

# 'Success Addicts' Choose Being Special Over Being Happy

Retrain Yourself to Chase Happiness  
Instead of Success

**T**hough it isn't a conventional medical addiction, for many people success has addictive properties. To a certain extent, this is meant literally—praise stimulates the neurotransmitter dopamine, which is implicated in all **addictive behaviors**. This is basically how social media keeps people hooked. Users get a dopamine hit from the "likes" generated by a post, keeping them coming back again and again, hour after miserable hour.

**But success also resembles addiction in its effects on human relationships.** People sacrifice their links with others for their true love—Success. They travel for work on anniversaries. They miss Little League games and dance recitals while working long hours. Some even forego marriage for their careers, even though a good relationship is more satisfying than any job.

Many scholars have shown that people **willingly sacrifice their own well-being through overwork to keep getting hits of success.** Some think to themselves or even say out loud, *"I would prefer to be special than happy ... Anyone can do the things it takes to be happy—going on vacation with family, relaxing with friends—but not everyone can accomplish great things."*

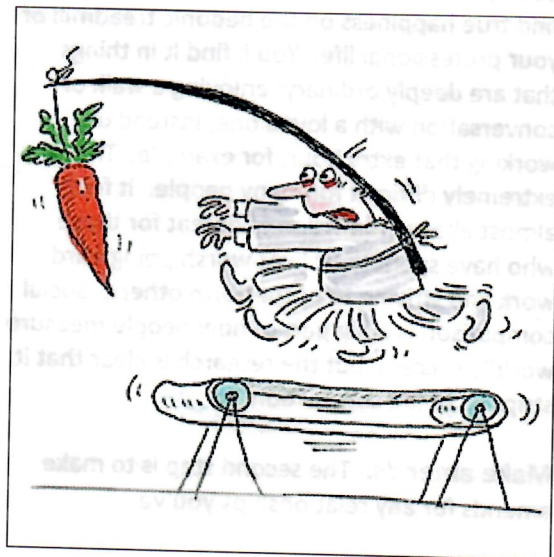
Many people make the success addict's choice of specialness over happiness. They would put

off ordinary delights of relaxation and time with loved ones until after this project, or that promotion, when finally it would be time to rest. But, of course, that day never seems to arrive.

## What are Success Addicts Willing to Sacrifice?

The desire for success may be inherent to human nature. But specialness doesn't come cheap. **Success is brutal work, and it requires sacrifices.** In the 1980s, one researcher found that more than half of aspiring athletes would be willing to take a drug that would kill them in five years in exchange for winning every competition they entered today. Later research found that up to 14% of elite performers would accept a fatal cardiovascular condition in exchange for an Olympic gold medal.

While some would choose certain physical death for a glorious legacy, most will still never feel "successful enough." The goal can't be satisfied, unfortunately. The high only lasts a day or two, and then it's on to the next goal. Psychologists call this the **hedonic treadmill**, in which satisfaction wears off almost immediately and we must run on to the next reward to avoid the feeling of falling behind. This is why so many studies show that successful people are



almost invariably jealous of people who are *more* successful.

They should get off the treadmill. But quitting isn't easy for addicts. **Success addicts giving up their habit experience a kind of withdrawal, akin to alcohol or drug addicts.** Research finds that depression and anxiety are common among elite athletes after their careers end. High performers in other areas also suffer mightily when they step back from the limelight—sometimes of their own volition, sometimes not. They talk of virtually nothing but the old days and struggle emotionally to adapt to their post-success circumstances.

### Choose Happiness Instead of Success

American culture valorizes overwork, which makes it easy to slip into a mindset that can breed success addiction. But if you see yourself in that description, don't lose hope. There is plenty you can do to retrain yourself to chase happiness instead of success, no matter where you are in life's journey. Consider these three steps, whether you are at the peak of your career, trying to work your way up the ladder, or looking at success in the rearview mirror.

**Admit the truth.** The first step is an admission that as successful as you are, were, or hope to be in your life and work, you are not going to find true happiness on the hedonic treadmill of your professional life. You'll find it in things that are deeply ordinary: enjoying a walk or conversation with a loved one, instead of working that extra hour, for example. This is extremely difficult for many people. It feels almost like an admission of defeat for those who have spent their lives worshipping hard work and striving to outperform others. Social comparison is a big part of how people measure worldly success, but the research is clear that it strips us of life satisfaction.

**Make amends.** The second step is to make amends for any relationships you've

compromised in the name of success. This is complicated, obviously. "Sorry about choosing tedious meetings—which I don't even remember now—over your ballet recitals" probably won't get the job done. More effective is simply start showing up. With relationships, actions speak louder than words, especially if your words have been fairly empty in the past.

**Find the right metrics.** The last step is to find the right metrics of success. In business, people often say, "You are what you measure." If you measure yourself only by the worldly rewards of money, power, and prestige, you'll spend your life running on the hedonic treadmill and comparing yourself to others. Better metrics for building a meaningful life include family, friendship, and spirituality. Work is also a meaningful metric, but not work for the sake of outward achievement. Rather, it should be work that serves others and gives you a sense of personal meaning.

In sum, success in and of itself is not a bad thing, any more than wine is a bad thing. Both can bring fun and sweetness to life. But both become tyrannical when they are a substitute for—instead of a complement to—the relationships and love that should be at the center of our lives.

Source: Brooks, A.C. (30 JUL 2022). 'Success addicts' choose being special over being happy. *The Atlantic*.

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