

# Increase Your Passion for Work Without Becoming Obsessed

by Scott Barry Kaufman

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Work brings some people intrinsic joy. These people feel in control of their work, feel good about themselves while working, find their work to be in harmony with their other activities.

Psychologists describe these folks as having *harmonious passion*. But there's another kind of passion: *obsessive passion*. Those who are obsessively passionate feel an uncontrollable urge to engage in their work, feel more conflict between their passion and other areas in their life, and their work forms a large part of their often unstable and negative self-concept.

In my last post, I summarized Robert J. Vallerand's distinction between obsessive passion and harmonious passion. In the comment thread that followed, I noticed a couple of questions emerge: Is obsessive passion ever helpful? What should you do if you recognize that your passion for work is not harmonious, but obsessive? I'll address both of those in this post.

Some commentators argued that obsessive passion could be useful in the beginning stages of a new endeavor, such as when starting a new company. I disagree. Obsessive passion is rarely beneficial. It's not just that those with high levels of obsessive passion are committed, focused, and dedicated. Those who are obsessively passionate about their work are inflexibly, excessively and compulsively committed, finding it difficult to disengage. As such, they are setting up bad habits from the start, and risking burnout in the longer run. Note that harmonious passion is correlated with *flow* – the mental state of being completely present and fully immersed in a task. Research shows that it's flow that is conducive to creativity, not obsessive passion. The positive emotions and intrinsic joy that is associated with harmonious passion is what propels one to greatness, not the negative emotions, compulsions, and unstable ego that is associated with obsessive passion.

All of us have at least a little bit of obsessive and harmonious passion for our work. The key for work productivity and for buffering against work burnout is to increase your harmonious passion while reducing your obsessive passion.

**How can we turn down the dial on obsessive passion and turn up the dial on harmonious passion?** Unfortunately, there isn't a lot of scientific research on the practical side of passion (a state of affairs I seriously lament). I can think of a few things, however, that might help. I think it's a two-part process: first it's important to recognize that you are demonstrating obsessive passion, and then it's a matter of boosting your harmonious passion.

There are clear warning signs that you are obsessively passionate about your work. Here are some tests:

1. **Do you have enough energy?** Do you engage in your work with positive enthusiasm? Do you feel enjoyment doing what you do?
2. **Do you define yourself by criteria other than work?** If your self is a pie, how big of a bite does your work take out of it?
3. **Do you have a positive self-image?** Obsessive passion is correlated with a negative image of the self, including automatic subconscious associations between the self and the concept "unpleasant."
4. **When you work, is your interior monologue positive** – filled with words like "want to," "get to," and "can't wait to"? Or are words like "must," "need," and "have to" rummaging around?
5. **Are you able to stop working when you want to?** Recent research found that online gamers who were very harmoniously passionate about gaming felt positive emotions while playing, while gamers with obsessive passion felt more negative emotions both when playing *and when prevented from playing*. Do you feel a compulsion to work all the time, even when you really don't want to?
6. **Do you get into a state of flow?** Do you feel as though time has receded into the background, or do you feel the weight of pressure on your back? Flow is an enjoyable experience, whereas obsessive engagement feels more urgent.

If you're reading down that list and thinking, "no, no, no," these are signs that you may have obsessive, not harmonious, passion. If you do think your level of obsessive passion might be too high, there are some things you can do about it:

- **Schedule real breaks.** If you recognize you are obsessively passionate about your work, force yourself to get out of that headspace by scheduling other activities during the course of the day

(like lunch with a friend, or a break to hit the gym). Block out time after work or on weekends for family, friends, and activities you enjoy. Having a schedule will keep you honest.

- **Don't bring work home.** If you can afford to, make it completely impossible to access your work once you leave work. Don't bring home your laptop. Leave those files on your desk. Keep separate email accounts for home and work, and don't check work email when you're at home (put up an out-of-office message if you have to). Obsessive passion is really just a bad habit, and habits can be broken gently.
- **Change your thought patterns when you work.** Fake the mindset of the harmoniously passionate person until you make it. For instance, convert thoughts of "must" and "need" to "want" and "desire." At first, this may feel awkward, but eventually the obsessively passionate mindset will dissipate, and so will the behaviors associated with it. A recent study suggests that changing your explicit thought patterns may increase self-esteem and harmonious passion.
- **Commit to a new hobby.** Often, investing too much self in one project is an indication of a negative core self. The more additional things outside of work contribute to a positive sense of self, the less space your work performance will take up in your ego, and the smaller your chances of burnout.

If all of this sounds incompatible with success, consider a case study: A young, very talented musician is trying to decide whether to launch his promising solo career, or to put it off a little while to learn more about the world around him. On the one hand, timing is very important in the music industry. There are many talented artists, and they could get a head start if he decided to postpone his career. On the other hand, talent isn't everything in music. Audiences not only respond to talent, but also to many subtle influences like sensitivity, expression, and wisdom, fed by experiences outside the musical realm.

The musician's name? Yo-Yo Ma. In the end, he chose to defer his career to expand his sense of self. Ma compares those years to an "emotional bank account in which you must draw the rest of your life." To be sure, that path wasn't all clear sailing for Ma; he earned a D+ in his music history course at Harvard. But if those years of undisciplined learning were detrimental to his career, I am hard-pressed to detect it. Yo-Yo Ma is one of the greatest cellists of all time, noted not just for his incredible talent and dedication, but also the breadth of his accomplishments, his compassion, thoughtfulness, knowledge, and positive enthusiasm. In other words, his harmonious passion.

Passion is one of our most important vehicles for performance, creativity, imagination, and ingenuity. By no means do I want to discourage passion. But we rarely realize how other important areas of life feed into our main passion. When one’s life isn’t in balance, passion can become obsessive and counterproductive. When a person feels good about their self and the work they are doing, and is capable of disengaging, passion becomes a wellspring of long-term success.

Scott Barry Kaufman is scientific director of the Imagination Institute in the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. He is author of *Ungifted: Intelligence Redefined* and co-author of the upcoming book *Wired to Create: Unraveling the Mysteries of the Creative Mind* (with Carolyn Gregoire). Kaufman is also co-founder of The Creativity Post and he hosts The Psychology Podcast.

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