

Burning the Candle at Both Ends

For those working irregular schedules, the battle against fatigue is relentless. Many shiftworkers focus intensely on how job demands contribute to their fatigue. However, a significant, often overlooked factor lies in the hours off the clock. For shiftworkers, free time is not simply time for leisure. We live in a culture that glorifies being busy - packing every free moment with social commitments, family obligations, or household responsibilities. This constant "on-the-go" mentality cannot be supported by a shift worker's tight and often fragmented window of off-duty time which is critical to rest and recovery. Failing to manage this time properly can drastically increase fatigue, impair physical and cognitive ability, and ultimately jeopardize safety on the job and well-being at home.

Off-duty activities can significantly impact shiftworkers' ability to achieve an adequate quantity of quality rest. Some activities that can overwhelm our off-duty time include:

- **Social and family commitments** such as late-night entertaining, attending events, caregiving for parents or other relatives, and long commutes can reduce the quantity of sleep and often compromise sleep quality due to the irregularity of the schedule.
- **Personal pursuits** such as intense hobbies, side or family businesses, late-night gaming, caregiving, and extensive home renovations can result in physical and mental strain that mimics work stress, using up the body's recovery resources.
- **Technology use** especially excessive screen time close to bedtime can suppress melatonin, making it harder to fall asleep and reducing the quality of deep sleep.
- **Overscheduling** or trying to pack too many activities or appointments into a limited amount of personal time can lead to mental stress and perpetual exhaustion.

There are a few things we can do to avoid burning the candle at both ends:

1. Set boundaries

We can establish boundaries by creating a buffer zone between work and rest, which helps to avoid going straight from an intense activity to trying to sleep.

2. Schedule off-duty time

We can also use scheduling for our work time and our personal time, which can help bring structure and predictability to our off-duty time. Prioritizing restful activities such as an hour of quiet reading, meditation, or light exercise can also be beneficial by building deliberate downtime into our schedules.

3. Practice good sleep hygiene

Practicing good sleep hygiene is key. Establish a consistent sleep/wake schedule (even on days off), minimize stimulating light and sound in the bedroom, and avoid heavy meals, caffeine, and alcohol close to bedtime.

Saying "no" to non-essential commitments that infringe on our sleep can be challenging, but protecting our rest time must be non-negotiable. Adequate rest has a direct impact on improved cognitive function, mood regulation, physical health, and stronger immunity.

Making good off-duty choices is key to managing fatigue. Failing to set boundaries and schedule downtime compromises both our health and our performance. Protect your rest and recovery time, which is essential for a safe, productive, and balanced life. It starts with just one step. Identify one change you can make this week to better protect your rest and reduce off-duty fatigue.

