

What Does it Look Like?

If you've worked rotating 12-hour shifts in a pipeline control room for any length of time, you've probably witnessed it. You know, the Controller who reads the same alarm three times before it finally registers. Maybe it's the coworker who asks, "Wait...what were we talking about?" halfway through a conversation. Or the person staring at a trend screen just a little too long, hoping the data will suddenly become clearer. And if you're being honest, you've probably been that person too.

Here's the funny thing about fatigue, it can be sneaky. It's often much easier to recognize in the Controller sitting next to you than in the one looking back at you in the bathroom mirror.

That's because fatigue doesn't usually announce its arrival. It creeps in. Your reaction time slows just a bit. You reread procedures more often. You miss small but important details relayed from the field. Small decisions suddenly require much more mental effort than they should. Unfortunately, fatigue can convince you that you're functioning just fine. Meanwhile, everyone else is wondering why you just microwaved your coffee twice without drinking it.

Pipeline Controllers spend their shifts monitoring complex systems, making safety-critical decisions, coordinating field activities, and responding to changing conditions. Those responsibilities demand sustained attention, especially during long rotating shifts, overnight hours, and schedule transitions. Fatigue is not a sign of weakness; it's a predictable human response to demanding work and disrupted sleep schedules.

So, what should you do if you recognize fatigue in yourself? First, acknowledge it. Simply admitting, "I'm feeling more fatigued than usual tonight," is a sign of professionalism, not failure. Next, use the fatigue countermeasures available to you. Get up and move around when operationally appropriate. Stretch, walk for a few minutes, drink some water, or eat a healthy snack. If your organization provides fatigue mitigation resources or scheduled breaks, use them before your brain starts negotiating with the blinking console lights. Just as important, slow... yourself... down. Fatigue often causes us to rush because our brains want to "get through it." Deliberately verifying information, using checklists, practicing clear

three-way communication, and asking a teammate to confirm critical information can help reduce the likelihood of mistakes.

But what if you notice fatigue in someone else? Start with empathy, not criticism. A simple, "Hey, you doing okay?" or "Need me to double-check that with you?" can go a long way. Most of us appreciate a teammate who quietly has our back, especially on those long night shifts when everyone is fighting against the same circadian rhythm challenges.

If a coworker appears significantly fatigued or their reduced alertness could compromise safe operations of the pipeline, follow your organization's reporting and fatigue management procedures. Speaking up isn't about placing blame or getting someone in trouble; it's about protecting your coworker, your team, and the pipeline.

The safest and most effective control rooms aren't built on superheroes who never get tired. They are built on professionals who recognize that fatigue affects everyone eventually. Watch out for one another, and don't be afraid to say, "I think I need a little help today."

After all, the easiest fatigue to manage is the fatigue that's recognized before it has a chance to make decisions for you.

