

Self-Care for Shift Workers

Shift-working patterns are an essential part of the economy and involve millions of people across the globe. Shift work is defined as working outside of the traditional 9 to 5 workday, which can include early mornings, late nights, or rotating shifts. Inadequate shift-working schedules and long hours can cause irritability, exhaustion, injuries, and burnout among workers. However, there are steps to minimize these effects.

Understanding Shift Stress

Adjustment to shift work is based on the circadian rhythm—the biological clock. Our internal clock tells us when to eat, sleep, and wake up. Our brains produce a hormone, melatonin, that prepares the body for rest and helps us sleep. But this process is suppressed by daylight when we usually need to be active.

At night when melatonin is produced, a cascade of chemicals that affects blood, glands, digestion, brain waves, body temperature, general alertness, and level of arousal is produced—and we become sleepy as a result. It can be extremely difficult to fight the physiological switch that induces rest and sleep.

Coping with Shift Work

Studies show that the best shift schedules move clockwise or forward (e.g., morning to evening to night) rather than counterclockwise. Regardless of your shift changes, managing your sleep, even if it must come during daylight, is essential to avoiding shift stress. Try some of the following to help you sleep at any time:

- Relax without caffeine, sleeping pills, alcohol, or nicotine before going to bed. Make sure you are separate from all distractions, phone calls and lights. Keep your bedroom temperature comfortable.
- Use earplugs and masks to block out sound and light.
- Use heavy or “blackout” curtains to block out light.
- If possible, soundproof your room—heavy carpeting can help muffle noise. Use a fan or a “white noise” machine to block out other sounds.
- Go to bed with an empty bladder.

Shift Work Disorder

Shift work disorder, also known as shift work sleep disorder, is a condition that affects shift workers due to the disruptions to sleep patterns, with an average of 1-4 hours of sleep lost per night by people with this condition.

Strategies to help you maintain a normal schedule during your waking hours include:

- Going to bed at the same time every day, even if it is an odd time or if it means adjusting your social life on your days off.
- If you must be up at different hours on days off, try going halfway. Overlap half your usual work period with sleep. For example, if your usual shift is midnight to 8 a.m., stay awake until 4 a.m. and then sleep till noon. It will be easier than making a total transition, but will buy you some extra daytime.
- Plan social events around your ideal sleep schedule. This can be a challenge but it's better than shocking your body rhythms when you return to work.

- Make sure your family and friends are aware of your schedule, and that you've worked out quality time to spend with them.
- If you have children who need attention while you're sleeping, try to arrange for suitable childcare to allow you enough time for rest.
- Try taking a nap for at least 30 minutes just before going to work.
- After a night shift, go to bed as soon as you're relaxed enough to fall asleep, even if you feel you could stay up for hours.
- Keep a sleep diary to monitor your sleep habits.
- Seek advice, information, and support if you are struggling with your shift patterns and sleep.

Diet and Healthy Habits

Diet and health play an important role in avoiding stress and maintaining energy throughout a difficult schedule. Remember to:

- Drink enough fluids to avoid dehydration.
- Limit your caffeine intake and stop drinking caffeinated drinks 4-5 hours before your ideal sleep time.
- Eat light and healthy at night.
- Get extra energy from vegetables, cereal, rice, pasta, fruit, and juices. Cut down on sweets and fats.
- Eat several small meals throughout the day, if possible, rather than one or two large ones. Always eat lightly, if at all, toward the end of your shift.
- Make time for exercise. The last thing you may want to do in between working shifts is a strenuous work out, but some regular exercise is crucial in maintaining your health.

Shift work can take a toll on alertness and response times as well. Make a special effort to:

- Follow your workplace procedures carefully. Errors are more likely at night. Take all permitted breaks at work to keep fresh and alert.
- Drive carefully after a night shift, as more accidents happen after dark.

With some adjustments and taking care of yourself, you can avoid a lot of the stress and burnout that often comes from working shifts.

Katherine Johnson, MA, LP – Counselor
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