



SLEEP TIPS AND HACKS

Maintaining an adequate sleep-hygiene routine while working as an emergency responder can be difficult. There are many opportunities to interrupt a “normal” sleep cycle while working in EMS, including long shift hours and/or working a night-shift rotation. By taking small steps, you can improve your sleep habits and your well-being. Ultimately, you are the only one who can improve these habits. Remember: Little improvements lead to big results.

PREPPING FOR SHIFT

Take a Nap: Napping prior to shift can decrease cumulative fatigue (sleep pressure). Research suggests taking a nap for either 1) less than 30 minutes or 2) more than 90 minutes to avoid waking during the deepest part of your normal sleep cycle.

Waking Up: One of the best habits to build when waking up from sleep is to have exposure to bright light. By turning the lights on or having exposure to the sun, your body naturally decreases melatonin and sends “wake signals” to your brain.

ON SHIFT

Get Clear About Your Shift Expectations: Are you really going to be able to “catch up” on sleep while at work? Probably not. Plan to come to work as rested as possible. If you feel like you are fatigued to the point of having a decrease in performance, use the tools below to “hack” your fatigue.

- ▶ **Caffeine:** Caffeine is a stimulant that is used to maintain alertness and is most effective when consumed 1-4 hours after waking. Drinking caffeine immediately after waking increases cortisol levels and can cause increased sleepiness a few hours later. Since caffeine has a half-life of six hours, it should not be consumed within 6 hours of desired sleep.
- ▶ **Non-sleep Deep Rest (NSDR):** A science-backed tool that provides the benefits of a 45-minute nap in just 10 minutes. Practicing NSDR mid-shift can restore physical and mental energy.
 - Watch this [NSDR session](#) (10-minute video).
- ▶ **Mitigate Cortisol:** Cortisol is a stress hormone. Too much cortisol has negative outcomes on your performance and increases feelings of fatigue. You can mitigate levels of cortisol with the following:
 - **Box Breathing:** Inhale for four seconds, hold for four seconds, exhale for four seconds, hold for four seconds – then repeat three times.
 - **Physiologic Sigh:** Inhale through nose, inhale again on top of first inhale (double inhale). Slowly exhale through the mouth. Repeat three-to-five times.
 - **Movement:** Movement is key to managing fatigue. Light stretching or a brisk walk (less than five minutes) can help mitigate fatigue. Additionally, chronic stress increases muscle tension. Stretching relieves tension and sends signal to brain that it’s “safe” to relax.

NIGHT SHIFT

Most of us plan to sleep within a few hours after getting off shift. For a night shift, this can be especially hard. Below are a few suggestions to maximize sleep for night shift employees driving home.

On the Drive Home: Avoid bright lights. Your brain will become stimulated when it has exposure to bright lights. Plan to drive home wearing sunglasses, have the visor down or wear a ball cap to limit intense morning sunlight.

Don't Stay Up: Once you get home, go to bed immediately to better align with circadian rhythm. It is best to get the bulk of your sleep prior to 2 p.m. Staying up to run errands or do other tasks can make it harder to sleep later in the day.

OFF-DUTY

Prepare for Sleep: Mind racing or ruminating? Journaling (or writing down bullet points or a to-do list) allows your mind to let immediate concerns go. The act of writing down your thoughts allows your brain to “offload” information to prepare for sleep.

Go Dark: Having a dark room and limiting exposure to digital devices prior to sleep is critically important. Direct exposure to blue and/or bright light decreases natural production of melatonin, a hormone that signals the start of sleep. Incorporate a “digital sunset” and limit exposure to screens for one hour prior to sleep. Reading a printed book or magazine is a good option to limit screen time and stimulate relaxation of your nervous system.

Keep a Routine: Sticking to a similar sleep schedule daily will help create hormone regulation and a normal sleep/wake cycle. This is true for night-shift employees as well.

Supplements: If you are interested in a supplement to help sleep, then a low-dose of melatonin or magnesium supplementation may be an option. Talk to your doctor before adding any sleep supplements to your routine.

SUMMARY

We know that sleep is critically important to being a high-functioning emergency responder. We take great pride in our safety and patient care. By focusing on building healthy sleep habits, we improve our ability to take care of ourselves and our patients.

And finally, in a tweet from Dr. Andrew Huberman, a Stanford Professor and Neuroscientist who studies sleep, he summarizes the benefits of sleep by stating:

“Best nootropic: sleep... Best stress relief: sleep... Best trauma release: sleep... Best immune booster: sleep... Best hormone augmentation: sleep... Best emotional stabilizer: sleep”