

## Adjusting to Shift Work

Maintaining healthy family relationships and keeping physically healthy is a challenge we all share. The challenge is more daunting if you are one of the estimated 22 million Americans who work the evening or night shifts.

Many industries from manufacturing to retail to health care operate on a 24 hour seven day a week basis. Working off shifts requires a person to disrupt the normal circadian rhythm (the 24 hour systems that regulates sleep/wake cycles) that is programmed into us from our childhood. Sufferers of shift work sleep disorder (SWSD) can experience symptoms like excessive sleepiness during the night and insomnia during the day. This interruption in the body's normal sleep schedule can lead to health concerns such as obesity, high blood pressure and gastrointestinal diseases.

When accepting a position on second or third shift expect an adjustment period. This article will outline steps one can take to adjust and maintain physical and emotional health.

**Tip #1: Set your new sleep schedule and don't stray from it.** A person can alter his or her normal circadian rhythm by setting and maintaining the new sleep/wake schedule. Maintaining continuity is vital; some try to keep their second or third shift sleep schedules during the week then go back to a traditional sleep schedule on the weekend. Schedule weekend activities to fit the adjusted sleep schedule or you will have to readjust every week.

**Tip #2: Create a dark and quiet place to sleep.** Buy light blocking shades or blinds or use a sleep mask as it is more difficult for the body to sleep during the daylight hours. Also, developing a consistent bedtime routine (reading, a warm bath, meditation) can signal the brain that it is time to prepare itself for rest.

**Tip #3: Pay attention to nutrition.** Since many shift workers don't eat according to the traditional meal times, they tend to rely on fast food or grab whatever is available in vending machines. Maintaining a well-balanced diet and limiting the amount of caffeine and other stimulants will help the body adjust to the schedule and provide for more restful sleep.

**Tip #4: Don't underestimate the power of a nap.** Studies have shown that a 20-minute power nap can increase alertness, improve



physical dexterity, boost stamina and lower stress. Consider taking a short nap before your or during a lunch break.

**Tip # 5: Develop a night shift community.** Most social, recreational and networking events are scheduled according to the traditional 8-5 world. A feeling of isolation or segregation can take an emotional toll on shift workers. Make an effort plan activities with people who work the same hours.

**Tip #6: Nurture relationships with loved-ones.** Shift workers often struggle to share valuable quality time with their family and close friends. These relationships are vital to emotional well-being. The following suggestions might be helpful.

*Post your schedule.* Make sure your family and friends know your work schedule and keep them up-to-date with any changes. If you are facing a major schedule change, discuss it with your loved-ones and talk about how it will affect you and the ones closest to you.

*Set up a family bulletin board.* Hang a bulletin board in a common area of your home so you and your family can post notes, photos and cards for each other. It is also a great place for children to share school work, art projects, report cards and so on.

*Become a techie.* Find ways to use technology to stay connected with your loved-ones. Use the DVR or VCR to record favorite television shows so you can enjoy them as a family. Have friends or family videotape your children's sporting events, dance recitals and school programs so you don't miss those important events. Cell phones are great if your family must contact you in an emergency but they can also send pictures that you can enjoy and share with coworkers.

*Plan a date night.* Plan regular date nights with your spouse or significant other. It is important that you have time alone together so that you can maintain and nurture your relationship.

We live in a 24/7 economy and shift work is a way of life for many. With a bit of effort, most shift workers can maintain a healthy work/life balance. Remember Continuum EAP when the challenge becomes overwhelming. Continuum has the people and resources to help you through those challenges.



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