



## DON'T DIE FOR A DEADLINE

**Sandra Kimball** breaks free  
from the daily grind

If you live in Japan, you know someone who is addicted to work. What you may not know is that the price they are paying is greater than any paycheck can cover.

Japan is the world leader in producing the dangerously overworked. It has one of the highest suicide rates in the developed world and overwork is a major contributing factor. There is even a special word for it, *karoshi*, which means death by overwork. The government doesn't keep statistics on *karoshi* per se, but the Ministry of Labor handles a growing number of compensation cases of death by overwork each year. *Karoshi* is often used in applications for compensation, especially in investigations of cardio-vascular disease causing death brought on by excessive work and occupational stress.

Burning the candle at both ends creates huge surges of adrenaline, which floods the body and taxes every physical function, especially that of the heart. Adrenaline contributes to high blood pressure and to increasing the build-up of plaque in the heart vessels, which in turn increases the risk of a heart attack. The role of adrenaline is to give the illusion that you have an unusual amount of strength, resilience and energy. This false sense of power masks physical symptoms and you're not aware that you're really tired or worn down until you collapse.

On the high end of the scale of over doing it is "workaholism". This is a serious affliction of obsessive-compulsive behaviour, where one identifies so strongly with their occupation that they can't maintain wholesome relationships, outside interests, or take care of their health needs. They get high on the challenge of a deadline, spend long hours fixated on their careers and can't enjoy life or feel energetic and purposeful unless they're toiling away at something.

If you think about your job constantly, feel panicky or depressed if you're not working, and look around for the next challenge before you've completed the last one, please pause and reflect on what you may be setting yourself up for.

Unfortunately, in modern times it's socially sanctioned to overwork. Those who overdo it are the ones who get the praise and recognition. The pace of life has quickened and it doesn't matter if you're in a corporation or at home, hard work is rewarded. Many grapple endlessly with

tense commuting journeys, late dinners and stressful personal interactions fuelled by fatigue. And many of us are running on empty.

Here's the paradox. Who wants to be in an intimate relationship, with a doctor for example, who is never at home? Yet how much do we want that doctor to put his or her heart and soul into concern for our wellbeing? Children may go days without seeing one of their parents and we may feel sad about this. But we still want the shopkeeper who is probably also a parent, to work long hours so shopping is convenient for us.

There is tension between the life we want for ourselves and the work ethic we expect of others. There is tension between the unsocial, long hours we work and the time we spend with family or friends. There is a contradiction between the desire for a flexible, well-balanced life we want to live and the desire for instant, top-notch service we expect is our due. Many futurist thinkers say that we will look back on how we run ourselves into the ground and consider it a modern form of slavery.

It's easy to get caught in the loop of overwork. We experience a basic dissatisfaction in life and seek relief. We take refuge in our occupations to shore up a self-image of success that in turn gives us a sense of self-worth. Working feels good, but too much of it and our personal lives suffer, the discomfort returns and we work harder to escape the discomfort. And besides adding a huge amount of stress on our relationships, it takes its toll on our mind and body.

In Japan, the land of *bushido* – the never-say-die spirit of the samurai, overwork is historically a relatively new phenomenon. Forgotten is the fact that the ordinary warrior's life was abundant with leisure. Besides taking a shift to protect the lord's castle, samurai had ample free time to pursue learning and the arts, many of which continue today to give Japan its reputation for attention to beauty and detail, such as *chado*, the way of tea, *kendo*, sword training and *shodo*, Japanese calligraphy.

Living side by side with the samurai were the merchants and farmers. The merchant class initiated several holidays and the farmers and fishermen, who by necessity lived a life in tune with the seasons, rested during the extreme weather and laboured when the climate was right. They also dedicated time for events to celebrate harvests, the reward for their efforts and community cooperation.

There is nothing wrong with working hard and loving what you do. Gratification from putting in the extra time and effort to meet a deadline and feeling satisfied with your achievements is a good thing. But don't wait too long to do something healthy

to help you unwind from the stress of it. If you feel calmer, so will the people around you.

### Five Steps to maintain a reasonable balance in your life.

**1. Commit to Relaxing.** We've come to believe that relaxation is a waste of time so in the beginning you'll have to "work" at it. Overwork is a habit and habits are learned behaviour so you can learn to loosen up, just like you got into the habit of overdoing it. Condition yourself to take the load off in a way that attracts you. Thirty minutes of intense cardiovascular exercise immediately reduces body tension. Or, you may want to consider meditation, which is a time-honoured method to learn to tolerate challenging thoughts, emotions and experiences. Or better yet, do both.

**2. Give yourself more time.** If you review what you've done in the past, most likely you will remember that it always takes longer than you anticipated. Allocate at least 20% more time than you think you will need to complete a project.

**3. Live more simply.** A little is often enough. We can get caught in a cycle of working for things we don't really need. It's not a question of how much you have. Like a *tenzo*, the chief cook in a Zen temple, you can make something good out of very few ingredients. Try to buy or create as much as you can use – no more, no less.

**4. Review your beliefs about boredom.** We've got this idea that being peaceful is boring. We feel guilty if we're not being, or at least look like we're being productive. Move toward activity that brings you peace but isn't dull because boredom often adds to your stress levels. Learn to narrow down your focus in a way that you begin to enjoy one thing at a time.

**5. See the Big Picture.** This quote from the letters of William James, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century psychologist and philosopher, is one sure antidote to overdoing it.

*"I am done with great things and big plans, great institutions and big success. I am for those tiny, invisible, loving, human forces that work from individual to individual, creeping through the crannies of the world like so many rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, which, if given time, will rend the hardest monuments of pride."*

Living a balanced life gives each day real vitality. It shifts our perspective from what we can get out of life to giving attention to how we can participate fully in it. So when you work, remember you are part of an endless chain reaction. What you offer is what you are teaching others.

*Stress management and meditation programs can be found at: [www.internationalcounselling.com](http://www.internationalcounselling.com)*