

Countering fatigue on night shift

Try the following strategies to help beat shift fatigue:

- Schedule easy, short, interesting tasks for when you are fatigued.
- Listen to a chat show or talk to others when tired.
- At regular times, get up and have a walk and a stretch.
- Develop a good sleeping pattern and protect your rights to sleep during the day.
- Naps can be a useful preventative measure (e.g. prior to night shift).
- Strategic use of caffeine can help maintain alertness at night. Take care that it does not prevent you from sleeping after work.
- Turn up the lights! Bright light has a direct alerting affect so you will be more alert when working in a brightly lit area.
- Warm humid conditions make you sleepy. Wear warm clothing and turn down the heat.

Act responsibly

Fatigue can cause serious risks. As a shift worker you need to act responsibly.

- If seriously fatigued, stop work and see your supervisor — don't try to "tough it out".
- Sleeping is an important duty for a shift worker — make sure you get as much as you need.
- Take extra care returning from time off or at shift change.

The ideas and strategies outlined in this brochure are often beneficial, but are not comprehensive. Assistance from a professional counsellor may help you to make quicker progress. Remember to use your workplace EAP as a resource.

Call your EAP on 1800 056 076

Gryphon Psychology provide a free professional, independent and confidential counselling and consulting service. This service assists employees in both the private and public sectors to find solutions to any work or personal/family problems that are affecting their quality of life and which may be impacting on their effectiveness at work. If needed, our counsellors can make referrals to specialist agencies for particular problems, or for ongoing support.

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is completely confidential, and provided by your employer at no cost to you.



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Living with Shift Work

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The human body and mind follow a regular daily rhythm. Humans have evolved to be awake and perform best during the day, and to sleep at night.

Many body functions (including temperature, hormone production, etc) follow a regular daily cycle known as the circadian rhythm. During the circadian low period (2.00–6.00am) it is difficult to stay awake and perform well. In contrast, during the circadian peak (late morning to early afternoon) it is difficult to remain asleep.

Effects of shift work

Loss of sleep

Many people who work rotating or irregular shifts suffer some loss of sleep. Studies indicate that 60–80% of shift workers suffer sleep problems.

Mood problems

A common complaint is that shift workers are “grumpy”! In addition to the loss of sleep, it seems that a shift worker’s mood can be influenced by lack of sunshine, especially in winter.

Physical complaints

Shift workers often eat at times when the stomach is least expecting food, and go without it at normal eating times. This can cause stress and stomach problems. Studies have also shown that shift workers have a two to three times the risk of heart disease. This could be related to factors such as diet, smoking and stress. Irregular sleep schedules also make it harder to control chronic diseases such as diabetes and epilepsy.

Social impact

Family problems

Shift workers and their families can suffer from higher rates of family stress due to the strains imposed on them.

Drug and alcohol abuse

Drug and alcohol abuse is reported to be higher amongst shift workers than day workers.

Factors that determine impact

The impact of shift work can vary from mild to severe. Some of the things that determine the degree of impact include:

- The direction of shift change
- Whether you are living at home or away when on shift
- Individuals’ shift management practices
- Differences in the capacity to tolerate “circadian disruption”
- Flexibility in sleeping habits
- Age — individuals over 40 typically have more difficulty coping with shift
- Attitudinal factors including motivation and job satisfaction
- Family and social demands and the degree of support available.

Alcohol and substance use

An individual’s alcohol and other substance use will also impact on their capacity to adjust to shift work. Alcohol and drug use can significantly impact on the quantity and quality of an individual’s sleep and thus on the person’s rest and recuperation.

What about sleep?

Sleep is an essential physical need and people suffer both mentally and physically if deprived of it. Adequate sleep is essential for good health and effective performance.

Remember these important facts:

- Fatigue can accumulate
- Individuals do NOT learn to cope with lack of sleep
- Fatigued individuals think that lowered performance is normal
- Excess drinking and sleeping tablets can reduce the quality of sleep and cause chronic fatigue.

Improving sleep

Good sleep relies on good habits. The following can improve your sleep:

- Ensure you have the right conditions for sleeping. Your bedroom should be quiet, cool, dark, have fresh air and have a comfortable bed, pillows etc
- Keep your weekly sleeping times as regular as possible
- Develop a regular routine before sleep
- Go to bed when you are ready to sleep — not to read or watch TV
- Do some gentle exercise
- Try relaxation or deep breathing exercises to unwind and get rid of the day’s worries
- Have a warm bath
- Avoid things that may keep you awake, eg caffeine, spicy meals, smoking, and alcohol.