

Bitter Work: Part 1

by Mohammad Khan

Some would say I'm a workaholic, but I don't know about that. But what follows is my personal experience teetering on the edge of workaholism and not in anyway sound medical advice.

Workaholism is an addiction or compulsion to work. Some would say it's one of the better addictions to have. If you're a student, working all the time should lead to better grades and more free time. If you're working, more hours spent working leads to more pay. So how can you go wrong with working? Other than the fact that it's mentally, physically, and emotionally draining and your personal life suffers for the sake of your work, it's otherwise fine.

There's a blurred line between being a hard worker vs a workaholic. A hard worker knows when to stop working, a workaholic keeps working. When a hard worker isn't working, they enjoy the break and can focus on other things like family, friends, or simply being present. When a workaholic isn't working, guilt and anger cloud the mind because they *should* be working. Because who are they without their work?

Workaholism is different for everyone. For me, it's more than a compulsion to work, it has become a lifestyle. I get nagging thoughts of upcoming exams, assignments, future problems, that I should work on instead of going on a trip or taking a break. Everything you do is for the work, every choice is efficiently made to optimize work output. The worse thing you can do to a workaholic is give them nothing to do, put them on vacation. Because there's nothing left for you to do. Their your life was built around work, around solving problems, progressing in life, and when that's taken away there's nothing left. So we hunt for problems that, sometimes, aren't even there. We bury ourselves in small work, sometimes things that don't matter, like straightening a crooked painting, obsessing about the color of the walls, or living in our minds, day dreaming the day away whilst foreseeing problems and situations thinking that the this work will fulfill us. It will fix us. It will get us the love and warmth we need. You don't just run out of work, you run out of hope.

Like any addiction, it seeps into all aspects of your life. The worst parts about an addiction is not how it affects your choices overtly, it's how it subverts your own autonomy. You can make a choice to hang out with friends but cancel because some work came up and rationalize to yourself that you need to do this. And sometimes it is urgent work, but oftentimes it can be pushed back. And you know that you lost again to the addiction.

If you do manage to get to a social gathering, things aren't any better. As soon as you stop working, your mind gravitate to work. Constantly thinking about what to do next, what can I do now. Work is on your mind even when you're not working. Your conversations often involve work, you only know about work, your vocabulary is work, your tone is work. You are work. This makes it increasingly difficult to form an emotional connection with people because your mind drifts to work rather than to the person. That every conversation is someone wanting something from you. I've caught myself thinking 'how would a non-workaholic human respond to this situation'. As if I had forgotten how to be human.

Workaholism seeps into your mindset. It creates a filter that only shows logical choices that provide some sort of gain. Visiting friends or family isn't worthwhile if all you do is talk. There's no doing, there's nothing productive to be gained so why bother? It's easy for people to become means to an end to your work, and walk the edge of sociopathic tendencies. Workaholics become obsessed with wringing out every inch of productivity of their day. Not to say those who want to be more productive are workaholics, there's a balance between passion and obsession. But for workaholics, it's the nagging feeling to always work even when you're on vacation. If you aren't working then there is no purpose to you, to your existence, so you try to quit if you're fortunate enough to realize your destructive behavior.

You can go clean for weeks or years even, but you can unconsciously make choices that lead you back to the high if you're not careful. All the time you spent working to run away from your addiction, you didn't realize you were working just as hard to get back. Like a dog running with a long leash attached thinking it's free, only for the leash to restrain vigorously.