him, others stepped in to stave off more disasters; his own assistant diverted cases away from him; and finally, his medical licence was taken away. At some low point after that, he thought of suicide. Until he turned bad, he was the stereotype of the self-sacrificing good doctor who thought nothing of putting in long hours to tend to his patients.

The sad tale of Dr Goodman is timely coming at the start of a new year, when resolutions to do better are made, including those related to making the best use of one's time. There are just 24 hours in a day, and limitless demands on them. How does one strike a healthy balance?

Doctors are perhaps not the ideal source of advice against working too much, as the medical profession is one where overwork is valorised. But they are not alone. The legal profession, finance, and the tech industry are also notorious for a punishing work culture defined by long hours. The Ministry of Manpower may have stipulated that an employee should not exceed a maximum of 44 hours of work in a week and can work no more than 72 overtime hours in a month, but we can assume that many in these sectors – whether out of choice or not – do not stick to these limits.

Billionaire Elon Musk once recounted how he slept on the factory floor to get a new Tesla model out. There was simply no time to go home and shower, he explained. Working about 120 hours a week was par for the course if one wanted "to change the world", in his words. More recently, as the new owner of Twitter and self-styled "Chief Twit", he wanted his employees to put in 84-hour work weeks with 12-hour shifts, and no overtime pay. Unsurprisingly, it did not go down well.

Amid the uproar about brutal capitalist practices, a number of interesting questions arise. From Mr Musk's point of view, there is no cause for complaint as he willingly underwent the same punishing pace, which invites the retort that not everyone is a workaholic. But what defines a workaholic? It is not, as it may appear at first sight, someone who spends an inordinate amount of time on work. It has to do with a combination of mentality and behaviour as well.

RESPECTABLE ADDICTION

The now ubiquitous term "workaholism" was coined by psychologist Wayne Oates in a 1968 article in which he confessed that his own industriousness resembled a disorder like substance abuse. (He wrote 57 books in his lifetime, and was so busy with his work that his young son once had to ask for an appointment at his office to see him.)

Oates defined workaholism as "the compulsion or the uncontrollable need to work incessantly". It has subsequently been referred to as an addiction, albeit a "respectable" one. There is no consensus among researchers about whether it is a true addiction, nor has it been officially designated as a mental disorder.

The connotation of the term itself can be positive or negative. Those who blithely call themselves workaholics are probably not; there is a difference between workaholics and those who are simply very engaged in their work. The latter are passionate about their work and thrive on hard work; it's what they do best and the work they do – far from being spirit-crushing – gives them a sense of achievement, pride, meaning and identity.

Workaholics, on the other hand, are yoked to an inner compulsion that is a cauldron of ambition, anxiety, insecurity and guilt. They constantly have work on their minds and worry when they are not working. They feel that they are not doing enough. They get anxious thinking of the work that they are not doing. They don't delegate work to others. And they continue to work even if they are deprived of sleep, wrecking their health, and neglecting their family and relationships.

There are different theories in the still nascent field of workaholism studies to explain the conscious and latent forces that make a workaholic.

That desire to stand out in some way is probably innate in most of us. The 19th-century American philosopher and psychologist William James once observed that "(we) are not only gregarious animals, liking to be in sight of our fellows, but we have an innate propensity to get ourselves noticed, and noticed favourably, by our kind".

As we are always reflected in the eyes of others, most of us never quite cease to be self-conscious of that, and we want to stand out in some way. And in workaholics, that need to be special is probably even more compelling.

Children who are pushed hard by parents with high expectations might develop a sense of worth that is tied to external achievements rather than who they are, and could grow up to become "approval-addicted" and people-pleasing adults who resort to their work – which can morph into a compulsive pursuit of status and material success – to unconsciously slake this desire to feel validated and worthy.

But for workaholics, these feelings of gratification from external validation never last, and they have to keep running and chasing, driven by the fear of falling behind. They just don't know what is enough and lose sight of what success means to them. Psychologists call this the hedonic treadmill, in which the overwrought, anxious workaholics must run on to the next thing to avoid the awful feeling of lagging behind.

Some stay on the treadmill until they end up suffering from burnout, which the World Health Organisation has formally recognised as an "occupational phenomenon" characterised by feelings of exhaustion, extreme fatigue, low mood, irritability, cynicism and reduced professional efficacy. Even with burnout, some would still continue to trudge on miserably.

Families and friends are often the collateral damage. In the wake of workaholism may be a trail of marital unhappiness and discord, alienated and resentful children, and neglected and broken friendships.

Separately, studies of women survivors of intimate-partner violence and victims of childhood sexual abuse indicate that they may be prone to workaholic behaviours. Some researchers think work addiction might be a concealment and sublimation of painful thoughts and emotions that follow some trauma. Overworking provides a means of obliterating, numbing or avoiding their unresolved feelings.

LOVE AND WORK

Work is vitally important for most of us; it is also many things to us. Beyond being a means of livelihood, it is also a source of our sense of self-worth, accomplishment, contribution to society, and friendships and belonging. But work for the sole purpose of outward achievements and external validation is suspect: We risk losing that wider perspective of what it is like to be a human being.

When asked about what is important for the human psyche, psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud was said to have replied, "Love and work... work and love, that's all", provided, of course, that the work is not soulless and life-stifling drudgery.

Most of us would need to work to live, and the work we do could still be the crucial core of our life and identity. While it's good and fortunate if we love our work, our work will not love us back.

We need to be able to love others and have the love of others. Those deep connections (which take time and effort to cultivate and maintain) make memories and life precious and meaningful. Perhaps that is the pathos and tragedy of workaholics – by reducing everything to work, they have impoverished their lives by working the people who matter out of their lives.

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Office workers at Raffles Place. Most of us would need to work to live, and the work we do could still be the crucial core of our life and identity. ST FILE PHOTO

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