

## Are you addicted to work?

By Lucía Martín

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Lucia Martín, born in Paris, works as a journalist in Madrid since 2000. From 2000 to 2008, she managed the investment section in the economical magazine Capital. After 2008, she worked as a freelancer journalist for different medias in Spain and France: newspaper El Mundo, magazine Esquire, Forbes, Tiempo, Interviu, [diarioabierto.es](http://diarioabierto.es), [myeurop.info](http://myeurop.info), etc. She has had published five books and she's now preparing the next one, based on her blog: El sexo de Lucía.

The idea that work gives health (*a popular phrase in some counties*) is not always true, particularly if work becomes an uncontrollable addiction that controls a person's life. If this is the case, then it's time to change.

Is it hard for you to disconnect from work? Are you among those who are first to arrive and last to depart from the office? Are you so hooked to your e-mail that you also read it even when you are on vacation? Do you rush through lunch break to get back to work? Do you have conflicts with your family about the hours you are spending at work? If you said yes to these questions maybe you are a workaholic.

The term *workaholism* was coined in 1971 by psychologist Wayne E. Oates, in an effort to describe his work addiction. It seems the phenomenon of workaholism has increased in its severity over the years and articles have been written everywhere analyzing and explaining this problem.

But does just working hard mean one is addicted to the office? Certainly not. "The workaholic is somebody, traditionally a man, although this is problem is occurring more in women, who treats work as an addiction, like someone would use a drug to feel better or escape – explains Francisco Alonso Fernández, a professor of Psychiatry and Medical Psychology on the Universidad Complutense de Madrid and an author of several works on this subject. "When not working he/she feels something like an abstinence syndrome: restless, irritated, can have digestive problems, etc... Work dependency activates the same neuronal processes that every other addiction whether alcohol, drugs, food, etc... The addictions activate the brain reward system. If the brain activation doesn't exist there is a feeling of emotional loss".

Work addiction is not only already well known by specialists, but with the problem increasing throughout the world, more people are starting to recognize it as a serious issue. The Japanese Health Ministry did officially recognize this disorder in 1987. There it is called *karoshi* that means literally “death by over work”. Japan has documented deaths caused by *karoshi* for several decades. For example, in 2013, an Indonesian editor, Mita Diran, was found dead in front of her computer after publishing in Twitter that she was working non-stop for 30 hours. Last summer, another young man, a German scholar, Moritz Erhardt, died in the London City after 72 non-stop working hours.

It is very difficult not to fall in the vortex of long work hours when many things in societies throughout the world, pushes us towards it. It is said that work dignifies (almost a gift in our times) and entails some social status. Being competitive is acclaimed and considered very good, not to mention encouraged and promoted. All these are contributing factors to the perfect soil and social climate for people to end up becoming work slaves.

### **WORK IS NOT ALWAYS HEALTH**

Since we were children we were told that work gives health, and never put off until tomorrow what you can do today. Is this how it is? It seems this can turn into disease for some people and if you think about it, you can easily see how we can spend our whole life focused on working. “When we review the history of work, we see that it was an activity that was discredited until the beginning of the XIX century. Since then it has been dignified and globalized. Work addiction began to extend with the modern consideration of the concept”, Alonso comments.

Working is indeed well seen and working hard, especially in certain Latin countries like ours, even more valued. Spain is a country in which people work longer hours, although we are not more productive. On the contrary, as per OCDE’s data, Spain has more than 300 work hours per worker per year than Germany and Austria. It is above Finland, United Kingdom, Slovenia, Sweden, Luxembourg and France. However, although these numbers are high, Spain productivity falls behind other European countries.

Some would think that with the unemployment tax, the work addiction phenomenon would lessen, but this is not necessarily so. More people have to work longer hours

to supplement their co-workers who have been fired. But does working hard mean that one is a workaholic?

“Addiction to work depends on individual factors and on external factors, for instance, when there was more work demands, workaholism was higher. It also excels in cities that are in the industrialization process” says psychiatrist Rosa Sender, author of the book *El trabajo como adicción* (Work as an Addiction). “There is a specific profile: these are people who like very much to compete, very impatient, they don’t like free time as they don’t know what to do about it and they avoid vacations”, she adds.

“Work addiction doesn’t happen only in offices, but appears in other activities. It arises in bosses, managers, advisors. It happens less in the lower level work class”, says Alonso.

### **WORKAHOLICS ANONYMOUS**

In the United States, Outreach Coordinator for Workaholics Anonymous, Michele S., doesn’t agree with the previous opinion and she states that the kind of work that the person does is irrelevant to being a workaholic: “It can happen to anybody; the idea that this can only happen to men in high positions is a stereotype. Anyone can be workaholic; a housewife who doesn’t stop even for a minute and doesn’t know how to relax and/or take care of herself, or even a student that is a constant overachiever”. Michele has been a member of Workaholics Anonymous (Adictos al trabajo Anónimos) for 7 years now. The association began in the United States in 1983. She is also a volunteer for W.A. “I realized I had a problem some 17 years ago and this problem escalated when I started my own business 11 years ago. I was having an emotional, physical and spiritual breakdown when I found W.A. and working the 12 step program and having the fellowship as support, has really helped turn my life around.”

W.A. has its roots in the Alcoholics Anonymous 12 step program to help members start working and living a healthier more balanced way. The fellowship has face to face meetings in some areas as well as online and phone meetings. It helps provide guidelines and support to its members and tools to learn to deal with work and life differently, with more balance.

“Many of us live in a work addicted society and with the development and popular use of smart phones, our employers and customers can contact us anytime, worsening the tendency to work constantly”, says Michele. New technologies are like an alcoholic’s free bar: if workaholics had to find excuses to go to the office, now they don’t need them anymore because they have their telephone or tablet at their fingertips.

## **THE 15 QUESTIONS OF WORKAHOLICS**

1. Do you get more excited about your work than about family or anything else?
2. Do you take work with you to bed? On weekends? On vacation?
3. Is work the activity you like to do best and talk about most?
4. Do you work more than 40 hours a week?
5. Do you take complete responsibility for the outcome of your work efforts?
6. Do you take on extra work because you are concerned that it won't otherwise get done?
7. Do you believe that it is okay to work long hours if you love what you are doing?
8. Do you get impatient with people who have other priorities besides work?
9. Are you afraid that if you don't work hard you will lose your job?
10. Is the future a constant worry for you even when things are going very well?
11. Do you get irritated when people ask you to stop doing your work in order to do something else?
12. Have your long hours hurt your family or other relationships?
13. Do you think about your work while driving, falling asleep or when others are talking?
14. Do you work or read during meals?
15. Do you believe that more money will solve the other problems in your life?

These are some of the questions from Workaholics Anonymous. If “yes” is the answer to three or more of these questions this is an indication that the person may be a workaholic. From then on the mechanics to find the right solution would be ignited.

Not all the existing literature about this problem comes from the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

There are indeed several Spanish works about this question written mainly by psychologists and psychiatrists. Also some researchers from Norway and United Kingdom created some years ago. The Bergen Work Addiction Scale, a tool that measures this addiction based on some characteristics, was designed after evaluating 12.000 Norwegian workers.

## **WORKAHOLIC ROBOT PORTRAIT**

It happens in men as well as in women.

Usually in high responsibility jobs: bosses, managers, advisors... but also in lower positions.

Competitive person, doesn't like to delegate, thrives on adrenaline, stress, gets irritated easily (among men there happen to be higher hostility rates than among women).

It is hard to stop and relax.

It is hard to accept one's self. The work defines one's identity and justifies their existence. Work is the only way to win approval.

Needs to have everything under control and organized.

Usually a perfectionist, very competitive and very ambitious.

Usually lies about the number of working hours.

Their home is not the place to disconnect, but rather an extension of their workplace.

Doesn't like free time and feels guilty when not working.

## **BERGEN'S SCALE**

**Score the following affirmations in accordance with: 1 (never); 2 (rarely); 3 (sometimes); 4 (often); 5 (always).**

1. You think of how you can free more time to work.
2. You spend more time working than initially intended.
3. You work in order to reduce feelings of guilt, anxiety, depression.
4. You have been told to cut down on work but you don't listen.
5. You become stressed if you are prohibited from working.
6. You prioritize work over hobbies, leisure or exercise.
7. You work so much that it is negatively influencing your health.

**If you answer "often" or "always" to four or more of these sentences, you can be an workaholic.**

“This problem’s severity is that it counts on social support, spending hours at work is praised”, Sender says. Also, if who suffers from it doesn’t confess (or even realize) that he has an addiction: “This is an invisible illness”, says Alonso. And yet another pitfall: those who could, by their position, prevent these behaviours in the companies are themselves often work addicted. Most definitely a vicious circle.

If you look around you can certainly find some personalities suffering from this problem, some very known and close to us: “I am sure that [Manuel] Fraga was a great workaholic. And Jordi Pujol also” adds Sender.

There are risk factors, both internal and external, that accentuate this seriousness in people who have a tendency; loneliness or troubles with the family, mental health problems, low self esteem and also, on the opposite side, people very competitive and ambitious, who seem to thrive on adrenaline and stress for awhile”, Alonso adds. Addiction and stress go hand in hand although being a stressed person doesn’t mean necessarily that you are hooked in work activity.

Another difficulty you find when you want to diagnose such problem, is when you look for statistics about this subject: the boundary between being stressed in work and being a work addict is not easy to see: “Even if the majority of stressed people are not workaholics, the contrary is true: everyone who has this addiction suffers from it, insomuch that occupational stress is their addictive object”, says Alonso. And, as we well know, stress dangers are not only psychological but also physical and can be very severe, as the Fundación Española del Corazón (Spanish Heart Foundation) highlights.

Curiously, the person arriving at the psychiatrist appointment is not aware of having a work dependency: “People never come because of this. If they are men, they come because their family or their wife has put them on the ropes. They come for other things, anxiety, insomnia, irritability... due to the addiction, of course” doctor Sender comments. Other than severe physical problems (as heart diseases, for instance), this problem can generate sexual problems, marriage and family breakdowns, and accident. And one cannot forget that this situation that keeps some people chained to the office desk is not necessarily beneficial to the company, although many bosses like to see their workers working extra hours. It can be profitable in the short term, because these are people who produce above average, but not in the medium-long term. The Spanish case is a perfect example of this: although working more hours

than other European countries, the competitive tax is at the tail. And the so popular in Spain “presencialista” culture (the so called “warm up the seat”) doesn’t make better employees. If we could improve productivity, and this doesn’t mean work more hours, we could have an additional growth in the PIB around 2,3%. To achieve this, though, there would be needed not only an increase in productivity per worker but also a boost the R+D (research and development) inversion.

### **A TIME FOR EACH THING**

Is there a cure for the work addict? Yes, but it is not easy. “When you are used to a certain rhythm and suddenly you stop, because you are obliged by your body or by a professional, it is not easy.

“I felt very uncomfortable when I began to change my behaviour. We are talking about making a serious change in habits we have had for a lifetime.” says Michele.

“It is necessary to reorganize life, gain awareness of the problem, if a psychological treatment is necessary and sometimes also some anti-addictive medicine” Alonso explains.

“It is very difficult to convince them to stop, these are very active people, warns Sender. I usually suggest that, if they are healthy and the body hasn't yet given them any warnings, they develop non-competitive and non-stressed activities.” Many also need to understand that they use work as a means to not be aware of and escape their emotions. They need a change in behaviour and values and long-term goals, but they can achieve this with help. But the emotional trouble behind the work compulsion has to be identified before real change can take place.

One of the solutions can be asking for professional help, and this should be the first thing, change life behaviours, and this is something harder and needs more time, and include the words “delegate”, “reconcile” and “postpone” in the vocabulary. The anxiety for doing it as soon as possible is an indication of this problem. Learning priorities is a good beginning.