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ADDICTIONS: WORKAHOLISM ⁽¹⁾

Rachel Shifron

The rationale for choosing to discuss the issue of "workaholism" is based on many therapy sessions I conducted with couples and individuals. I have found that "workaholism" is the addiction of our era. Addiction to work, or "workaholism", has increased significantly during the last two decades. It is manifested through the rise of personal achievements and the race for materialistic acquisition. The price of this race is a decrease in leisure time with couple partners and family members.

The world has gradually become one global market; consequently there are no universally defined working hours and frequent travel overseas. Compounded with the diminishing impact of the labour unions on working hours, this trend has led to workers' and their families' burnout.

Like every pub owner who aims at raising profits by providing "happy hour specials", so too do employers by offering "goodies" to their employees. They provide day care centres for the children and exercise rooms at the place of work, subsidised meals, social activities, company cars, business class travel, portable computers and mobile telephones. The result is that one can work 24 hours a day, be always connected and at least potentially highly rewarded. This is a perfect recipe for addiction.

Robinson (2000) conducted many research projects on the issue of workaholism, which he defines as follows:

⁽¹⁾ This is a written version of a presentation made at ICASSI (International Committee of Adlerian Summer Schools and Institutes), Győr, Hungary, July 15, 2008.

"Work addiction is an addiction in the same way that alcoholism is an addiction. Progressive in nature, it is an unconscious attempt to resolve unmet psychological needs that have roots in the family of origin and can lead to unmanageable life, family disintegration, serious health problems and even death" (p. 34).

In a 2006 paper, Robinson also defined workaholism as:

"A compulsive and progressive potentially fatal disorder characterised by self imposed demands, compulsive overworking, inability to regulate work habits and overindulgence in work to the exclusion and detriment of intimate relationship and major life activities" (Robinson, Flowers & Ng, 2006, p. 213).

Selinger's (2007) definition for workaholism is:

"A workaholic is someone who works at the expense of his family and personal life. Workaholics have the compulsion to just do more work. Therefore it is different from just working hard" (p. 7).

The purpose of this paper is to conceptualise *addictions* and specifically *workaholism* from an Adlerian perspective, bearing in mind that these are not mutually exclusive categories.

In previous lectures and papers (from 1996 to 2008), I have defined addictive behaviour as follows: "Addiction is a *chosen* repetitive developing behaviour. ... The goal of this behaviour is ... to escape existential fears" (Shifron, 1999, p. 114). I have indicated that in most research studies about addiction in general, and particularly about workaholism, the addiction serves an unconscious need. However, according to Adlerian theory, although it might feel as if the behaviour is out of control, it is a chosen behaviour and it indicates the individual's creative ability to make choices. Very often the addiction is an extremely creative choice when the goal is to escape emotional pressures.

The emphasis is on the fact that it is a chosen behaviour. All addictive behaviours are goal-oriented. These goals may be, for example, to assume feelings of belonging, to avoid the pain of being rejected, or to avoid the inconvenience of coping with unpleasant situations.

The main existential fear of the workaholic is to be *excluded* from the world of work. Additional fears can be a striving to "keep up with the Jones" or a fear of losing the respect and appreciation of one's couple partner and other family members. One is ready to pay high prices at times and the result is an addiction to work.

A very significant component in the Adlerian definition of addiction is that addictive behaviours are extremely *creative* strategies to escape from the frustration of unfulfilled abilities. In workaholism, there is a high likelihood that the family or the community environment is not sufficient to fulfil these abilities.

As a couple and family therapist, I have come to realise that workaholism is a creative solution to marital problems. It is very creative because it is considered a *positive behaviour* that demonstrates *genuine care for the family's needs*, and criticism is negated immediately and even considered immoral. How can one criticise someone who has such a high work ethic? Gradually, the immediate and extended family learn to live without the workaholic as does the typical alcoholic family.

All people are creative in developing behaviours that are aimed at reaching the goal of contributing and belonging to their group. At times, this creative power becomes an addiction, especially in the case of workaholism.

The need to contribute to the immediate group enhances the feeling of self-worth. When the contribution is encouraged, it may result in an addiction. There is a strong need to feel that the contribution is meaningful to the group. Workaholism fulfils this need to the

utmost. Obsessive contribution benefits the organisation and increases a sense of meaningful belonging. Therefore, there is no incentive to modify the addiction.

Addictive behaviours are *holistic* in their nature. They are expressed physically, psychologically and cognitively, and they affect the entire family system (Shifron, 1999).

Physically: the workaholic reaches a point of exhaustion. Research indicates that workaholism causes serious threats to the health of the workaholic, sometimes culminating in death (Robinson, 2000, 2001; Garfinkel, 2004; Selinger, 2007).

Psychologically: the higher the reward at work, the more the emotional investment of the individual in his work. (Andreassen, Ursin & Eriksen, 2007). The more meaningful the task is, the more demanding it becomes. When the worker feels needed, when his or her contribution is meaningful, there is a tendency to invest even more energy and time.

Cognitively: thinking about work during leisure time and family events is part of the workaholic's daily lifestyle (Snir, 2008).

The effects on the family system are powerful:

- often holidays become a disappointing experience;
- no boundaries exist between work, leisure and family life;
- children are expected to act in parental roles;
- children become mediators between their parents;
- children might develop a negative attitude towards work or they might imitate the workaholic's behaviour;
- in families with more than one child, we may find both the aforementioned extremes of these attitudes and behaviours;
- the children develop creative abilities to cope and deal with their parents' workaholism. For example, developing methods to be in control at all times, assuming responsibility for self and others, creating a fantasyland, using all resources in order to survive (Shifron, 2006).

Children of workaholics find extremely creative methods in order to deal with the lack of boundaries in the family environment. At times these methods also become manifest addictions.

Robinson, Flowers and Ng (2006) examined the correlation among males between workaholism and marital disaffection. They found that workaholism was positively related to marital disaffection. The findings supported previous research they conducted with women who identified their husbands as workaholics. The women also reported greater marital disaffection and less positive feelings among couple partners. These studies support my observations in my clinical work of the last twenty years where I have found an increase in the severity and the number of clients who suffer from workaholism. The above researchers also concluded that workaholism and marital relationships continues to be the most ignored area of clinical and empirical research. They claimed that this tendency stems from the fact that most cultures gratify hard workers with various rewards, in particular in the field of high-tech.

In conclusion, we can say that workaholism is not only affecting the family system but also the entire global cultural way of thinking.

Thus far I have addressed the general identification of workaholism according to the following Adlerian concepts: the behaviours are creatively goal-oriented, and the goals are to experience a meaningful contribution as a human being to the family and society. However, we have to remember that each person is doing it in his or her unique way. Therefore, psychotherapists and counsellors need to examine the person's family constellation and Life Style. Moreover, the use and analysis of early memories is also essential in working more broadly through the dynamics underpinning workaholism and addictions.

Addictive people differ in their Life Styles. No addict is like another and each workaholic is a unique individual. It is important to indicate that, as in psychotherapy of other addictions, ideally there should be a balance between individual therapy and, as appropriate, couples or family therapy (Shifron, 1999, 2006).

Psychotherapy Process for Workaholism

Stage 1

- Analysis of Life Style
- Disclosing hidden goals
- Couples' therapy.

Stage 2

- Changing tools in order to reach goals
- Family therapy.

The goals for therapy with the family:

- to help families to negotiate *boundaries*;
- to learn that work should not dominate their lives;
- to work on effective family roles;
- to teach family members how to *encourage* the individual workaholic when efforts to cut down are being made;
- encouragement is needed at all stages of therapeutic interventions, especially when working with workaholics;
- encouragement is meaningful when it is appropriate to one's Life Style (Shifron, 2006).

An important question emerges in the treatment of workaholism: how to encourage organisations to be motivated to reduce the phenomenon by lowering the extreme demands at work. The latest research (Andreassen, Arzin & Eriksen, 2007) shows that workaholism poses serious threats to the health of organisations (since they are built on human beings). Some suggestions for reducing effects of workaholism on the organisation are as follows:

- assessing the extent of workaholism;
- re-creating work priorities;
- offering training programmes to assist in acquiring outside interests and learning time management strategies;
- establishing organisational values and culture that emphasises work-life balance;
- offering incentives towards work-family balance;
- discouraging perfectionism in work assignments.

The following is a case study, which is presented in order to demonstrate the correlation between the individual's Life Style and the risk of becoming a workaholic. This case study illustrates the creative choice made in order to feel a sense of *belonging*, the *goals* for the chosen behaviours, and the *holistic* nature of the choices and the family's *culture*.

CASE STUDY: ERIC ⁽¹⁾

Presenting problem: Marital issues.

R: Can you tell me something about yourself as a child?

Eric: I don't remember myself during my childhood investing many hours in something specific. I loved to read and I read a great deal. *I have a tendency to be extreme and to take things to an extreme.* I have developed a personality trait of *being a pleaser in order to reduce conflict at home.* (*A chosen goal-oriented behaviour*).

R: Conflict? What kind of conflict?

Eric: There were always economic pressures about money. The topic of money was in the air constantly. My mother worked in several jobs; when she worked there was money and when she didn't there was no money. I was a saver; I

⁽¹⁾ Demonstration for the presentation on *Workaholism*, ICASSI, Győr, Hungary, July 15, 2008. Eric is a pseudonym and consent was obtained for publication. Dr. Rachel Shifron and role play of the client by her son Gal Shifron.

kept money in order to save it, not for a particular purpose. When we moved to a new neighbourhood, the *economic gap* between my family and the other children's families in high school became substantial. *Saving money was for me to escape survival worries*. We were a middle-class family but very cautious around money issues.

(The goal is to be like the others, to belong).

R: Was money the only source of pressure?

Eric: There were lots of conflicts between my brothers (+ 5 and - 4). My older brother stated that my younger brother was spoiled and was treated exceptionally. A statement I agreed with because my younger brother did very little at home. Because of their conflict, I always found myself in the middle. I understood that, to break up conflicts, one needs to do something; you can't just talk. *It was a responsibility I took upon myself. When I was alone it was quiet.* *(Awareness of the choices he made).*

R: Can you tell me something about your parents?

Eric: My parents came from a poor background. I remember tension between my parents but I don't recall concrete issues. There wasn't a lot of talking in the family.

R: What kind of communication did you have?

Eric: There was a lot of touching and a lot of doing for each other. It was clear that they loved me and would do anything for me. I have had a feeling that they did everything to enrich our lives. *As a child, I took too much responsibility and I was busy trying to please my parents and my brothers.* My mother said that I was a very quiet child. I wasn't quiet. *I did everything I could to avoid conflict.*

(The goal is to assume a specific role in the family).

R: Today you are very responsible for your family, wife and children; you are doing it as your parents did, by doing a lot. You are trying to do your best to enrich your children's life as your parents did for you. Like your mother who worked overtime, you are working overtime. However, your tendency to be extreme and to take things to an extreme result in becoming gradually a workaholic, you spend most of your waking hours at work, you continue to work after coming home and your wife's and children's main complaint is that you are always on the phone.
Can you give me an early memory?

Eric: *I remember myself in a photo. I was dressed up for a costume party as an angel. My mother held me in her hands and hugged me.*

R: Because you feel today that you are your current family's angel, your expectation is that your wife will hug you with affection for your "angelic deeds".

Summary

In this paper, workaholism is introduced as an addiction. The Adlerian conceptualisation suggests that an addiction is not solely an unconscious behaviour but rather a goal-oriented chosen behaviour. Shifron (1999) indicated that addictions are creative choices to deal with the hardships of life, as is the case of workaholism. This creates a negative effect on the individual, the family system, the entire community and paradoxically the working organisation that encourages it.

Therefore, in addition to the individual family members and extended family, treatment and prevention of workaholism should include educational workshops for organisations in order to change the concept of what is considered a "good worker".

It is important to remember that an individual makes creative choices and, moreover, is capable of making positive and adaptive choices. It is said that the Judeo-Christian God chose to rest on the 7th day after creating the world in 6 days; even workaholics can choose to rest!

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