

The Performance Addicted Worker Scientist: How a Lack of Empathy Can Deteriorate Work, Love and Self Care Effectiveness



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Short Communication

The Culprit-Performance Addiction? Performance Addiction is the belief that perfecting appearance and achieving status will secure love and respect. It is an irrational belief system that becomes hardwired from early experiences and is re-enforced by cultural expectations. My first recognition of Performance Addiction came about largely as a result of my work with a group of individuals who embodied so many of the qualities that are highly regarded in professional and public life. Their resumes were very impressive but I noticed that despite their capabilities, they seemed to have little regard for their personal achievements and their own physical appearance. They all seemed to be score board watchers. Every day, they took inventory of how well or how terribly they were performing, how attractive or dreadful they looked in the mirror. The men seemed particularly preoccupied with money, achieving more status, and acquiring more prestigious positions. Many of the women were so self-conscious about appearance that their looks seemed to be the potential ticket to happiness. Then there were the men and women who transcended gender lines. As I probed further I realized that a new kind of addiction was occurring and I have come to realize that it is rampant in our society. It affects the way we work, the way we love and most importantly the way we parent.

How do you know if you have Performance Addiction? Performance addicts turn to activity like alcoholics turn to a drink, like gamblers are drawn to the gambling table. If performance addicts are not distractedly busy they don't feel worthy. When good performance does not buy them happiness they think they must perform even better. When that fails to deliver, they decide they must try harder, go faster, be more dedicated and make more sacrifices. This is the Nature of Addiction. Performance addicts value status over character, achievement over relationships.

Have you thought "I will be loved and respected if Most of what comes after is likely performance addiction.

I have a quiz in the first chapter of Performance Addiction that comes from questions that Performance Addicts often ask themselves and the quiz also indicates the severity of the syndrome. Let me read a sample of questions from the quiz to give you a sense of the typical concerns of a Performance Addict (4 minutes).

Common Symptoms- Example- Chris - Critical father, scientist, anxiety playing basketball at 16, none as musician, obsesses about presentations, poor self care, marries late in life, difficulty empathizing with wife, wife often feels he is somewhere else", cries when recalling childhood, hesitant to go over past.

Common Symptoms

- a) Difficulty 1: Difficulty Listening-Seldom present in the moment, usually re-hearsing what they are going to say while the other person is talking, always preparing to impress.
- b) Difficulty 2: Difficulty Slowing Down-No Dimmer Switch. They need to focus on building relationship skills, especially the capacity for empathy, as empathy allows us to get lost in another person's world and take a mental vacation from our own troubles, an experience that all psychologists clinicians who love what they do experience daily.
- c) Difficulty 3: Difficulty Sleeping-Can't wind down, can't turn off the "to do list", afraid today's performance wasn't good enough.
- d) Difficulty 4: Difficulty with Unstructured Time-Performance Addiction is a thief of simple pleasures, satisfaction only comes from hard work and spontaneous fun is rare!

e) Difficulty 5: Difficulty with Self Care-nutrition, exercise (miracle grow for the brain), sleep not consistent, relegated to secondary importance despite good intentions.

Performance addicts need to learn that the ability to take care of ourselves and those around us is the foundation for achieving genuine, healthy accomplishment throughout a lifetime.

Exceptional Mediocrity- Case Example

How do you stop this syndrome from ruining your life? Performance addicts believe in the religion of perfection. They believe they can perfect their way into happiness. All religions have their myths; the cure is in understanding the truth of what brings a person love and respect. They must return to the “scene of the crime”, the moment they started believing that performance would bring them love and respect. You must re-access the irrational “hard wiring” that became deeply embedded as a belief system. Remember performance addiction is insatiable; it can’t be satisfied if you make more money, perfect your appearance or become famous. It’s not possible! The myths must be discarded, only learning the truth will save you from the relentless grasp of Performance Addiction.

Recovery from PA means defeating the two most prevalent drivers in American Society-Money and Beauty.

The pursuit of money and status does not bring happiness, love or respect. Net worth does not equal self worth. “Show me the money” theory of life doesn’t work; even Gerry McGuire discovered love matters more than money. The correlation between income and personal happiness in US, Canada and Europe is surprisingly weak. Even the very rich are only slightly happier (Forbes). Recent studies have indicated that even though young people have grown up with much more affluence than their grandparents, four decades of becoming “better off” has not resulted in any improvement in well being.

The most amazing proof that the pursuit of money does not bring happiness is revealed in the recent World Values Survey. The average Nigerian earns \$300 a year, and has a life expectancy of 45.3 years. Nearly six percent of the young female population there has HIV, only 7.1 in a thousand has a computer, electricity and other services are luxuries, and the country is drowning in 31.1 billion of debt. Yet apparently Nigerians have figured out something that has eluded us, of more than 65 countries Nigeria ranked number one in terms of happiness. To further validate the point that money does not buy happiness this week The World Health Organization survey of 14 countries and two Chinese cities found the impoverished Nigerians to have the lowest prevalence of mood disorders (0.8%). The United States, the most affluent nation in the world had 20.9 million people diagnosed with a mood disorder, 26% were diagnosed with a diagnosable mental disorder, 57.7 million people.

As you can see the obsession with more and more money is akin to the anorexic’s obsession with less and less weight. Extremes are better in their eyes, although in actuality it’s a sure

formula for misery. As one of my very affluent patients says, “I ruined my marriage and my business relationships by living by the Golden Rule-the one with the gold makes the rules, people couldn’t stand being around me”.

Perfecting appearance does not bring happiness or love; in fact it creates addictive behavior. The competitive and compulsive striving for beauty is the most outright evidence of performance addiction in women and it is an increasing concern for men as well.

The “You Look Marvelous” theory of love doesn’t work either. We love Billy Crystal, in truth, because he’s incredibly charming and funny. His hair loss has had no influence on his career, probably has made us love him more. Americans underwent an increase of 197% of cosmetic medical procedures in 2011, at a cost of 10 billion dollars and our approval of cosmetic surgery is higher than ever before (American Plastic Surgery Association). More men approve (63%) than women (61%). Highest rating was among 18 to 24 year olds and people with highest incomes were more likely to consider cosmetic surgery.

Middle age executives are turning to cosmetic surgery. Studies have shown links between psychiatric disorders and a desire in individuals for cosmetic surgery. Plastic surgeons have to be particularly careful for patients they call “social perfectionists” as they have unrealistic expectations of what surgery can actually accomplish. It doesn’t improve marriages and surely doesn’t keep a CFO in his position if his company is losing money. One study of Swedish women who had breast implants between for cosmetic reasons (not to replace breasts due to a mastectomy) were three times more likely to commit suicide than women who had not been surgically enhanced. Another study indicates that 24% of women would sacrifice three years of their life if they could only be the weight they desire.

Trying to improve appearance within reason is appropriate but thinking that these improvements will make you feel differently about yourself is akin to thinking that Michael Jackson was more content after his alterations. A surgeon’s knife cannot produce love and secure respect. As one of my patients indicates, “I lost weight after a hideous year of dieting, I have my eyes done, my stomach tucked and my husband still can’t talk to me, he still doesn’t know the difference between making love and having an orgasm, so what’s the point?”

True happiness, love, and respect come when relationships are more important than achieving status and maintaining image. Empathy is the key capacity for successful personal and professional life. The ability to take care of yourself and those close to you provides the foundation to achieve genuine, healthy accomplishment throughout life. We all want love and respect in our lives, but Americans are “looking in all the wrong places”. Developing the capacity for empathy is the key for a successful personal and professional life. Performance addicts recover only when they learn in their hearts and in their heads that

relationships are in fact the key to gaining what has been missing all their lives.

In a study of 121 major companies and organizations worldwide, accessing 181 positions, 67 percent (two of three) of the abilities deemed essential for effective performance were emotional competencies. A landmark study by the Center for Creative Leadership of 62 executives in 15 Fortune 500 companies found the main reason for failure in leadership, despite strong technical expertise, was rigidity and poor relationship skills, essentially a lack of empathy.

Empathy-the capacity to understand and respond to the unique aspects of another-is the key to professional and personal success. Empathy is not an emotion or a feeling but a capacity that is innately present. It is every day mind reading; it atrophies or expands depending on whether or not we are treated with empathy. Empathy is different than sympathy or compassion, empathy always leads to action, it is objective, present oriented, focused on the unique not the general.

Research consistently shows that the trait shared by the most successful executives in the country is the ability to “sense others needs” and to “make others feel heard”. Today’s MBA’s overwhelmingly want better training in getting along with their peers.

Empathy is also the heart of the relationship skills needed to help Performance addicts move past Image Love to Real Love. Performance addicts have tremendous difficulty loving, they base their own lovability on their daily performance and unfortunately they expect the same of their partner. They are constantly comparing and contrasting themselves and their partner to others. They find it easy to fall in love, the binding and blinding effects of sex in the early phases of a relationship creates an illusion, an image of love. The blinding part is pure physical attraction-lust, raging hormones, and sexual excitement. The blinding part is a screen of illusion obscuring the love object, the partner who is a source of sexual devotion. The partner is a source of escape and ecstasy, an object of desire. This is what I call Image Love. The person with Performance Addiction has the characteristics that are considered attractive written in stone, in the brain’s emotional center. These characteristics are usually expected to bring the performance addict more esteem through his connection to his love object.

Is Sex a Performance? This is a frequent dilemma among performance addicted couples. Given the importance of achievement, it’s not surprising that sex itself has become a performance issue in many marriages. Expectations of sexual performance are set high. We all fall in love with an image initially but hopefully we progress to real love. Image love is often a protector of a poor sense of self.

True love is based on uncritical affection, something that has been alien to the Performance Addict. As one of my patients said to me last evening, “I really love being with her, I can talk to her

and I feel more comfortable than I ever have with any woman. I can’t get past the fact that she doesn’t have a college degree, I am embarrassed to say but if she had a degree and was a little thinner I know I would be proposing”. He goes on to complain about his job and recent promotion, “I love the money but I feel like I’m dying working these fourteen hour days. I can’t stand the people who work for me, always complaining about not getting enough time, never feeling heard, they all need their mothers. Thus the hard wiring of Performance Addiction.

What is Love Really? A question most performance addicts can’t answer. Performance Addiction can be unrelenting in its demands for Comparison, Measurement and Competition, and none of these is a component of love. Loving, the Performance Addict comes to learn, is quite different from “being in love”. One demands only a brief acquaintance; the other derives from intimacy, the prolonged journey of knowing another’s soul. Performance addict victims have great difficulty making the transition from “being in love” to loving. Whenever there is a loss of faith in the promise of relationships the Performance Addict is likely to substitute performance measures and become obsessively driven and isolated.

Daring to meet in the middle initially we are drawn to each other to make us more complete people. We are attracted to an aspect of the other person that is underdeveloped in ourselves and very developed in the other. As we become interested in developing the skill we admire we can move past image love. Achieving that balance, as pragmatic and unromantic as it may seem, just might be the key to eternal love. In the final analysis, true love is dependent on our ability to place relationships with those close to us above our quest for image and status.

Defeating Myths through Balanced Work and Life members of my group therapy sessions re-work old patterns just like many other addictions, understanding the sequences by which irrational beliefs-hard wiring- interferes with balance and joy. Knowledge is not enough-emotional learning is hard to understand for those who have ignored their emotional life for years. Week after week members begin to regard group as an island of opportunity-searching valiantly to re-arrange their pursuit of perfection into something that brings them happiness.

As they listen, understanding the forces driving other Performance Addicts, seeing themselves in others, calm comes over the faces of these very driven people. They begin to discover what has been missing in their lives, in their own families. They become proactive learners rather than perfectionists, appreciating the value of being in a process without obsessive emphasis on the outcome.

They experience what athletes call a “flow state”. They no longer feel that if they make a mistake they are a mistake. Performance addicts must learn that making a mistake is a natural part of learning. There are only two choices in life, we can either be human or we can be miserable trying to be perfect.



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