

## **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.

## **Bitter Work: Part 2**

by Mohammad Khan

Dealing with pain is an odd way to look at addiction for most people because of the harsh brush with which society has painted about addicts. Most think it's about getting the next fix. That we should stigmatize them, shame them, and cut them off from the drugs they're using.

If we wanted to make a society where addictions are made worse, that'd be the way to do it. Instead of asking where the addiction originates or asking why, we throw them to the wolves. Detach them even more from society.

My experience with workaholism is my own and I cannot speak for anyone else with workaholism or addiction. I do feel a euphoria of working on schoolwork or projects or helping others. Being there for others, but hardly for myself.

I'm not sure if I have a complete workaholic addiction, but I know have workaholic tendencies. Often times I fell ill after long hours of working and to fix that, but I continued working. In hindsight, that probably wasn't the best idea but circumstances forced me to keep working, or so I thought.

One thing I've realized through my introspection and reading books on addiction and social psychology is that what actually happens is completely different than how I perceive it. An argument with a family member can be a fiery battle with sharp words and hurtful comments in my head when in reality it was a mild discussion. You don't react to what happens to you to react to what you perceive what happens to you.

When you can't handle what happens to you, you turn to someone with whom you have a healthy relationship for support. And if you don't have one or feel like you don't have one, you turn to something else. To something like alcohol, social media, shopping, food, gambling, or you bury yourself in work.

I didn't think it was a problem for a long time. I got more done, got good grades in school, and felt amazingly productive. But I started noticing how I prioritized my work over my own health, over my family, friends, and the older I got, the more I realized how unsustainable it is. I'd probably work myself to death.

The reason I bury myself in work because I feel valued there. I feel that I belong, that I matter., that I am wanted. And even if things aren't going well in my personal life, I can rest easy knowing that I can do some good through my work at the expense of my own health. At least, that's how I've rationalized it. The work fills a void inside of me, trying to fix something inside of me. I keep working hoping the next completed assignment, project or accolade will fix what's wrong with me. Just maybe the next one will fill the void.

Why did I grow workaholic tendencies? I'm not sure but from my own introspection I realized that I wasn't able to feel valued or loved when I was younger. I know my family loved and cared for me, I owe them everything for making who I am today, but when I was younger I didn't feel their love. The love felt implied. So as young kid, I rationalized the implied love as 'I am not wanted or loved here', so I bury myself in work which can be many things for me: school work, extra curricular, or volunteering, anything where I felt that I feel need. Because if I wasn't wanted earlier, they're going to need me later. What better way to be wanted than to be an engineer? People will ask you to fix a lot of things and you'll be wanted everywhere.

It's not that I don't know that working 24/7 isn't harmful for my health, it's the bond that I've formed with

working that's hard to break. I feel wanted when working all the time. And what's wrong with feeling wanted and loved?

An addiction is a bond formed with something other than another human. And because we are social creatures, once you've got a bond that you perceive as vital, you'll do anything to keep hold of it.

It's more than just a matter of will power. This is a matter of human nature and diving into the voids we have within ourselves.

### **Bitter Work: Part 3**

by Mohammad Khan

Most people think addicts do drugs or fall prey to addictions because they're weak-minded or never grew up to make adult decisions or they should just say no to drugs. Addiction isn't an impulse to want something, it's an impulse to fulfill a void caused from a form of pain. Instead of asking why the addiction, ask why the pain? The void is different based on the addiction, upbringing, but for me workaholism fills the void of knowing your valued or wanted. Because somehow I rationalized early on in childhood, that I wasn't wanted. From the outside, you'd see a happy, loving family, but I never felt any of it. The high for me came from the success of finishing a project or solving a problem and the accolades that come with it. You brush off the praise humbly, but subconsciously crave the narcotic dopamine from feeling valued and wanted. It's the late night texts saying someone needs help. It's the weekend meetings that make you feel valued and that you are worth someone else's time. It's being available at a moment's notice so that you can get your fix. These voids often stem from childhood problems from the lack of a nurturing environment.

It's a difficult addiction to combat, let alone admit it's a problem. Western society, specifically in the U.S, glamorizes the late worker, the go-getter, the one who puts in the long hours day in and day out. I'm not saying you're a workaholic if you do work long hours consistently. An addiction isn't defined by how it negatively impacts you, it's how it systematically destroy the relationships you have with people closest to you and the motivation behind your choices. Someone who works long-hours out of necessity to stay alive versus someone who works even they don't have to.

Society puts those who work hard on pedestals, and rightfully so. Give credit where credit's due, but society forgets the nuances to working hard. When you hear that someone dies and they spent their lives dedicated to making the world better is admirable, but most of the time they worked hard at the expense of their own physical health. Workaholism can cause diseases due to the prolonged exposure to stress. So when someone is going through Chemotherapy and decides to continue working, they're doing so at their own expense. The body needs time to heal, yet we applaud people who work through illness. We wouldn't tell someone with a broken leg to run a marathon, so why do we applaud and glorify those who work despite being despite being physically, mentally, and perhaps emotionally sick?

And if you're lucky enough to detox or work with a therapist on your addiction, afterwards you're on your own. You have to hunt for support groups and additional help. If you relapse, you get ridiculed for not having will power to stay away or the motivation. And that's just what other say to you, the internal ridicule is worse. No one is a better critic than your inner self.

Breaking an addiction isn't a one time process, it's like tending a plant. You have to constantly care for the plant for it to survive. You can't take a day off else the plant will grow weaker or get sick. If you slip, then you slip far. For example, if you're a recovering alcoholic and you've been sober 5 years, and someone offers you a drink, you turn it down because you know, you don't just want one drink, you want 10 drinks. Things in your life may be going well, and you will still want 10 drinks because you're an alcoholic. It's not that I want to continue working, I want to never stop working because I know the high that's coming if I do keep

working because I'm a workaholic.

What makes addictions generally, well addictive, is how the addict feels. Addicts are responding to trauma. The addiction isn't the problem. The addiction is an attempt at solving the problem.

Most of the times, the trauma is emotional and deeply ingrained in their brains. If an addict takes medication to not feel pain or to feel loved or to feel valued or in control, is that wrong? Is it wrong to feel loved? To not suffer in emotional or physical pain? Who are we to force an addict to quit something that helps them live pain-free? There must be a better way to solve the problem than punishment, incarceration, and ridicule.

### **Bitter Work: Part 4** by Mohammad Khan

According to the CDC, there were more than 70,000 deaths in 2019 alone due to drug overdoses in the United States. There are ways to combat addiction through support groups and medication but there's still a prevalent stigma with addiction and relapse that must be combatted first.

Almost 21 million Americans have at least one addiction, yet only 10% of them receive treatment. We can't approach addiction as something to be shamed and ridiculed. If the addiction provides a sense of relief and comfort for addicts and we rip it away from them, what does that say about us? Is it wrong to feel loved or tranquility? We need a paradigm shift with addiction that brings compassion and mental health into the field along with the physical care.

Instead of asking why the addiction, ask why the pain. Alcohol, cocaine, morphine, and other addictive habits produce endorphins and provide a temporary sense of relief from pain. There are clinics that provide supervised drug injection sites where addicts can take an injection of heroin or other drugs under medical supervision. Under supervision, taking the drugs will not be as harmful and the addict can try and fix the source of their pain.

Many of the world's problems are caused by people who are dealing with their own insecurities. An addiction to power and attention creates autocrats in many countries and can get you elected president because an addiction to power is an attempt to fill the emptiness they feel, and maybe we recognize that.

Hurt people, hurt people. Our current "war on drugs" in the U.S needs a new angle, the hard crackdown on drugs and the shame brought about has not worked. A compassionate lens to help us solve problems that we once thought impossible.

Human nature is cooperative, community minded. There are more organizations lifting humanity instead of beating it down. We need to tap into our common humanity and reach out to the addicts close to us and those in pain. And care for them and be present. Say "I love you and no matter what state you are in, I love you and care about you."

A Hungarian-Canadian physician, Gabor Matè, once said, we judge addicts because we actually see that they are just like us and we don't like that, so we say 'you are different than us and you are worse than we are'. There is no "other" in the mirror, it's just you.

Social justice lawyer, Bryan Stevenson, once said, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever

done,...the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.”

The bitter work we all have to do is look at addicts and at ourselves and realize that they’re no different than us. That even the worst of us deserve some compassion and mercy.