

Vacation time is here – but do you suffer from WWS (Work Withdrawal Syndrome)?

This article was originally published in MindBodyGreen, August 6, 2014

Might as well face it—you're addicted to work!

With the lazy days of summer come holidays and breaks from work. But for some, vacation time prompts anxiety and distress.

If you find it hard to adapt to prolonged unstructured periods of leisure, you might be suffering from WWS.

What are the signs?

- Dread over looming time off (“What am I going to do with myself?”)
- Guilt over not doing anything “productive”
- Inability to stop thinking about work
- Compulsive checking of work-related emails
- Restlessness, irritability, and difficulty relaxing
- Obsessing over cramming leisure time with structured activities when faced with an empty schedule
- Onset of depression coinciding with vacations



WWS is an offshoot of workaholism. Though not formally defined as a mental disorder, workaholism is distinct from mere devotion to career or work. As with other addictive behaviors, you cross the line from normal when your focus on job-related activities becomes destructive to your relationships and your personal health.

Unfortunately, many societal imperatives point us in the direction of excessive conscientiousness and career orientation.

In productivity-fixated Japan, workaholism culminating in exhaustion and death is a well-documented phenomenon, dubbed *karoshi*.

Why does WWS occur? There may actually be biochemical reasons, rooted in the physiology of addiction.

As in compulsive exercise (“no pain, no gain”, “the runner’s high”), “cutting” (the self-infliction of wounds) or anorexia (self-imposed starvation), there is a powerful reward system at play in excess work—the endorphins, or internal opiates.

Some can get hooked on the internal sensation caused by endorphins released by overwork.

When work stops, the consequent plunge in endorphin production can literally cause unpleasant symptoms of withdrawal, not unlike “Jonesing” on heroin, prescription pain-killers, or alcohol.

Additionally, some people are literally hooked on stress. Emergencies and deadlines trigger release of powerful hormones like cortisol and adrenaline that deliver a wakeup call to the body. Absent the stimulation of work, levels of these bracing

chemicals plummet, and stress-addicts may experience a crash.

Additionally, for some, overwork is an antidote to depression or social isolation, or it may mask a case of obsessive-compulsive disorder or attention deficit disorder.

What can be done about WWS? First, as with all addictions, acknowledging the problem is the first step toward resolution. Denial will perpetuate the addictive cycle.

Here are some constructive measures you can undertake:

- 1) Try cultivating a vacation "style". Create a light wish list of low-key, fun projects you don't get around to while working, but avoid loading your holiday schedule with a daunting menu of scheduled activities.
- 2) Develop a "hobby"—working with your hands really gets you out of your head.
- 3) Learn to live with unstructured time (easier said than done!).
- 4) Leave an "away" message on your business email and arrange for coverage at your office or business. Resist the temptation to "check-in" via email or phone.
- 5) If necessary, get professional help from a psychologist if self-help measures don't help you conquer your leisure distress.

Most importantly, evaluate your work style to make sure you don't descend into patterns of workaholism that will make you experience WWS when you have time off!