

## **Living With a Workaholic—For Friends and Family**

This chapter is for people with a workaholic in their lives. Perhaps you are just now becoming aware of workaholism and some of its consequences, a newcomer to addiction and recovery. We want to share with you the experience of other partners of workaholics, both before recovery and during early recovery. The effects of workaholism can be just as devastating for partners as for work addicts themselves. We hope you will find reassurance and support for yourself, whether the workaholic in your life is in recovery or not.

Sharing their experience in this article are recovering partners or spouses of work addicts, and also other family members who have lived with a workaholic (perhaps a parent). Recovering persons living with a work addict often refer to themselves as “co-workaholics.”

### **Before Recovery**

Many recovering co-workaholics say that in early recovery their lives often got worse before they got better. They say they often used to feel recovery had failed because they had no experience of how life without the active addiction could be a good thing. And while they say getting past early recovery was almost always a crushing experience, they also share that it has been well worthwhile. They say the capacity to seek help and engage with support from outside the family was the most crucial step making possible long-term healing and growth.

Workaholism is often described as a disorder of several dimensions—physical, psychological, social, emotional, and spiritual. There’s often an ongoing or recurring loss of control over excessive working and compulsive activity. Despite the adverse consequences, workaholics have a preoccupation and obsessive investment with work and activity. Along with this are distortions in thinking, particularly what is called “denial.”

What do people mean by denial? The central contradiction of workaholism—denying the reality of the addiction while explaining it away at the same time—often necessitates dishonesty and secrets. Denial means not able to understand, not able to see things that are too threatening—it is an unconscious self-deception.

Many work addicts experience an ever-increasing need for intense activity and a corresponding increase in the denial of that need. As workaholism gets worse, changes occur in behavior and in thinking. (Work avoiders and work anorexics too are affected as much as compulsive over-doers.) For some workaholics, their sense of importance, powerfulness, and grandiosity—like intoxication—impairs their judgment. For others, anxiety and fear start to build around their ability to perform. Addicts hold two core ideas—a kind of “self-talk”—which they use to explain their view of themselves and the world:

“I am not a workaholic.”

“I can control my work world.”

Co-workaholics say their own behavior and thinking were affected by the disorder also. They say they joined the denial and contorted logic of the workaholic in order to gain reassurance and an illusion of control about the sturdiness of their relationship. They became preoccupied with the work addict and obsessed with the workaholic’s wellbeing. One co-workaholic says, “Sometimes I would feel guilty and unworthy when my partner complained that I wasn’t pushing myself as much as he did. I thought his over-involvement with work was all my fault. That his chronic avoidance of me meant there had to be something terribly wrong with me, and I couldn’t seem to figure it out.”

Some co-workaholics say they felt ashamed and began to close out the world, isolating their coupleship or family further. Recovering co-workaholics variously say they felt anxious, emotionally numb, insecure, powerless, and plagued by low self-image and a

sense of hopelessness. Isolation made it even harder to ask for help and support when they “hit bottom.” They say their capacity for genuineness and honesty was gone.

Depression and chronic under-functioning often became the norm. Relatives and friends were avoided or abandoned who did not support the compulsive busyness or the rationalizations of the work addict. The remedy for their distress was to try harder to control the workaholic, leading to mutual accusations and further disillusionment and despair. “I tried to fight it. I really tried. But it just seemed to make things worse.”

Work addicts say their hostility towards change was very high. “I couldn’t figure it out. I was rewarded by the world at large but despised by my own family.” Work filled the void and deepened it; but while they were still over-working, the idea of resigning their perpetual busyness without a substitute was unthinkable. One recovering workaholic says, “There was no way I was going to admit defeat. To do so was to become vulnerable, and I knew for certain that vulnerability always triggered attack.” Why do partners and other family members go along with all this? Some say their intense need for attachment—and their fears of abandonment and aloneness—dominated everything else. “We were in shared denial.”

### **The Beginnings of Recovery**

The beginnings of recovery can occur when one partner or family member “hits bottom.” The denial and the resistance and the defiance can’t be maintained any longer, or something else breaks down and a family member reaches outside for help. The pain of the addiction or co-addiction outweighs the considerable pain of recovery. One partner says, “Unfortunately, I wasn’t aware of my partner’s workaholism until after he hit bottom, which came in the form of his suicidal depression. I tried to control things and make them better—‘fix it.’ When my stomach was in knots I’d go for a walk outside the house. What helped during those horrible days was going to Al-Anon and to educational programs about addiction.”

By the time the work addict halts her/his over-working, the co-workaholic and the rest of the family have been severely impaired. “I did manage to bury my emotional needs, but I wasn’t able to bury my resentments.” On the way to withdrawal from workaholism, things can get very bad and usually do, with increasing turmoil before the self-deceptions and other defenses ultimately cave in.

Co-workaholics say that their denial often lifted like a haze, slowly dissolving as they became ready to discern reality more clearly. One recovering co-workaholic says of her family, “It was something none of us were willing or able to talk about. We were trying desperately not to have the relationship we were having. Our rock bottom was delayed because we were all resigned to keeping everything together and patching over problems. Make nice. Good manners. We wanted to be a socially acceptable family.”

The emotional acceptance of the end of the battle is what recovering people refer to as “surrender.” Some recovering persons also refer to this as an admission of defeat or “ego deflation.” Surrender, they say, is accompanied by their profound acceptance of loss of control. One co-workaholic says, “One day I realized I had no power or hold over the workaholic in my life. I finally saw I couldn’t keep him in line, that I had to give up my efforts at damage control.”

At the same time, they report that the beginning of withdrawal from workaholism is often very hard because the reality is so different from their expectations. Many co-workaholics also say it was difficult, awkward, even shameful to accept or look for a helping hand. “We both felt trapped and isolated. It was difficult to accept the fact that I couldn’t do it alone.” The introduction to recovery—becoming abstinent—is often full of disillusionment and disenchantment for all. This is especially the case if there’s no one in the family invested in recovery. Abstinence is then likely to be what recovering people call a “white-knuckle” holding pattern. “We were in ‘remission’ rather than in ‘recovery.’ It was

very hard to view workaholism as something that was harmful to my partner and to our coupleship, rather than a well-rewarded activity.”

New abstinence is an intense, critical point. “Our family’s recognition of workaholism was supposed to make everything better and put an end to upsets and fights. Instead it just seemed to leave a gaping hole, a great terrifying emptiness.” Recovering co-workaholics and workaholics say early on they needed to sustain their fledgling recoveries from workaholism, which they did not know how to do. “I focused on just one day at a time, or even smaller increments, to get through. We needed to learn how to hold on.”

In some recovering coupleships, both partners report that early on they felt only hopelessness. They had tried every measure they could think of in order to save their relationship, but nothing had worked for them. Some had tried therapy before recovery. “I was there because I was unhappy with him, and he was there because I was unhappy with him. It didn’t work.” They accepted that they were powerless to fix their irresolvable issues.

Finally, both had become willing, or were trying to become willing, to accept mutual responsibility for the destructive patterns in their relationship; both saw themselves as “identified patients” in the sense that they recognized that each of them needed help individually; and both accepted “loss of control” and were willing to accept outside help.

“When he went into recovery I was shocked. The therapist treating him told me to go to Al-Anon. None of it seemed to make sense. I kept going to work myself, while he was in bed all day for weeks and weeks. I started learning to take better care of myself, and learning to go places by myself. I was becoming less dependent on my partner and more dependent on myself. I was becoming less codependent.” These two partners say they committed themselves to recovery—which was not the same as committing to each other. “We didn’t know it at the time, but that wasn’t possible until much later.”

Co-workaholics often say that early in recovery they needed to learn to live with ongoing confusion and unpredictability as part of the strain of early recovery. Sudden outbursts were all too common. “If I became very anxious it helped me to remove myself both physically and emotionally from my partner.” They say they needed to accept not knowing much about anything, which they say was often so upsetting and unsettling that they sometimes turned to short-term “fixes” and unhealthy behaviors harmful to recovery. “As a co-workaholic, here are things that I tried that didn’t work: blaming, fighting, threatening to leave, ignoring, doing my own thing, working harder myself, over-eating to smother my feelings.”

Some recovering partners say they found a couples therapist who guided and led them to put their attention and emphasis on themselves as individuals and *not* to try to “fix” their damaged coupleship. Yet, because these partners were fearful of the unpredictable future, or hadn’t a clue as to how they might be restored to intimacy and commitment together, they say they were frightened that such a switch in their attention and energy would lead to the end of their coupleship. “Holding fast to one another in the midst of all this flux—that was one of our most critical tasks.” Some couples new to recovery do grow apart and end up separating. Other times in early recovery, an unwillingness or an inability to accept the natural ambiguity and confusion have led to the end of the relationship, as one partner felt trapped and compelled to choose between recovery *or* the marriage/partnership.

Many co-workaholics say that in their coupleship one partner entered recovery alone and the coupleship lived with divisiveness between the old norm (active workaholism) and the new one (abstinence). In that scenario, they say, there were two versions of reality—there was no addiction and co-addiction in the partnership, and there was addiction and co-addiction in the partnership—in an atmosphere of constant stress while the partners were living in two separate worlds. This kind of rupture or disparity can go on indefinitely. Some couples find ways to stay together despite the ongoing heavy strain, while others end their relationship.

Some couples get to Workaholics Anonymous after considerable recovery from other addictions and co-addictions. One such co-workaholic says of herself and her partner,

“We took an inventory of our lives together in a couples Twelve Step program. One of the problems we agreed on: we were both too depleted to be really present for our relationship, our friends or family. We wrote a spiritual contract that included going to a Workaholics Anonymous meeting together once a week. At the time I did not think it was a bottom—only that a friend had gotten relief in W.A. and I wanted my partner to get help. It was only after attending the meetings that I began to see the workaholic patterns I had myself.”

To repeat: for many recovering co-workaholics in early recovery, reaching outside the family for support and then making continued use of that support for a lengthy period of time, was the single most important element in sustaining their process of recovery. “We had to accept that change is equal to action, and action is equal to accepting change.” For “outside help” co-workaholics mention therapy, religion, and various Twelve Step programs.

One partner attended an addiction education and support group at her HMO; she says, “One of the premises, which I thoroughly agree with, is that the whole family is affected. If one person is to recover, the family needs to recover, too. The addict and the codependent both need education and support about their roles in the dysfunction or disease. Recovery changes the couple dynamic. When one person is recovering, the other must change also, if they are to stay together and be happy together.” Nonetheless, nearly all co-workaholics report their initial resistance to outside help, including resistance to programs such as Al-Anon and CoDependents Anonymous—and resistance to Workaholics Anonymous as well, where there happened to be a nearby W.A. meeting. “At my first several meetings, I was just a guest rather than an active member.”

People often report a rude awakening from their wishful thinking that abstinence and recovery were supposed to mean no more problems: “We figured that we’d be done and cured probably within six months, or twelve at the most. Now in hindsight it’s clear that my recovery had barely started at one year and that our coupleship was just taking baby steps. I had been frustrated that I wasn’t ‘making him better.’ We both felt we were ‘running late’ in recovery.”

In early recovery many family members say they had a difficult time interacting. Some say they had no idea how to approach each other and feared making mistakes that could lead to feeling out of control or lead to relapse. Co-workaholics report they could not tackle problems, disagreements, or feelings head-on without ending up polarized in a battle over who was right and who was wrong—in essence, shaming each other and fighting over who was to blame. “I see now that I couldn’t get to my own issues, because I was able to hide behind his flagrant ones.” But an early focus on individual growth and responsibility, they say, prepared them to come back later as allies and to deal with differences or conflicts without getting totally out of control and without engaging in conflict avoidance.

### **Progress in the Here and Now**

The focus on their own individual growth and responsibility, say some co-workaholics, was sometimes at odds with the needs of their children. When they reached outside the family for help for themselves—therapy, religion, and Twelve Step programs—many co-workaholics had less time, energy, and focus for their kids. This was very difficult and painful: paying heed to their own self-reclamation needs while straining to meet the best interests of their children.

Some co-workaholics say that, even with resistance and impasses, they gradually understood they could not rely on their partner or the coupleship itself to fill a hole or heal them. “That’s a task for the individual. In Twelve Step rooms it’s sometimes said, ‘We can’t do it alone, but we alone can do it.’” Another says, “Al-Anon and CoDA are helpful in learning to ‘put oneself first.’”

Co-workaholics who report their self-worth was vested in their work-addict partner—caretaking or controlling the workaholic—also say that early recovery was a time of deep sorrow, pain, and resistance to building their own separate individuality and

separate recovery program. They say they wanted to sidestep the workaholism, to overlook it, and even ignore it—to focus on bettering communication and other facets of family life instead.

Another partner says, “Regarding my own recovery, now I focus mostly on myself. I spend much less energy on my partner’s issues. The problem in both of us seems much deeper and more cunning than before recovery. I am aware of unconscious adrenaline-seeking behavior that can be stirred up even with things we agree to do as a couple on the weekend. I am aware of the problems of my mind that can turn future worry into catastrophes. For a while my own financial insecurities played into my partner’s and fueled an illusion that money was the reason we needed to work so much.”

Another co-workaholic says, “I went to my individual Twelve Step program and it was three years before I gave up the idea that I could get my partner to stop. And it was four years before she surrendered to her compulsive overworking. It was hard to look at myself and impossible to do it alone.” Still another co-workaholic said, “I had a lot of fear that our relationship wouldn’t survive all the changes in recovery.”

For some co-workaholics, the recovering addict’s recovery program was regarded as an unwelcome guest, a gatecrasher, a trespasser. Many non-Twelve Step individuals say they resented the recovering addict going to meetings or out for coffee or talking on the phone. What about their partnership? It’s horrendously difficult to accept that the newly recovering person has plenty of energy and time for Twelve Step friends but no time for the coupleship.

Recovering co-workaholics say that attending their own meetings, connecting with other recovering co-workaholics between meetings, and switching their efforts onto their own recovery all helped in initial recuperation from the effects and consequences of work addiction. They say at meetings they heard how other people’s experiences and problems were similar to their own, and that this helped them feel less alone and isolated and adrift. “If others have been there and survived, there is hope.” As the self-deception and other self-protective measures lessened, co-workaholics and workaholics in Twelve Step programs set out to “work the Steps.” This includes looking at one’s own beliefs and behaviors and beginning a process of recognizing and accepting the reality before recovery as well as in the here and now. “I started learning how to be less critical of myself. I saw some of my own tendencies towards busyness, and in recovery I limited the number of projects I was willing to undertake. Now I recognize when I’m starting to get overwhelmed and I try to mitigate it.”

Recovering people commonly say that early recovery often meant grief and defeat as much as optimism, and uncertainty and doubts as much as a return to any comfortable routines there might have been before hitting bottom. “In early recovery, it’s important to realize you may be living together but you’re not really much of a coupleship. You’re polarized about practically everything. You have routines together, pay bills together, even sleep in the same room together, but there’s no real sense of deep connection or bright future together, at least for the time being. Somehow you have to figure out how to stay connected while you’re disconnected.”

Partnerships in which both members began their individual recovery process say that they didn’t end up getting back to the lives they had before recovery—this was a brand new experience.

Partners recovering from the consequences of workaholism and with significant progress in recovery often point out that it was not within their capabilities to have an intimate and committed relationship together without solid, stable individual groundwork first. In early recovery, they say, “It wasn’t that we didn’t communicate well together—we didn’t communicate at all. There just wasn’t any connection. I had faith that our shift together would happen in time. He had to emphasize and concentrate on his recovery. I wasn’t kidding myself that all our problems had gone away. I figured we’d get to the other stuff later on. But I didn’t feel frantic or rushed. There was progress in the here and now.”

These partners say that their shared recognition of workaholism and the vocabulary of recovery served to hold them together until they could direct their energies back toward themselves as a couple. One co-workaholic suggests, “Believe your partner if he or she states, ‘I’m a workaholic.’” Another says, “Even though each person has to put his or her primary program first in order to maintain health, the coupleship needs to be strengthened and nurtured too.” Some couples turned to therapy in order to satisfy their needs to express angry feelings while protecting themselves from the dangers of uncontrolled argument.

When both partners arrange their coupleship around programs like Workaholics Anonymous, CoDependents Anonymous, and Al-Anon, the family gains from the outside buttressing of mutual new attitudes about workaholism and actions in recovery. “Meetings gave me support and encouragement, and, of course, a place to share my pain. I came away each time with hope, peace, love, and growth.” Early on, however, the future can look pretty bleak: “It was scary for us in the beginning because we didn't know any couples who were both in recovery. Our society is organized around production and consumption, not connection and relatedness. Now after a long time in program, we’ve seen lots of couples separate or get divorced—or simply give up and accept the status quo—because they were unable or unwilling to accept mutual responsibility for the health or disorder of their coupleship.”

Wanting to finally have persistent troubles “done and over with” is also common, say many recovering co-workaholics: “We told ourselves we should have gotten past all this by now.” Some problems indeed are often better, but they aren't fixed. “In early recovery, it was invaluable to hear that other couples had experienced the same kinds of problems we were now having, and to be able to see the positive changes they had made. ‘Progress, Not Perfection’ was one of the slogans.”

Another partner says, “After some time in recovery I have adjusted to a lower standard of living. My paychecks from my part-time job are no longer just the extra but about half of our combined income. It took years to become accustomed to not having my partner in Corporate America. I now appreciate more what we do have together, and I appreciate that we really have to work as partners to have a good standard of living.”

### **The Evolving Adventure**

A few co-workaholics say their lives improved almost at once in early recovery, and that things just kept improving from there. While true for some, most others report that recovery was a gradual, evolving adventure where change and progress became evident only in hindsight. They say it wasn't recapturing something they had in the past yet had lost; instead, it meant wide-ranging adjustments and unforeseen transformations which only slowly evolved into a new sense of assurance and wellness. Later in ongoing recovery, they say they were better able to work on their coupleship and the rest of their family once the partners were solid in their individual recoveries.

Some recovering couples say they were well into recovery before the work addict was able to “show up” emotionally for the relationship. “He isn't as driven as he used to be, and he's somewhat more available to me. But he still resents getting interrupted in the middle of a project.” And some co-workaholics say they were astonished to find out that they themselves had not been emotionally available or open to an intimate, committed relationship. They say that looking back they realized the unavailability and distance of their actively workaholic partner had felt familiar and comfortable to them. They say movements toward greater closeness and connectedness in later recovery often felt unfamiliar and uncomfortable but were worth the effort.

Some partners say that several years into recovery they could see in their coupleship healthy developments that were simply not even conceivable in the first year. “We work as partners more to plan large expenditures. We have more time together. We plan our calendars together. I can more clearly communicate my needs, and he more willingly alters his behavior to meet them. We enjoy our days off together. We've learned to be more

flexible with our schedules. On our days off we may have ten things to do—but we’re both willing to see how things go and to stop pushing to get everything done. Putting rest as a top priority.”

Trust, warmth and mutual responsibility were restored only gradually, in fits and starts, evolving slowly and occasionally with slips back into the old, painful patterns. Their period of difficult adjustment and repair lasted more than ten years, according to some. But eventually, they say, they’ve become a healthy family, with a stable relationship, shared values and goals, more affection and love, and solid individual recoveries as distinct selves.

Finally, even with several years of recovery, many co-workaholics say they are still active in their program of recovery. They say that their ongoing involvement in outside support—Twelve Step programs, therapy, religion—helps them keep the focus on themselves as individuals while avoiding isolation or falling back into the old destructive patterns. “We socialize and share a lot with other recovering couples who are working to change themselves in order to stay together.” They say they haven’t “graduated” from healthy reliance and dependency on their support system. “We alone can do it, but we can’t do it alone.”

Another partner says, “Things are different. I left a very workaholic job and work part-time now. My partner has more responsibility but takes vacations, comes home early many nights, we get regular exercise, we help each other prioritize and make a realistic action plan, we are happier and have energy for each other, our family and friends. Our agreed plan of action is to keep those commitments to our spiritual contract, which nine years later still includes a weekly meeting of W.A.” They’ve learned from their own experience that recovery is certainly possible and definitely worth it.

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The *Workaholics Anonymous Book of Recovery* is available on the [Workaholics Anonymous website](http://www.workaholics-anonymous.org) <http://www.workaholics-anonymous.org>.

[Work-Anon](http://work-anon.blogspot.com/) is a Twelve-Step fellowship or recovery for friends and family of workaholics, located at <http://work-anon.blogspot.com/>.