

People struggling with work addiction feel unwell even when they are working, finds study

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The mood of workaholics—individuals who suffer from work addiction—is on average worse than that of other people, even when

engaged in the activity they are most passionate about: their work. Workaholism shares many similarities with other addictions, such as gambling or alcoholism.

This is what emerges from a study [published in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*](#), conducted by Cristian Balducci, a professor at the Department for Life Quality Studies at the University of Bologna (Rimini Campus), in collaboration with Dr. Luca Menghini from the University of Trento and Prof. Paola Spagnoli from the University of Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli."

Professor Balducci explains, "The [negative mood](#) observed in workaholics may indicate elevated daily stress levels and that could be the cause of the higher risk for these individuals to develop burnout and cardiovascular problems. Furthermore, considering that workaholics often hold positions of responsibility, their negative mood could readily influence that of colleagues and co-workers. This poses a risk that organizations should seriously consider, intervening to discourage behaviors that contribute to workaholism."

Work addiction

Work addiction has been a well-known phenomenon for a long time: people suffering from it tend to work excessively and compulsively. This is a true obsession that negatively affects health, [psychological well-being](#), and relations with family and friends.

Several studies indicate that workaholics commonly experience a sense of unwellness, often accompanied by [negative emotions](#) such as hostility, anxiety, and guilt when they are unable to work as extensively as they wish.

On the other hand, there are conflicting assumptions about the feelings

that emerge in these people while they are at work. Some studies suggest that workaholics experience feelings of well-being and satisfaction during the workday, yet other research indicates that these positive emotions quickly transition to a prevailing dysphoric state characterized by irritation and depression.

Workaholism and emotional flatness

To shed light on this aspect, scholars involved 139 full-time workers in the study, mostly employed in back-office activities. A psychological test was first used to assess the participants' level of work dependency. Afterward, the scholars analyzed the mood of the workers and their perception of workload using a technique known as the "experience sampling method."

This was done using an app installed on the participants' phones, which allowed them to send short questionnaires approximately every 90 minutes, from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., over the course of three working days (Monday, Wednesday and Friday).

"The collected data show that most workaholic workers have, on average, a worse mood than the others," says Prof. Balducci. "So, it does not appear to be true that people who are addicted to work derive more pleasure from their work activity; quite the opposite, the results seem to confirm that, as in other forms of behavioral and substance addiction, the initial euphoria gives way to a negative emotional state that pervades the person even while at work."

The results also demonstrate that, unlike other workers, workaholics, on average, consistently maintain a more negative mood throughout the day, with no significant variations attributed to the passage of time or fluctuations in workload. A diminished reactivity of mood to [external stimuli](#) implies a notable emotional flattening, a well-recognized

phenomenon in other types of addictions.

"This element," suggests Luca Menghini, a researcher at the University of Trento and first author of the study, "could stem from the workaholic's inability to moderate work investment, resulting in a significant decrease in disconnection and recovery experiences, and the parallel consolidation of a negative affective tone."

Women and workaholism

Another interesting result that emerged from the study is that of gender differences. The relationship between [work addiction](#) and bad mood was, in fact, more pronounced in women than in men, indicating a greater vulnerability of women to workaholism.

Scholars suggest that this phenomenon may depend on an increased role conflict experienced by workaholic women, caught between the internal tendency to over-invest in their work and the external pressures stemming from gender expectations still deeply rooted in our culture.

Dangers and countermeasures

These results warn of the dangers of workaholism. Work addiction can lead to significant negative repercussions not only on relationships with family and friends but also on physical and psychological well-being. The so-called "overwork illnesses" can aggravate to the point of leading to death from overwork—a phenomenon with a not inconsiderable case history today.

"Organizations must send clear signals to workers on this issue and avoid encouraging a climate where working outside working hours and at weekends is considered the norm," Prof. Balducci concludes. "On the

contrary, it is necessary to foster an environment that discourages excessive and dysfunctional investment in work, promoting disconnection policies, specific training activities and counseling interventions."

More information: Luca Menghini et al, Uncovering the main and interacting impact of workaholism on momentary hedonic tone at work: An experience sampling approach., *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/ocp0000365](https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000365)

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