



Personal Growth and
Transformation

Overcoming Overwork

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A Workaholic's Guide to Reclaiming Your Life

Six strategies for finding better balance. **by Malissa Clark**

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Carl Godfrey

My daughter, Alex, was born three years into my PhD program, smack in the middle of midterms. I was at a coffee shop, scrambling to complete a take-home exam, when my contractions started. I told myself I would continue until they were consistent, which bought me several more hours, until the pain was unbearable. I reluctantly stopped working and headed home (and shortly thereafter to the hospital).

My memories of that day, and the days following Alex's birth, should have been about the experience of labor, the joy of childbirth, and the

building of a family. I was instead filled with anxiety and panic over the fact that I hadn't finished my midterm, which I forced myself to return to within 72 hours. The next week was a blur of sleepless nights and feverish work when I could muster the energy. I then took two additional weeks off — but after that “break,” I went right back to my classes and teaching obligations.

Why, I ask myself now, did I not request a substitute for the rest of the semester, or an extension on my coursework? How could I have been so invested in work when I had a literal newborn at home? The answer is simple: I was a workaholic.

A workaholic is not someone who simply works a lot of hours — in fact there's only a weak correlation between number of hours worked and problematic “overwork” or workaholism. Instead, the term refers to a deleterious inability to disconnect from your job. When work dominates your thoughts and your activities, to the detriment of other aspects of your life, relationships, and health, you are displaying workaholic tendencies. Note that this is not a clinical diagnosis — it's not in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, or DSM — but the literature on it is deep and convincing. Workaholism is detrimental to both people who may experience it and the organizations they work for. Often, companies contribute to a culture of overwork without even realizing it; while I've addressed how they can reverse this culture, their efforts alone are not enough. The change must also be yours, and it must be personal.

Today, I still carry guilt over the fact that I prioritized work over my daughter during those first few months of her life. Because of my research, most of which I've published in my book, *Never Not Working: Why the Always-On Culture Is Bad for Business — and How to Fix It*, I know that my story is not unique. Many of the individuals I've

interviewed recounted similar feelings of guilt and regret once they realized they were workaholics.

Take Gabe, founder and CEO of a tech company. Gabe's realization of how much he gave up for his work came at the most unlikely of times — when watching the final scene of *The Notebook*. As he reflected on the deep connection between the couple in that scene, Gabe remembers being overcome with feelings of regret. Thinking about his own relationship with his wife and kids, Gabe realized he was not living the life he wanted to live. He loved his work more than his family. At that point, Gabe was working between 60 and 80 hours per week. Even when he wasn't working, Gabe admitted he was constantly working in his head.

Then there's Ellen, an educational leader. She found herself working from 8 AM to 10 PM daily, often waking up in the middle of the night to send just one more email. Ellen also put off taking care of herself. When her doctor found a lump in her breast and needed to schedule her for a lumpectomy, Ellen negotiated, saying it needed to wait until her vacation, which was an entire month away. By the time of the procedure, the triple-negative tumor had developed aggressively. Had Ellen waited any longer, the cancer could have been lethal. Looking back, she realizes now that her successes at work came at an immense personal cost. Thinking of how she delayed her lumpectomy, Ellen bemoaned, "What kind of idiot was I? I put myself at life-and-death risk — all because of my workaholism."

Gabe, Ellen, and I — and many like us — are unbelievably adept at our jobs, appearing incredibly confident, competent, and productive. But this productivity comes at an unreasonable personal cost. News flash: It's never worth it.

If you recognize yourself in our stories and want to change, I have good news: It's possible to loosen your workaholic tendencies and thrive both on the job and in the rest of your life, without having to choose between the two. In this article, I'll walk you through exercises that may help you identify workaholic behavior and begin to mitigate it. I've found these activities particularly effective, especially for people who sense they have a problem but don't know where to start. I've also found that even small improvements tend to have an outsize and lasting impact.

We'll focus on six strategies:

- Redefining “urgent”
- Reinventing the to-do list
- Learning to say “no” and delegate
- Fixing the workaholic clock
- Controlling rumination
- Embracing rest and recovery

Redefining “Urgent”

Workaholics tend to view everything job-related as high-priority; Workaholics Anonymous's [*Book of Discovery*](#) calls this “frantic multitasking.” Many people I've spoken with talk about how they almost feel addicted to adrenaline when they are in this mode; there's no better way to create a perpetual mini-crisis than to assign everything as urgent. The problem is this means we put ourselves and our bodies in a constant fight-or-flight state, which significantly increases our stress.

Lauren, who agreed to be interviewed for my book, is a former academic and member of [Workaholics Anonymous](#), an international nonprofit organization that holds meetings for those who desire to stop working compulsively. She recalled one vacation, when she stopped by a grocery store on a hot day to pick up a cake for a family party. While her

husband waited in the car with their crying children, she stood in the parking lot, the cake beginning to melt, while she made a phone call. “I’m having this conversation with this new study coordinator...to make sure that she was doing things right. Remembering all the little details.”

“It felt urgent,” Lauren says. “And it felt like things were going to spiral out of control and somehow be a reflection on me if I wasn’t there.” It was so urgent that she interrupted her vacation, ruined a cake, and made her family miserable — all so she could initiate a call with a person who, by the way, didn’t appreciate being micromanaged.

At the core, issues such as Lauren’s are all about prioritization. It’s not always easy, but sometimes the brute force of setting artificial restrictions is a good way to begin redefining your relationship with work and seeing “urgent” in a new light. So I recommend starting by doing a retroactive review of your tasks. This can help you see that not everything is as urgent as it seems in the moment.

Look at a list of things that were on your to-do list, say, a month ago, and think about how important they seem now, in retrospect. Ask others what they think, too. You may realize that what was driving the urgency around some tasks wasn’t their actual importance but rather your workaholic reflex to treat any unfinished work as acutely needing to be completed (and perfectly!). But looking back, you may note that the task didn’t matter all that much or didn’t need to be completed perfectly in that time frame. For example, what was Lauren’s urgent matter with the study coordinator? Upon reflection she noted: “I can’t even remember.”

Keep notes on these tasks and try to spot them when they arise again. When they do, force yourself to critically question if it’s actually a priority. If not, assign them further down your list.

There are other ways to think about urgency. In her TED Talk, ["An ER Doctor on Triaging Your 'Crazy Busy' Life,"](#) Dr. Darria Long Gillespie uses an emergency room triage model to recategorize to-dos. Red is immediately life-threatening. Yellow is serious, but not as urgent as red. Green is minor. There's one other category: black, which means that no measures can save the patient. Applying this lens to a to-do list — again, with discipline and honesty — forces you to make decisions about what is truly important rather than treating everything as urgent. For example, a colleague asking for your help in finding a contact may be timely, but it isn't as urgent as the rapidly approaching project deadline you've been working on day in and day out. So your colleague is a green, and your deadline is a yellow. At your healthiest, only personal, health, and family matters will escalate to red and black.

With experience, you will see that even though you deprioritized a work task, the sky didn't fall when you didn't complete it right away, perfectly, or even at all.

Assessment: Am I a Workaholic?

To help determine whether you might be a workaholic, read each statement and rate the degree to which each one describes you, using the following scale: 1 = never true; 2 = seldom true; 3 = sometimes true; 4 = often true; 5 = always true.

1. I work because there is a part inside of me that feels compelled to work.
2. It is difficult for me to stop thinking about work when I stop working.
3. I feel upset if I have to miss a day of work for any reason.
4. I tend to work beyond my job's requirements.

Add up your total score across these four items. If your total score is 15 or above, you are displaying significant signs of workaholism. Even if your

score is below that, if you rated any of these items a 4 or a 5, you have some workaholic tendencies.

Reinventing the To-Do List

Once you've started to redefine "urgent," it may be time to take a closer look at your relationship to your to-do list entirely. That's because, for the workaholic, a to-do list becomes an invitation to overwork. We become almost addicted to anticipating — and then getting — the satisfaction of checking things off. And for good reason: [Research shows](#) that accomplishing a goal can give us a burst of dopamine. We feel positive emotions and are motivated to keep working toward accomplishing another goal. However, the stark reality is that to-do lists are never going to be fully completed. For the workaholic, this fact becomes self-reinforcing.

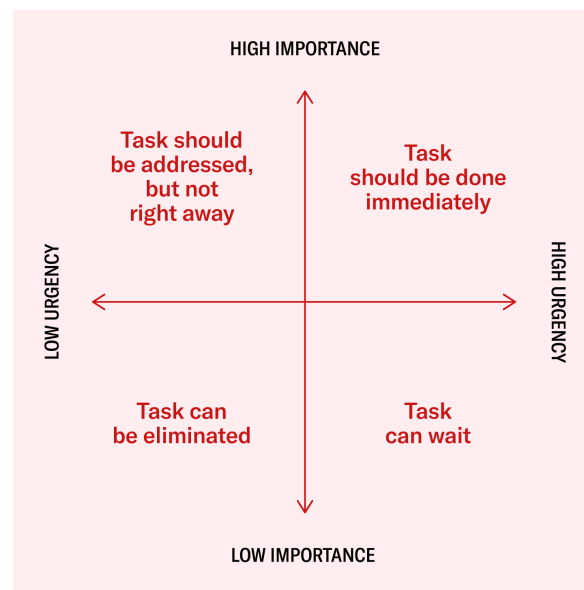
In [one study](#), for example, researchers found that when people have high workloads, they want to take a break — but are much less likely to do so when they feel a strong desire to "get it over with." Something that can be checked off today leaves one less thing to do tomorrow — theoretically. Now imagine the same scenario for a workaholic, who sees a high workload as a positive. For them, the drive to ensure more work by adding to the list outweighs any satisfaction from completing a task. To the workaholic, a break is a signal that something's wrong. A to-do list that gets shorter is a threat that triggers a need to fill the empty space.

You can break this pattern, however, by reinventing your to-do list and its purpose. The key is to transform it into a document in which the completion of a task isn't the point. There is no focus on finishing what's on the list or crossing things off. Instead, you can use your to-do list as a method for mapping and prioritizing.

One way to do this is by using the Eisenhower Matrix. Also known as the “urgent-versus-important matrix,” this tool helps individuals identify what tasks they may be spending too much (or too little) time on. Start by taking your to-do list, which is probably a linear set of bullet points or numbered items, and placing all the items on the matrix.

The Eisenhower Matrix

Use this tool to prioritize your tasks and identify which ones you spend too much or too little time on.



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See more HBR charts in [Data & Visuals](#) on HBR.org.

For the workaholic, almost everything will end up in the top right quadrant at first. Everything is urgent and important! But if you can force yourself to map with some self-reflection and honesty — and overcome those feelings that all work is all-important — you can start to let go of some tasks. For example, things that fall in the bottom right

quadrant (high urgency, low importance) are workaholic enablers. They feel necessary but aren't. *You* are the one overestimating the urgency, perhaps because you're afraid that if you treat it as less urgent, others will judge you. Or maybe you're after the adrenaline of having a pressing task to take on.

Try letting go of the to-dos in this quadrant entirely, or at least push them off. Say to yourself, "This is not important now. It can wait." Also have the courage to eliminate entirely low-urgency, low-importance to-dos (bottom left) and learn to respect but not immediately address high-importance, low-urgency items (top left). Through experience, you will see that deprioritizing some work tasks isn't the end of the world, or your career.

Equally vital, make sure you force yourself to put to-dos on the matrix that are not about work at all. If you are intent on resetting your life and escaping workaholism, you should have at least one high-urgency, high-importance task that isn't job-related.

Learning to Say "No" and Delegate

Workaholics tend to be poor delegators. Their drive to always have work to do means they'd rather take it on themselves than give it to someone else. They don't say "no" to requests because it feels good to be asked to do a task. And their need for things to be done perfectly means they can't trust others to do the work to their standards.

Overcoming this predisposition takes practice. In his podcast [*WorkLife with Adam Grant*](#), the Wharton professor talks about how he practices saying "no" more often than he is inclined to. He does it by setting priorities that may echo the Eisenhower Matrix method for your to-do list. Here's how he describes his method:

- **Who to help?** Family first, students second, colleagues third, everyone else fourth.
- **When to help?** At designated times that don't interfere with my goals.
- **How to help?** In areas where I have a unique contribution to make.

He adds, "Now, when people reach out with requests that stretch beyond my wheelhouse or my calendar, I refer them to relevant resources: an article or an expert."

Maybe for you, the people you want to help are your family and friends, with work colleagues coming later. The timing around when you help may vary, but it could be in moments that don't interfere with your self-care — for example, say "no" to things at lunch and any time before 9 AM and after 5 PM. The "how" can serve as a much-needed boundary; if the ask is bigger than expected, you might aid in the first two steps and direct them on how to proceed independently from there. Ultimately, this exercise is a reminder that your time is yours.

Another idea is to keep your mantras close by as a reminder and forcing mechanism. One woman I interviewed from Workaholics Anonymous reminds herself to say "no" by keeping a laminated index card on her desk so that it is always in her line of sight. It displays two affirmations she learned from Workaholics Anonymous: "My life is full and underscheduled," and "I say no, even when offered the best."

Fixing the Workaholic Clock

Workaholics tend to underestimate how long it will take to do something, so they overcommit to doing too many things in too short a time. This is the workaholic-clock error that leads to so many problems — not only for the workaholic but for others who are pulled into projects and tasks that have been set on an unreasonable timeline. And unlike employees or coworkers who may simply fall behind on such deadlines,

workaholics are much more likely to do anything they physically can to try to meet them — often at the expense of their well-being.

To reset the workaholic clock, you must first acknowledge that your clock is off, and then gauge how far off it is. So, for the next week, before you start any task, write down the amount of time you think it will take and afterward compare that to how long it actually takes. For example, say you estimated that it would take two hours to complete a task, but you actually spent three hours on it — that's 1.5 times your estimate (3 divided by 2). I recommend doing this by starting a timer before you begin your task. Do this for multiple tasks in order to identify the pattern between your estimated and actual times of completion, and figure out how much longer than anticipated things take you, on average.



Carl Godfrey

Now, say I expect a task will take 20 hours, but I know I tend to work 1.8 times longer than my estimated time. My first calculation would

be my expected time (20 hours) multiplied by my projected pace (1.8 workaholic clock), with a product of 36 hours that I should actually allocate to complete said task. There's a catch, though. A workaholic might look at that number and say, "OK, 36 hours is about two and a half days of work," because they expect to put in 14-hour days. Instead, you must force yourself to budget the time on a nonworkaholic schedule. Either extend the deadline by a few days, or bring in a few more team members to help lighten everyone's load.

You can also try implementing the workaholic-clock calculation in your preparation process for larger projects. By knowing how much time to allocate toward each task, you'll be able to prioritize and organize each one according to the time needed. Done regularly, this exercise works to relieve intimidation and anxiety around time management.

Controlling Rumination

At the core of workaholism is something that's a positive — a passion for something. It's the inability to throttle that passion, to turn it off, that becomes the issue. Passion becomes an all-consuming obsession — to the point that the workaholic actively seeks out ways to fuel it.

Adam Grant once referred to me as a "metaworkaholic," trying to apply my obsessive work habits to *study* obsessive work habits. In our conversations, we've also talked about how we actively try to avoid a Netflix binge or YouTube distractions. For us, it takes willpower not to work. We have to force ourselves not to engage in the next task.

Grant has a strategy to help with this tendency. If he notices he's ruminating about work — thinking about it while trying to enjoy family time; propping open a laptop while watching TV; or feeling stress, anxiety, or guilt about not working — he forces himself to stop. He asks himself why he feels that. He has some questions and statements he'll

repeat to himself: “Who said I should be working every minute? I don’t even have a boss!” and “What is the point of having tenure if I don’t get to decide for myself how many hours I will be spending on which projects?”

You can come up with your own mantras specific to your situation when you find yourself in similar moments. It may be something as simple as, “This work can wait. I need downtime to recover.” I also recommend practicing all the mindfulness techniques you can and finding one that sticks, whether it’s meditation, breathing exercises, or something else. Remember: You won’t be able to simply eliminate rumination. You have to learn to listen to it and work with it.

Rumination is one of the hardest workaholic tendencies to combat because it’s one of the most internal. It happens in a place — your mind — where no one sees it, and it’s hard to control. Thoughts and feelings come whether you want them to or not. And what you feel may be quite different from what the world sees.

Further, workaholics often tell themselves they can’t stop working because their students, patients, clients, or customers count on them. They use a fear of letting other people down as a driver. It can help to talk to some of those people. Ask them if they will feel let down if you put in a little less time or stop communicating with them after hours. My experience with workaholics is that they are surprised at how relieved people are that you’re taking steps to improve your well-being.

Embracing Rest and Recovery

Our bodies are not physically able to remain in constant fight-or-flight mode. Part of a healthy stress response is the eventual calming down of our regulatory systems, which allows us to return to homeostasis. Research definitively shows that when we rest and engage in recovery

activities, we have better well-being, particularly when we have a lot on our plates.

Unfortunately, workaholics have told me that even sleep becomes “a nuisance” and “a waste of time,” and they are almost annoyed that it can’t be engineered out of their lives. Rest when they are not sleeping feels doubly foolish because, in their minds, it’s not necessary. However, as burnout management coach Emily Ballesteros put it to me, “The only time you rest should not be when you are dead asleep. You have to have rest in your waking hours.”

Here are four ways you can adopt rest and recovery as a way to combat your workaholic tendencies, including concepts from the recovery literature about reducing the strain on our bodies and improving our well-being as outlined by preeminent scholars Sabine Sonnentag and Charlotte Fritz:

Psychological detachment. This is a full mental “disconnect” from work, switching off your work-related thoughts when you’re not in the office or don’t need to be working. To facilitate psychological detachment, force yourself to do a nonwork activity that shifts your attention toward something (or someone) else. Think of activities that seem interesting, or people you’ve always wanted to spend more time with. If you force yourself to engage with one of them, you may become engrossed and detached from work. This could include something like immersing yourself in a good book or TV series, cooking, or catching up with an old friend (but resist the temptation to talk about your job!).

Physical activity. Of course, we all know that medical research has shown the positive effects of exercise on our mood and physical health, but it can also help us rest and recover from work, too. Physical activity has been shown to be even more beneficial for workaholics than for

the average worker; [one study found](#) that those higher in workaholic tendencies were happier in the evening and felt more recovered the next morning on days during which they exercised or participated in sports after work.

Relaxation. Meditation or other relaxation exercises such as yoga lower your sympathetic nervous system activation, which brings your heart rate down, helps you breathe more deeply, and relaxes your muscles. It literally takes you out of the fight-or-flight response, reducing stress. Many of the individuals I spoke with from Workaholics Anonymous shared how they have found ways to relax. Debra, a licensed clinical counselor, said she takes a few minutes each morning to practice putting golf balls in her living room or listening to jazz music. Also, she and a friend each committed to taking two quiet pauses every day to take three or four slow, deep breaths.

Mastery experiences. This involves engaging in non-work-related activities that challenge you to learn and grow. Any number of activities can fall into this category. For one of my graduate students, it's woodworking. My editor plays guitar. Others may pursue learning a foreign language, perfecting their baking or gardening skills, or taking up a sport. It could be anything, really. The most important thing is that you decide what's the most restorative for you, because having control over what you choose to engage in during your leisure time is [also related to more-positive outcomes](#).

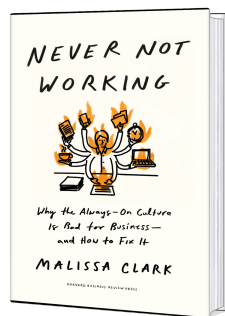
I also encourage you to experiment with freeing up more time during your typical work hours. Schedule exercise, rest, and mastery experiences. [Research](#) on exercise during lunch breaks, for example, has shown that people come back after the break with even more vigor to finish out their workday. Make intentional choices to choose recovery

over work. It's OK to do something that you find pleasurable for the pure goal of finding joy.

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If you're a workaholic, the idea of detaching probably seems difficult. You might even experience a physical reaction at the thought of carving out time in the middle of the day to not work.

All of that is normal, which is why you've seen me repeatedly mention "forcing" yourself to try something, being open-minded about an alternative approach, and being disciplined and honest with yourself. I get it. Although there are things I am much better at today (such as setting boundaries protecting my weekends), I am still a work in progress. This past December, I went on vacation without my laptop for the *first time in my adult life* — which, for me, was a big step. If that sounds daunting — try a laptop-free evening as a baby step. Remember: This stuff takes work. But that work, I promise, pays off and can get you to a healthier and happier place.



Malissa Clark is the author of *Never Not Working: Why the Always-On Culture Is Bad for Business — and How to Fix It* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2024), from which this article is adapted.

[Buy it here](#)

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“You’re More Than a Success Machine”

Social scientist Arthur C. Brooks on how work addiction develops — and why spiritual practices and connections with others can help break the habit. **by Gretchen Gavett**

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Video Available Online

To view, please visit this article at [HBR.org](#).

About halfway through Arthur C. Brooks’s tenure as president of a Washington, DC, think tank, he realized two things: He lacked a clear purpose, and he was missing valuable time with his family. Traveling frequently and working 80-plus hours a week, he had allowed workaholic tendencies to creep into his life. Despite everything that was rewarding about his job, something had to change.

Brooks, a social scientist, is now at the Harvard Kennedy School and Harvard Business School, where he teaches a course in leadership and happiness. He’s also interested in addictive behaviors, including workaholism — or, as he specifies, an addiction to success.

This addiction, while not a chemical dependence, “revs up our dopaminergic system and makes us chase the ‘high’ of success,” he told me in an interview conducted over email. “And...each new success doesn’t seem to fill our desire. We work harder and keep searching for the next score, notwithstanding how that might hurt our personal relationships.”

In the process, we become what he calls “success machines.”

“Two hallmark signs exist for success machines,” he explains. “First, in the workplace, will you do anything to get ahead (including disparaging coworkers or cutting corners to make yourself look good)? Second, are your personal relationships suffering from your unwillingness to leave your work at the office?”

If you answer “yes” to these questions, “odds are you might be losing your humanity.”

So, how do you get it back? “You can prevent this outcome by recognizing that success is rarely a zero-sum game,” says Brooks. “Spending more time with your children will not mean you’ll fail professionally, and your coworkers’ success will not make you look terrible. You can do your job well and still live a life of personal and professional virtue.”

Brooks is also clear that cultivating genuine connections with others is necessary, though it can be tricky to know where to start if you’ve spent

years in workaholic mode. “Are you feeling lonely and want to be loved? If so, go love others,” he says. “This can start in remarkably simple ways. In the workplace, make your coworker a cup of coffee; at home, strike up a conversation with your neighbor, and ask how he or she is doing. Before long, you might find yourself having a weekly lunch with your coworker, or perhaps getting invited to your neighbor’s dinner party. If you initiate little acts of kindness, you’ll be much less lonely as a result.”

Finally, Brooks notes that the problem of workaholism and success addiction also requires societal solutions. “In an era of social media (which, in essence, is a social comparison machine), we tend to admire those with fancy jobs, high salaries, and insanely busy lives,” he explains. “We need to reach a collective agreement that, say, success means far more than making a huge paycheck while wearing designer clothing. In my view, living a life full of virtue — which means loving your job, your friends, your family, and your faith — is a truer marker of success.”

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Gretchen Gavett is a senior editor at Harvard Business Review.

Confessions from 1,000 Workaholics

And advice on how to recover. **by Kelsey Hansen**

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Carl Godfrey

“I was in Mexico, in the middle of the ocean, thinking about an email.”

“I realized I had worked the past 10 weekends.”

“I wasn’t able to sleep because I had an unfinished task.”

If you recognize yourself in any of these statements you might be experiencing workaholism, which University of Georgia professor and overwork expert Malissa Clark characterizes as [the inability to](#)

disconnect from your job — to the point where it takes over your thoughts and actions, detracting from other aspects of your life.

Through a survey distributed on social media, we asked members of HBR's global community to describe the moment they realized they were addicted to work and, if they've taken steps to recover, to explain any solutions that worked for them.

In more than 1,000 responses, readers shared how they let work infiltrate their bedrooms at night and hijack vacations during which they'd hoped to unwind. Numerous people noted that their "aha" moment came when they realized they were neglecting the activities and people that they loved.

For many of our readers, this was far from a minor obstacle. Some said that workaholism turned them into someone they didn't recognize. Others said their addiction to work brought their mental and physical health to the brink.

Lightly edited versions of their responses are shared below, grouped by theme.

I can't disconnect from work.

One common thread we noticed was constant connectivity. Sometimes this took the form of needing to be tethered to technology. "I am addicted to checking my work email all the time — workdays, weekends, nights, vacation. Literally all the time. I hate emails piling up," said Ather, a finance manager in Dubai, UAE. Ranjeeta, a student adviser in Hyderabad, India, noted, "I started replying to my emails at midnight." And an anonymous regional operations manager shared, "I chose to run with my work phone instead of my personal phone just in case I needed to be reached."

In other cases, the problem was an inability to take any time at all away from work. “I always work on holidays...even when it’s after hours,” said Yosi, a lecturer in Jakarta, Indonesia. An anonymous reader added, “I take my work with me on vacations. I don’t take the days off and ask for remote work instead.”

I can’t stop thinking about work.

For many others, thoughts of work are constant, even when they’re away from the office and devices. “Even during sleep I dream about work,” said an anonymous reader in Singapore. A consultant in Frankfurt, Germany, confessed, “When I was alone over the weekend, and there were no work tasks to do — which is not typical — I realized two things: It made me sad, and I didn’t know what to do instead.”

Several people said that incessant thinking about work drove them away from other satisfying pursuits and relationships. “I would refrain from engaging in activities I enjoyed if it meant me being away from my computer for more than 30 minutes, because I was constantly worried about not being available should a problem arise — even during off-hours,” recalled Terry, who works in sports and entertainment in Los Angeles. “Even when I was at home with family and kids, I would always have some work-related ‘problem/solution’ exchange going on in my head and would get ideas on how to interact with a boss or superior,” an anonymous lecturer said.

I put work ahead of loved ones.

The act of deprioritizing friends, family, and other loved ones in favor of work appeared frequently in our responses. “I started distancing myself from my hobbies, friends, and family to get more work done,” said an anonymous reader. “I was at a party at 1 AM,” said another, “and I had to go to the parking garage to take a conference call.”

What may have started as an infrequent habit for many readers turned into a cycle of neglecting family. “I skipped my son’s spring concert at school because I had to complete urgent work on deadline. My whole life has been ruined by moments like these because I choose work over my life. I feel like I’m caught in a time loop over and over again with no solution,” admitted SJ, a bank vice president in Dallas, Texas. Barnisha, a marketing manager in Kolkata, India, said, “I never sat at the table with my family for a single meal.”

Jan, a registered nurse case manager in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, even missed a parent’s last moments of life. “I felt obligated to go into work to finish up a few tasks before visiting my father in hospice care, and he passed away before I got there.”

I put work ahead of caring for myself.

Work addiction caused many of our respondents to also disregard self-care, which often had long-term impacts on their physical or mental health.

“I was prioritizing work over everything, including basic daily tasks like showering or cleaning my house,” said an anonymous consultant from the UK.

Telly, a higher education president and CEO, offered a similar story. “During the pandemic, I was working from home and any final barriers between work and life balance were deteriorated. I got up from the couch one Saturday afternoon to respond to an email from my desk; nine hours later, I realized I had continued working, not even taking time to eat, rest, drink, or use the bathroom.”

Mairin, who works in labor relations in Edmonton, Canada, returned to work too soon after an injury. “I wanted to get back...despite not

being well enough to do so. I disregarded the doctor's restrictions and overworked — and took on others' roles when people left the organization. This set back my recovery, but I still prioritized work," she concluded. "My need to prove my worth is what drives me."

Megan, a proposal manager in IT from Arlington, Virginia, put herself in a different type of danger. "I hadn't slept all week because we were on a deadline and my boss was pushing me to ensure that we met it. I was super tired but also hungry one night, and I went to grab some food. I never made it to the McDonald's because I fell asleep at the wheel. That experience scared the s— out of me."

A few more readers also described significant health scares.

"A couple of months ago, there was some severe weather early in the morning. The road out of my neighborhood was blocked by fallen trees and I couldn't go to the office, where I'd left my laptop the night before," wrote Mike, a consultant from Florida. "When the realization set in that I couldn't get to work, I started to have a panic attack. A tornado had just come through town but I was freaking out because I couldn't check my emails. I didn't even have anything important to do that day!"

An anonymous project manager in Cape Town, South Africa, shared their own devastating moment of realization. "I collapsed at work two years ago due to multiple seizures caused by total burnout. I almost died; I still have no recollection of the event, my time in the hospital, and the two months after being discharged. I realized that work had taken over my life when the psychologist asked me who I am and the only identity I had was my work self."

How to Break Free from Workaholism

A handful of readers shared simple but potentially helpful recommendations. For example, set — and stick to — boundaries around time, and take breaks, including for real vacations. One anonymous consultant from New York sets personal appointments they can't get out of. Another suggested adding “feeling good and not exhausted” as a success metric.

Bigger moves are an option, too. Several readers suggested leaving workplaces that encourage workaholism — [or taking a sabbatical](#), if possible.

Experts also advise [experimenting with digital detoxes](#) (for example, consider hiding your work phone when you're spending time with your family) and picking an activity you enjoy and [scheduling time for it every week](#). Clark offers [several more practical recommendations](#), including resetting your workaholic “clock” so that you stop underestimating how long tasks truly take and being willing to do whatever it takes to get them done.

One thing was clear from our readers' stories: It's an ongoing struggle to recover from workaholism. In the words of the project manager whose overwork led to multiple seizures: “The journey has not been easy and is still a daily challenge because I still feel guilty when switching off — that I'm not good enough, and I'm letting people down at work. So, I have to remind myself daily that if I die tomorrow, my work is not going to matter. Business will continue, but the lives of my loved ones will be changed forever because they lost me.”

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How Companies Can End a Culture of Overwork

Recommendations for improving productivity while encouraging employees to lead fuller lives. **by Brigid Schulte**

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Carl Godfrey

Jeff, a workaholic in recovery whom I met through Workaholics Anonymous, knows that his own internal demons and fears sparked his long work hours, late nights, insufficient sleep, and constant obsessing about his job.

But what may have started as an internal compulsion then developed into a career-long, destructive work addiction, reinforced by the organizational cultures around him. “I had managers who complimented me on my industriousness or what they saw as my sense

of duty because I was always in the office so late,” said Jeff, who, like others who spoke to me as I was reporting my new book, [Over Work](#), asked that I use his first name only. He received kudos, even when he knew the long work hours and lack of sleep meant he wasn’t producing particularly good work. He struggled with procrastination, and his inability to set realistic timelines, schedules, and boundaries meant that he and his team often sprinted madly in a high-stress rush of late nights to complete projects. “We had a challenge with our cultural management — which was basically that presence is productivity,” Jeff said. “Measuring presence is easy. Measuring productivity is harder. And there’s so much societal pressure to overwork.”

Jeff’s story illustrates what [research finds](#): that workaholism and long work hours do not lead to more productivity or better work. “You would think if someone’s spending all this time at work, that they would be a better performer. But we actually didn’t find that in [our study](#),” [Malissa Clark](#), a professor of industrial and organizational psychology at the University of Georgia who studies workaholism, told me. “We even found higher rates of counterproductive work, which is certainly not good for the organization.”

Further, long work hours have been associated with higher rates of [burnout](#), [unnecessary errors](#), [accidents](#), [fuzzy thinking](#), [presenteeism](#), [ill health](#), and even [shorter lifespans](#). There’s a financial toll as well: Stress from these hours can lead to disengagement that [Gallup estimates](#) costs \$8.9 trillion in lost GDP around the globe every year.

Economists like Claudia Goldin [have documented](#) how work has become “greedy” in recent decades, demanding more time and presence, fostering workaholism, and even contributing to the gender wage gap, as women and those with care responsibilities are simply unable to put in as many hours and thus aren’t rewarded or promoted at

the same rate. And while the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted some aspects of work, much is still in flux, with knowledge workers in particular demanding more flexibility and control over when, where, and how they do their jobs. Organizations are at a critical juncture. Rather than double down on high-stress, greedy work that doesn't actually produce better results, they can choose to transform workaholic- and burnout-inducing cultures into something much better for everyone.

Here are five strategies that can help organizations make that change:

[1]

Leaders, Shift Your Mindset

The first and perhaps most important journey in this transformation is in the minds of the leaders who set the tone for their organizations. Managers like Jeff's bosses need to understand the research and data and recognize that long work hours and presence do not equal excellent work.

Brian Elliott, Sheela Subramanian, and Helen Kupp of Slack's Future Forum, who coauthored [*How the Future Works*](#), say leaders often get in the way of positive change, clinging to workaholic, presence-rewarding cultures because that's what they know and how they succeeded. Many are also out of touch with their employees' lives: The majority of senior executives are men who have had [spouses or partners](#) managing family responsibilities, whereas nearly [three-fourths](#) of those who work for them have to juggle work and care obligations.

"It's an echo chamber," Elliott said. "I've had people say to me, 'I can show our CEO that my [flexible] team was actually more productive, not just in terms of hours worked but literally in output over the past few years. And I can't get them to listen, because instead they're

listening to their fellow CEOs and board members, who are ex-CEOs” — all of whom rose to power in heavily male-dominated, presence-rewarding, workaholic cultures. Workaholics Anonymous laments that work addiction is the only addiction that is “both socially sanctioned and financially rewarded.”

[2]

Get Work Processes Right

If there’s one thing that organizations can learn from the growing short-work-hours movements around the world, it’s that they are actually about designing better work processes. Shorter work hours are the by-product.

Andrew Barnes and Charlotte Lockhart, [four-day-workweek](#) movement leaders, became true believers once they transformed their own trust company, Perpetual Guardian, in New Zealand. “I basically said [to employees], ‘Look, we have absolutely no idea how to deliver this. So we’re going to ask you how you’re going to do it.’” That led to intensive discussions and brainstorming that forced teams to radically change the entire system. “Our whole organization had to go through a process of understanding: ‘What are we really doing here?’” Lockhart said. “Everybody [took] a really good look at what they did in the day, what their teams did, what other teams did, and came to understand better how the business functions and makes money. A lot of miscellaneous things that don’t feed into that were dropped.”

Productivity remained just as high in four days as in five. Engagement, empowerment, and loyalty levels rose as stress levels dropped. “More people said they were better able to do their job working four days rather than five,” Barnes said. “Now, that was a shock.”

Rightsize the Workforce and Workloads

Many leaders see layoffs as rightsizing. Yet, without focusing on output and redesigning their work processes, layoffs can often leave fewer and fewer people with more and more work to do. [Research](#) has found that work with high job demands can often lead to long work hours, exhaustion, and workaholism.

Again, the short-work-hours movement is instructive.

In 2015, the Swedish city of Gothenburg piloted a six-hour-workday experiment in a public care home. [Studies](#) found that the nurses working shorter hours were happier, healthier, more engaged, and more productive — and the quality of care improved, which lowered healthcare costs. But shaving a few hours off already-understaffed nurses' schedules meant the city had to hire more nurses rather than continue to rely, as so many countries do, on overworked, underpaid, and largely female care workers. Conservatives on Gothenburg's city council attacked the pilots as a costly waste of taxpayer money. Yet [observers](#) found that rightsizing had long-term benefits. In reducing burnout, fewer workers quit. That saved on rehiring and retraining. And it saved on the public benefits that people out of work would have had to rely on.

Similarly, in 2002, a Toyota plant in Sweden was also forced to hire additional workers when it moved to a six-hour workday. But leaders found that the cost of that additional labor was more than offset by increased productivity and sales and by the company's greater profits. The costs of burnout, disengagement, quitting, rehiring, and retraining aren't often reflected on balance sheets but have major long-term

impacts on organizations, so rightsizing requires leaders to take the long view.

[4]

Craft a Productivity and Well-Being Culture

Many organizations invest in individual wellness offerings, like meditation apps, in an effort to reduce stress and burnout. While certainly beneficial, these efforts don't get to the heart of the matter: Workaholic culture is a systems problem that requires a systems solution.

"Don't give me a yoga class at noon. But do make sure that you're not going to call me, email me, or text me after 5 PM Friday evening until Monday morning," said Christine, another workaholic in recovery I met through Workaholics Anonymous, emphasizing the importance of setting and communicating healthy boundaries.

Christine, who struggled with workaholic perfectionism, was helped most by a supportive work environment with managers who valued her talents and created structures outlining clear tasks and timelines. "They could say, 'That's good enough. Let it go. Move on now,'" she said.

Sue, whom I also met through Workaholics Anonymous, said organizations should mandate a vacation minimum. Further, she encouraged leaders to survey the stress levels and work hours of their employees and take [Workaholics Anonymous's 20-question quiz](#) to assess their own tendencies. "Senior staff should model a balanced life, not just tell others to do it," she wrote me in an email. "Create a culture in which workaholism isn't a prize but a concern."

Flexible work and supportive policies like paid family and medical leave, paid sick days, paid vacation time, and support for care responsibilities are also key to creating cultures that promote well-being rather than workaholism, argues Youngjoo Cha, a sociologist at Indiana University who studies long work hours and organizational change. But just as important as crafting the policies, Cha added, is the way organizations implement and talk about them.

“If these policies focus on accommodation for women and mothers and are seen as more feminized, they may increase the stigma of flexible policies, because people associate using them with a career-limiting move,” she said. “If the policies are framed as more gender-neutral, about employee well-being — something organizations do because they care about employees — those are more effective.”

Cha’s [research](#) has also found that transparency, clear communication, and guidelines are key to reducing flexibility stigma — as is making the policies a default rather than requiring employees to ask for or negotiate them. “The policies are much more effective when they rely less on manager discretion.”

[5]

Be Willing to Experiment

Some organizations have a long history of experimenting with work redesigns to promote both productivity and well-being and to prevent workaholism. Patagonia, for instance, has had a policy of [locking its Ventura, California, headquarters doors at 8 PM every evening and over the weekend to discourage overworking](#).

More recently, the pandemic forced virtually every organization to redesign overnight the way they worked. No one had a road map,

which thrust everyone into necessary experimentation. For example, Blackbaud, a global software company, completely remade itself into a flexible, digital-first company by first listening to what its employees needed and then redesigning work processes and cultural expectations in tandem. “We built [the work redesign] on a premise of trust and well-being, which is key,” Maggie Driscoll, chief people and culture officer, explained to me. During the pandemic, CEO Mike Gianoni began holding 30-minute virtual sync meetings with about 200 of the company’s global leaders every Monday to share updates and answer questions. Management also instituted virtual quarterly all-hands meetings for all employees to come together. Leaders realized these online gatherings enhanced transparency and improved coordination, so they’ve kept them up, as well as encouraging more virtual work, meetings, and social events, such as wedding and baby showers.

Blackbaud still believes in the effectiveness of employees gathering in person as necessary, Driscoll said, but they’re much more creative about how it happens. Workers who live in a certain region often coordinate their schedules for in-person collaboration and even volunteer days.

Embracing a digital-first, flexible work culture has also enabled the company to hire and promote what Driscoll calls the “best and most inclusive” workforce. “No longer do we look at a role based on location and geography. We look at a role based on experience, skills, and execution,” she explained. “We’re everywhere now. And productivity has remained high.”

Erin Kelly, who researches and directs work redesign projects as a professor of work and organization studies at MIT, has helped develop STAR (support, transform, achieve, results), a method to change workplace culture that relies on experimentation. The process starts with leaders believing that change can make work and worker well-

being better, and then, like Barnes and Lockhart at Perpetual Guardian, giving teams the space and support to figure out how to make it happen. Some of the changes teams come up with are small, but Kelly has found that the process alone can be powerful. “It really signals respect for workers’ whole lives and for them having a say in how they put their days together,” she told me.

...

There’s no single solution for fixing overwork. Public policy can go a long way in either advancing or alleviating workaholic work cultures. The United States, for instance, has no national mandate for paid time off work. Long work hours are viewed as a badge of honor.

Other countries, many in Europe and Scandinavia, have prioritized family-supportive initiatives like paid family leave, paid sick days, shorter work hours, and investments in care and work-life balance. That can make it easier for companies to then adopt flexible work practices, focus on performance, and value well-rested workers. For instance, one American now working in Denmark told me that her long work hours were seen as a sign of inefficiency rather than commitment and devotion.

Yet government incentives aren’t enough. Japan has some generous public policies to encourage paid vacation and paid paternity leave, yet the work culture still promotes long hours and a “work ’til you drop” style they call *karoshi* — or death from overwork.

So the onus is on organizations to create cultures focused on smart, effective work that both improves productivity and performance and enables people to live rich, full lives.

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