

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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“Overworking May Put You in an Early Grave”

My generation contributed to the creation of the “workaholic.” But, is this healthy? Workaholics feel compelled to work for the sake of working, and you feel panic, anxiety or a sense of loss when you aren’t working. The workaholic is “addicted to incessant activity,” said Diane M. Fassel, author of “Working Ourselves to Death.” The behavior continues even if the worker becomes aware that it is personally harmful. Opinions differ on whether such unhealthy behavior, as opposed to abuse of substances like drugs and alcohol, can be considered an actual addiction. But more mental health professionals now consider “workaholism” a condition that can cause both mental and physical damage, said Bryan E. Robinson, book author of “Chained to the Desk.” One problem is that people are praised and rewarded for working excessively, which almost never happens with addictions. Most workaholics are either perfectionists, have a need for control or a combination of both. Working too hard can also be a way to escape from a bad relationship or to make up for an absence in one’s personal life. The stress that goes along with working too much has been shown to lead to substance abuse, sleep disorders, anxiety and ultimately to physical problems like heart disease. “Karoshi” is a Japanese term for “death from overwork.” Not only is the concept of karoshi medically plausible, it is a phenomenon that has been recognized and well described in Asia (initially in Japan) since the early 1960’s. There is an expanding literature in peer reviewed medical journals describing the epidemiology and effects of work policy changes on cardiovascular deaths related to karoshi in Asian countries. Takotsubo cardiomyopathy is a well-recognized and studied condition, also known as stress cardiomyopathy or “broken heart syndrome,” where sudden emotional stress, such as receiving bad news, results in acute weakening of the heart muscle leading to heart failure or arrhythmias. It makes sense that chronic stress accumulated over a period of time, such as chronic overwork, could lead to a cardiac event in the same way that a sudden stress could. Elevations of stress hormones in the body are a normal physiologic response, but over time, long-term elevations can lead to high blood pressure, vasoconstriction, higher resting heart rates, and heart rhythm disturbances. Due to financial pressures, many people work multiple jobs outside the home to the point they do not have time for adequate self-care.

In the America that I love, strive to achieve a “work-life balance” to avoid the adverse effect on overall health. Personally, writing and publishing 35 books in twelve years took a health toll on me. So, in the words of Ronald Reagan, “Hard work never killed anyone, but why take the chance?”

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