

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Getting a Handle on Your Work Schedule

The demand for around-the-clock production and service in many industries is making the nine-to-five work day a thing of the past. Steering clear of traffic, lower daycare expenses and avoiding stressful daytime work environments are just a few great advantages of working non-standard hours. But you may face challenges too. The irregular lifestyle and physical demands can upset your body's internal clock, and put you on a different schedule than most friends and family, making it hard to connect. This can lead to stress and bad habits like poor eating, smoking and more caffeine and alcohol use. But if you work non-standard hours, you can achieve a healthy lifestyle by pinpointing challenges and planning for them.

Keeping time

People spend about one third of their life sleeping. In fact, each night, you pass through five phases of sleep: awake, stage one when sleep is light, stage two when brain waves slow down, stages three and four which are deep sleep, and the rapid eye movement stage when dreaming occurs.

Your sleep/wake cycle is linked to your internal clock, called a circadian rhythm, which is connected to the earth's rotation. It tells us to sleep at night and wake in the morning. Crossing time zones, too much noise and staying awake or asleep too long can all wreak havoc on this internal clock. Confusing your clock—by trying to sleep when it's light out—or disrupting it—by sleeping when temperatures are warm and there's lots of noise—can also get in the way of quality shut-eye.

Sleep solutions

Children playing in a schoolyard, the garbage truck rumbling or window shades that don't keep out the sunlight can all interrupt sleep. Preparing for a snooze and having a good sleep environment can make the difference between a deep sleep and going without zzz's. Learn to decrease noise and develop a routine to help your body adjust to a changing schedule.

Get comfortable. Use light-blocking shades or a sleep mask to make the room as dark as you can. Your internal clock is wired for sleep at night so this can trick your body into a better sleep. Is your bedroom a bright orange hue? Relaxing blues, violets and greens on your walls can help you unwind and get some well-needed rest. Block out noise with earplugs, a ceiling fan or soft music. A carpet or rug will also help absorb sound.

Be steady. Staying up late or switching to your family's sleep routine during time off can be tempting, but it'll also throw your body clock for a loop. Be sure to keep a relatively consistent sleep schedule, even on days off.

Nap time. A short nap—keep it to 30 minutes to avoid entering a deep sleep—before a shift will help you feel refreshed and alert. Wake up well before start time to avoid feeling groggy during work.

Avoid food and drink. Steer clear of fatty, spicy foods that can give you heartburn and indigestion. And don't have a big meal, excess liquids or caffeine before you hit the sack.

Create a ritual. Find a way to unwind before you go to bed. Listen to soft music, meditate or pick a favorite book to read.

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Use shower power. A hot shower or bath before you sleep can relax muscles and relieve tension, which can help you wind down after a long shift.

Shifting to healthy eating

When it's time for a break, all you can find is the vending machine filled with chips and chocolate. You may feel like it's impossible to pack a lunch or do groceries between trying to sleep, running errands and getting to work. True, eating well can be challenging, but it's not impossible.

Fuel your body with energy and healthy choices by:

Keeping it regular. Eat three full meals plus snacks or smaller meals throughout the day to get the energy needed to survive the long hours. It'll also help you avoid over-eating when you get home which can get in the way of sleep and cause weight gain.

Planning ahead. Bringing meals and snacks to work helps you eat well and save money. Make a list of items you'll need and schedule regular trips to the grocery store. Pack meals when you wake up each day or stock the freezer with healthy homemade foods on your day off.

Watching what you eat. While they may be tempting, fatty, fried, spicy and other seasoned foods can wreak havoc on sensitive stomachs causing heartburn, indigestion and stomachaches. They may also make it hard to work and sleep so it's best to just say "no," to these stomach-churning foods.

Avoiding caffeine. Caffeine can cause digestive track problems, frequent urination and may leave you lying awake in bed staring at the ceiling. Not to mention that it's highly addictive and can make you edgy and cause mood swings. Steer clear of coffee, cola and chocolate—especially four to six hours before bed.

Eat the good stuff. Fruits, veggies and whole grains are the easiest foods for your body to digest and help you sleep longer and deeper.

Get moving

It seems contradictory that when you're tired from long work hours, exercise will actually make you feel better and increase overall energy levels. It also reduces the risk of heart disease, strengthens bones and muscles and puts you in a better mood to help you sleep. Clock some time for planned, physical activity:

Plan it. If you can find a regular time to hit a gym, join a team or meet up with a squash partner, you'll socialize and stay in shape. Schedule in exercise and avoid swapping your workout for the sofa and a bag of chips.

Take breaks. At break time, walk around your building or do some stretches. Stepping away will help clear your mind and refresh you body for the next part of your work day.

Squeeze it in. You don't have to become a fitness guru or marathon runner. Instead, get off the bus one stop earlier and walk. Take the stairs instead of the elevator. If you can get to work on a bike or roller blades, dust them off and get moving.

Mood shifts

Though the physical challenges of non-standard work hours are obvious, mental and emotional strain can also impact your overall well-being. Being disconnected from family and friends because you're off working while the rest of the world is snoozing can lead to mood swings, loneliness, anger and feelings of isolation and guilt. Stay happy and in the loop by:

Communicating. Find time to call home and talk to your spouse, kids and friends whether it's before bed or as they wake in the morning. Make sure loved ones know your schedule and any days off so you can plan fishing trips, shopping or quiet time at home. Have at least one meal a day together to help share life events and stay up-to-date.

Getting creative. Make a breakfast date with loved ones—a nice end-of-the-day treat for you and a nice start-of-the-day treat for someone else. Leave post-it 'love notes' for your partner or family members to tell them how much they mean to you.

Indulging in R & R. Nothing is better for your emotional health than a little rest and relaxation. Take a yoga class, bird watch, soak in a bath, or let yourself indulge in whatever you find soothes your mind and body. Making time for yourself will help you recharge mentally and physically.

The benefits of non-standard work hours—like financial incentives or being available for kids' school trips—can make up for its drawbacks. There are also challenges inherent to non-standard work hours that leave many people disheartened and exhausted with this kind of work. By recognizing the challenges and pitfalls, you can make coping with them easier. Create strategies to get sleep, eat healthy, exercise and connect yourself to loved ones. The end result? You'll shift your life towards happiness and good health.