

# Acknowledgments

It's hard to believe that this book is now in its third edition. I have many people to thank for its continued success. My deepest appreciation goes to the anonymous individuals who took the time to write about their courageous struggle with work addiction and how it damaged their lives, as well as their inspiring stories of recovery. Special thanks to Dr. Nancy Chase, Annie O'Grady, Art Campbell, Stephanie Wilder, Daffie Matthews, George Raftelis, Annemarie Russell, Gloria Steinem, Roger Catlin, and Tom Dybro.

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Last but certainly not least, my heartfelt thanks go to the hundreds of readers who have called and e-mailed me, searching for help in their battle with workaholism. It has always been my wish that *Chained to the Desk* would give hope and courage to workaholics waging an inner battle against themselves, as well as to their loved ones who also suffer from this best-dressed problem of the twenty-first century. If you're searching for answers, I hope this book helps you find the peace and serenity that you're seeking.

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# Introduction

## Glorification of an Illness

*This is a man for whom work always came first. Now he can't even remember it.*

—Chris Wallace, *Fox News Sunday*  
anchor, on the final days of his  
hard-driving *60 Minutes* father,  
Mike Wallace, who died in 2012

Recording artists have always known something about the work world that the American workforce still doesn't get. Cyndi Lauper sang it: "When the work-ing day is done, girls just wanna have fun." Michael Jackson crooned it in *Off the Wall*: "So tonight gotta leave that nine-to-five upon the shelf and just enjoy yourself." And Dolly Parton warned us about working nine to five: "It'll drive you crazy if you let it."

And Dolly's right. It will, *if you let it*. But you don't have to worry about nine to five workdays anymore. In the twenty-first century, we have 24/7 work-days and soaring job pressures in our technologically driven work culture. "It's enough to drive you crazy if you let it." The key is not to let it, but that's easier said than done.

- ❖ Do you feel like you're tethered to your smart phone?
- ❖ Are you working far more than forty or fifty hours a week?
- ❖ Are you eating fast food or vending machine snacks at your desk or skipping lunch altogether?
- ❖ Do you stay in constant contact with work even on weekends, holidays, and vacations, or forfeit your vacations to keep on working?
- ❖ Do you get nervous or jittery when you're away from work?

If you answered “yes” to some of these questions, you could be a workaholic, a problem that has continued to swell since the first and second editions of this book. Increasingly, American workers find themselves on a tightrope, trying to hold that line between calm and frantic activity, looking for a way to balance crammed schedules and keep clever work gadgets from infiltrating their personal time.

## I Only Work on Days That End with “Y”

*Chained to the Desk* is a metaphor for the agonizing work obsessions that haunt you even when you’re away from your desk. If you’re a workaholic, chances are you openly admit your obsession with work while concealing the darker side of the addiction. Perhaps you testify to your passion for work, your nonstop schedule—all of which present you in a favorable light. But you fail to mention your episodes of depression, anxiety, chronic fatigue, and stress-related illnesses—consequences of working obsessively for days on end.

To say that the general public and media do not take workaholism seriously is an understatement. When it’s not praised, workaholism is dismissed as a joke. One light-hearted portrayal in a newspaper cartoon shows a huge, empty meeting room with a sign posted at the front that reads, “Workaholics Anonymous.” The cartoon’s caption says, “Everybody had to work overtime.” Advertisers bathe workaholism in the same glamorous light that they poured over cigarettes and liquor in the ads of the 1930s. A Lexus ad in the *Wall Street Journal* boasted, “Workaholic? Oh, you flatter us: The relentless pursuit of perfection.” A radio commercial for a truck praised the versatility of the “Workaholic 4 by 4.” If you tell people you’re a workaholic, they usually chuckle. The label is tossed around with abandon in social gatherings, not as a problem but a badge of honor. Corporate climbers wear the workaholic name with pride, proclaiming their loyalty on behalf of the company, announcing that they binged for eighteen hours or three days on a project as something of which to be proud. But rarely do you hear adults boast about a three-day drunk or proclaim that they binged on an entire apple pie.

## The Buzz on Workaholism

Workaholism is the best-dressed of all the addictions. It is enabled by our society’s dangerous immersion in overwork, which explains why we can’t see the water we swim in, and why many therapists look blank when the spouses of workaholics complain of loneliness and marital dissatisfaction. There are

hundreds of studies on alcoholism, substance abuse, compulsive gambling, and eating disorders, but only a handful on workaholism, a profound omission.

The term *workaholic* was coined by Wayne Oates in the first book on the subject, *Confessions of a Workaholic*, in which Oates described workaholics as behaving compulsively about work in the same ways that alcoholics do about alcohol.<sup>1</sup> More than forty years later, no consensus exists among clinicians on how to define or categorize workaholism.

I use the terms *workaholism* and *work addiction* interchangeably throughout this book. I define *workaholism* as *an obsessive-compulsive disorder that manifests itself through self-imposed demands, an inability to regulate work habits, and over-indulgence in work to the exclusion of most other life activities*. The frantic work habits of workaholics activate their stress response, and their neurological systems are on constant red alert. Although workaholism is a form of escape from unresolved emotional issues, the relief it provides has an addictive quality. The addictive nature of workaholism comes from the fact that workaholics are temporarily delivered from deeper red alert conditions through the distraction of working. But because the deeper issues are not addressed, constant working is necessary to keep the smoldering coals from becoming wildfires.

## Trending Now: Some Things NEVER Change

This is the third edition of *Chained to the Desk*. The first edition appeared in 1998, the second in 2007. During this fifteen-year span, a lot has happened to advance the understanding of workaholism. The problem is being recognized and addressed in more and more countries worldwide. Workaholics Anonymous has over a thousand members and holds meetings around the world—in Paris, Sydney, London, Reykjavik, and Bangkok.<sup>2</sup> On average, I receive several queries a month from researchers and graduate students studying the problem in such countries as Hungary, Poland, Spain, Slovenia, Turkey, the Netherlands, Japan, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

A 2011 dissertation by a graduate student at Central Queensland University, in Australia, was titled “Problematic Use of Smartphones in the Workplace: An Introductory Study.”<sup>3</sup> The research reported in the dissertation used the Work Addiction Risk Test (WART), a test that I created to measure workaholism (which you will get to take later in the book). Findings showed a strong link between workaholism and the negative impact of smart-phone use such as addictive highs, withdrawal symptoms, interpersonal conflict, and problems at work.

Other studies around the world report that the seeds of workaholism are being planted early. In a 2011 global study conducted by the International

Center for Media and the Public Agenda, researchers asked 1,000 young adults from the United States to Hong Kong to give up all electronic media for twenty-four hours.<sup>4</sup> Deprived of their MP3 players, cellphones, and laptops, their stress levels went through the roof. They experienced elevated heart rates and increased feelings of anxiety, panic, irritability, restlessness, and depression—all symptoms of addiction and withdrawal. Some even said they felt as if they had lost their identities. Such withdrawal reactions are typical of workaholics who are deprived of work opportunities.

Extreme work habits have become commonplace in a world characterized by the frenzied pace of life, fear of being left behind, and desperation to achieve. For example, a disturbing report showed Chinese college students hooked up to IV drips. Under life-and-death pressure to gain acceptance to the college of their dreams, they were cramming for the 2012 National College Entrance exams. They had been losing precious time running to and from health clinics, so amino acid IV drips were installed to fight fatigue, giving students more time to study.

## Working Faster, Furious, and Frenzied

In 1998, the same year that the first edition of this book was released, the Families and Work Institute reported that the average American worker clocked 44 hours of work per week, an increase of 3.5 hours since 1977 and far more than workers in France (39 hours per week) and Germany (40 hours).<sup>5</sup> And according to the Center for American Progress, American families worked an average of 11 hours more per week in 2006 than they did in 1979.<sup>6</sup>

Shortly after the publication of the first edition of *Chained to the Desk*, we entered a new century. A lot happened in terms of work and workaholism by the time the second edition was released in 2007. In the 1990s “blackberries” were something you consumed, not something that consumed you. If you had a “Bluetooth,” you went to the dentist instead of to work. By 2007 the 1990s workday phrase “nine to five” had become obsolete, replaced by the “24/7” of the new millennium. These trends were an indication of how work had slithered its way into every hour of our day—the “smart phoning” of our lives. But how smart are we, really?

During the seven years between the first and second editions of this book, we worked longer and longer hours. According to *US News and World Report*, the workweek jumped from forty-four hours in 1998 to forty-seven in 2000.<sup>7</sup> And the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reported that Americans put in 20 percent more hours in 2012 than in 1970, with sixty-

hour workweeks becoming the norm.<sup>8</sup> Along with that time increase, work stress skyrocketed. Studies show that after financial worries, job pressures are the second major cause of stress among Americans. According to the American Psychological Association, 62 percent of Americans said their jobs caused them stress in 2007, but the figure had jumped to 70 percent in the association's 2011 follow-up study.<sup>9</sup>

## The No-Vacation Nation

Even more disturbing has been the slow evaporation of vacation days. Years ago I never went on vacation without my laptop, cellphone, and mountains of work (See “My Story,” the opening case study in chapter 1). Although my old habits have changed, they are typical of today's employees, many of whom haul tons of work with them on vacation. But an increasing number of workers no longer take vacations at all.

The Economic Policy Institute of Washington, D.C., discovered that the average American worker took only two and a half weeks of vacation and holidays in 1990—less than the average worker in any other developed country, including Germany, where workers take six weeks a year. In 2004 Management Recruiters International reported that nearly half of US executives said they wouldn't use all of their earned vacation because they were too busy at work.<sup>10</sup> In 2010 a CareerBuilder survey found that 37 percent of working Americans did not take all their vacation days, an increase from 35 percent in 2009. And of those who did take all their time off, 30 percent worked while on vacation.<sup>11</sup>

In 2012 the average American worker left 9.2 vacation days on the table—up from 6.2 days in 2011—and most people said they did so because they were stressed out by the extra work they had to do around any vacation: “We have to get ahead of our workload in order to leave, and then we have to catch up to our workload upon our return.”<sup>12</sup>

Fear is another reason. Increasingly, patients in my clinical practice say they are afraid to take vacation days for fear they will not be perceived as team players. Some even say they are afraid to leave the office for lunch, because if positions were cut they would be the first to go. This worry has increased nationwide. In 1977, 45 percent of people felt secure in their jobs, according to the Families and Work Institute. That number dropped to only 36 percent in 2006.<sup>13</sup>

To make matters worse, once the recession began in 2008, the concept of workaholism became an even harder sell, especially in a declining economy

where people were desperate for work so they could stave off mortgage foreclosures and reduce their escalating debt. Many American workers were eager to accept heavy workloads and job stress if that meant they could make ends meet and feel more secure in their jobs.

## Psst, Denial Is Not a River in Egypt

Despite these disturbing trends, the concept of workaholism has been relegated to the pop psychology bookshelves. A book on workaholics by Marilyn Machlowitz in the 1980s applauded the workaholic lifestyle, presenting it as a virtue rather than a vice and suggesting that workaholics are actually happy because they are doing what they love.<sup>14</sup> And supporters of work addiction reform have been the targets of ridicule and butts of jokes, as the following commentary from *Fortune* magazine illustrates: “Along with heroin, gambling, sex, and sniffing model airplane glue, work is now taken seriously as something people often get addicted to, in which case they need to get cured. . . . The references to work addiction are instantly psychiatric. The phrase is enveloped in psychobabble about inner insecurities, lives destroyed, and—could it be otherwise?—support groups needed.”<sup>15</sup>

Another shocking example of denial is the professor in the Netherlands who coined the term *engaged workaholics*. The professor argues: “If you love what you do, where’s the harm in doing too much?” I wonder if that’s something anyone would tell an alcoholic, shopaholic, drug addict, or compulsive gambler.<sup>16</sup>

These kinds of comments reflect ignorance about a condition that wreaks misery and havoc on millions of people in this country. Obviously, a lot of education is still needed even for mental health professionals, which brings me to an even more disturbing state of affairs. Although *workaholism* has become a household word, it has not been accepted into the official psychiatric and psychological nomenclature. The American Psychiatric Association considers it a symptom of obsessive-compulsive personality disorder. Jeffrey Kahn, a consultant for the association’s committee on psychiatry in the workplace insists that “other professionals who think workaholism is an addiction or a diagnosis in and of itself are ‘missing the boat.’”<sup>17</sup> It’s also shocking that in 2006 a representative of the Priory, Great Britain’s high-profile clinic for addiction, charged that “workaholism is just something journalists like to write about.”<sup>18</sup>

As of this writing, The American Psychiatric Association is preparing the new diagnostic guidelines for substance use and addictive disorders that it will publish in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) in May 2013.<sup>19</sup> The DSM is the standard classification of mental disorders used by mental health professionals in the United States.

The American Psychiatric Association is recommending that this diagnostic category include both substance use disorders and nonsubstance addiction such as gambling. The association's recognition of behavioral addictions as true addictions is a groundbreaking action. But unfortunately workaholism—or work addiction or overworking—is not included as a nonsubstance addiction in the DSM-5. This oversight has occurred despite the fact that the association is recommending further study of Internet use disorder as an addiction and is recognizing other addictive disorders that are related to the use of caffeine, inhalants, and tobacco.

Many clinicians—vast numbers of whom are workaholics themselves—still do not recognize workaholism as a problem. They see nothing wrong with eighteen-hour, pressure-cooker days. They deny that workaholism is a factor in their patients' problems or in troubled relationships in the couples who see them for psychotherapy. Although workaholism surrounds us daily, they look on it much as we do caffeine or prescription drugs—as harmless, even beneficial. But not only has the problem of workaholism not gone away, it has worsened. Hence, the third edition of *Chained to the Desk*.

## Why Will This Book Be Helpful?

This book provides an inside look at work addiction that debunks the myths, refutes false claims, and sets the record straight, using the clinical, empirical, and case studies that are currently available. Since the first and second editions of this book, new studies have emerged that provide deeper insights into the condition and into the effects it has on the workaholic's family.

From California to the Carolinas, men and women have recounted their agonizing bouts with work addiction and the devastation left in its wake. It's no accident that personal stories in San Diego resemble the accounts of those in Atlanta. It's no coincidence either that patient after patient in Charlotte who grew up with workaholics describe haunting feelings that are strikingly similar to those of children of workaholics in Peoria, St. Louis, and Houston.

It's not a fluke that partners of workaholics in New York describe experiences that are almost identical in every detail to those of partners in other parts of the country. These personal accounts are not scientific in the quantitative sense, but they carry their own validity. They document the psychological experiences of individuals affected by work addiction—and the details in so many accounts provide such an uncanny match that the emerging profiles cannot be attributed to chance alone. In this respect we have a qualitative science of work addiction derived from the parallel themes and feelings that have been observed by clinicians in the field.

This is the first book to show the devastating effects of overworking on the workforce as a whole and on those who live and work with workaholics—their partners, offspring, and business associates. It contains new and innovative research not reported anywhere else on the outcomes of adults who carry the legacies of their workaholic parents and the problems this creates in their own adult relationships. Each chapter opens with a case study, followed by information assembled from hundreds of case reports and a small body of clinical and empirical research.

I have drawn on my own personal experiences, the research I've conducted at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, my vast clinical practice with workaholics and their families, and correspondence from around the world. This information is presented in a readable way for workaholics and their families in the general public who might be struggling with these issues.

Combining scientific knowledge and clinical practice with personal accounts, this book is unique because it's also the first informative source for clinicians to help them respond to the work addiction epidemic sweeping this country. Written for psychologists, social workers, marriage and family therapists, counselors, health educators, the clergy, medical practitioners, teachers, healthcare administrators, heads of corporations, and employee assistance personnel, *Chained to the Desk* reveals the origin and scope of work addiction, its pervasiveness within the family system, and how professionals can diagnose, intervene, and provide treatment for workaholics and their families.

## A Makeover for the Third Edition

You may notice that the third edition of this book has been given a makeover. For starters, it has a new organization: Part I (“Work Addiction: The New American Idol”) describes the problem of workaholism. Part II (“Recovery from Work Addiction”) focuses on the solution and includes four new chapters: chapter 9, “Your Workaholic Brain”; chapter 10, “Mindful Working”; chapter 11, “Your Work Resilient Zone: Finding Your Positive, Compassionate Self”; and chapter 12, “Work-Life Balance and Workaholics Anonymous.”

Each chapter opens with updated case studies and concludes with revised strategies and tips for clinicians to treat workaholics, their loved ones, and their employers and colleagues in the workplace. Within the chapters, I have included sections called “Recharging Your Batteries,” which contain practical recovery steps for workaholics and their families. A new appendix contains psychometric information about the Work Addiction Risk Test (WART) and further information on reading material, support organizations, and websites relating to workaholism.

Here's what else is new:

- ❖ Cutting-edge research on work stress and efficiency
- ❖ Information on stress, the workaholic brain, and neuroplasticity
- ❖ News about the effects of electronic devices
- ❖ Myths about the virtues of multitasking and overtime
- ❖ Groundbreaking mindfulness techniques and resilience
- ❖ The latest research on finding your work resilient zone and work-life balance
- ❖ A more reader-friendly writing style

## Idle Moments without Imperatives

If you're like most people who grow up in the United States, you've probably heard the adage, "An idle mind is the devil's workshop." For many people, doing is more valued in our culture than being, and the more you do, the greater your worth.

*Chained to the Desk* is for you and anyone struggling with the insidious and misunderstood addiction to work. It aims to provide both counseling and consolation when you cannot find them elsewhere. It shows you how to work hard, find your work resilient zone, be kind and compassionate to yourself, keep a positive attitude, and maintain balance with the three Rs: relaxation, recreation, and relationships.

May this book help you, the reader, find a place in your life where career success and personal and intimate fulfillment reside side by side—where you will know more about special times without imperatives, with idle moments when there's nothing to rush to, fix, or accomplish. And where you can give yourself the gift of being present in each moment.

Bryan Robinson  
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