

Fighting fatigue

Fatigue in the workplace is a cognitive menace and a performance killer.

Jenny Brockis explains what happens when we're tired at work and how to ensure we get more sleep each night.

Are you forgetting things? Lacking judgment? Feeling uninspired? Could you be tired? If so, you're not alone. It's estimated that around 1.6 million Australians have some sort of problem with sleep and it's costing business up to \$20 billion a year in lost productivity through absenteeism and presenteeism.

Insufficient sleep leads to a rapidly accumulating sleep debt with compounding interest. While going with less sleep is sometimes viewed as a status symbol of fortitude, it is a pyrrhic victory. The more tired we are, the more our performance suffers. It's harder to concentrate. We make more mistakes. We fail to remember things and, worse still, start to create false memories.

Most of us need between seven and eight hours of good quality uninterrupted sleep to wake fully restored and refreshed. It is estimated that up to 30 per cent of the population gets by on six hours' sleep each night. While manageable in the short term, this is not sustainable to maintain normal brain function and health.

When fatigued, the first insight that goes is just how tired we really are! Once we have been awake for around 17 to 18 hours, our ability to think is equivalent to having a blood alcohol level of 0.05 per cent. After 20 hours without sleep, it's 0.1 per cent. Being drunk is not tolerated in the workplace, so why is being tired?

Restoring memory, attention and executive function can be achieved by identifying and addressing those factors contributing to our levels of tiredness.

1. *Understand the value of sleep.*

Some organisations now include sleep education to promote healthy sleep habits for all employees. Understanding how to get sufficient good-quality sleep is just as important as time management for greater productivity.

2. *Make sleep a priority.* Research has revealed how our capacity for insight and creativity slumps when we are tired.



Some workplaces provide sleep pods for employees to take a brief power nap to restore energy levels and good executive function. You don't need a posh pod, just a quiet room where you won't be interrupted and a comfortable reclining chair. Around six per cent of American workplaces are now deemed nap friendly. While sleeping on the job might feel strange, the payoff for a 20-minute power nap is a two to three hour boost to your level of alertness, attention and focus.

3. *Provide flexibility and boundaries in working hours.*

If you've been pulling a couple of all-nighters or putting in extended hours to get that important project finished, what matters is taking sufficient time off afterwards to allow full recovery. Shifting a workplace culture towards one that recognises the importance of sleep starts with setting boundaries of when you are expected not to be at work.

4. *Monitor stress levels.* High levels of stress during the day make it harder to switch off and relax at night. If your sleep pattern is becoming increasingly disturbed and there's a lot on at work, this is the signal you are in urgent need of some down time. Try going to bed 20 minutes earlier and switch off all technology (including the phone).

5. *Take regular brain breaks.* Working hard all day long without pausing to draw breath is mentally exhausting and can lead to disturbed sleep at night. Block your day into 60-to-90-minute chunks interspersed with 15-minute intervals for unfocused or less cognitively demanding tasks to give


your brain the breathing space it needs to restore and reboot.

6. *Get out of the office and move.*

Regular daily exercise helps to burn off stress and promotes better quality sleep. Thirty minutes of 'huffnpuff' either before work or during the day is ideal. Avoid exercising too late in the evening as this paradoxically makes it harder to get to sleep.

7. *Keep the bedroom for sleep and sex only.*

Switch off all technology at least 60 minutes before bedtime and ditch the digital alarm clock. Yes, that pesky blue light tricks the brain into thinking it's still daytime, but switching to a yellow background means you are still engaged and stimulating your brain for longer than is ideal. Using your smartphone late at night has been shown to reduce daytime performance the following day.

Sleep matters for our health and wellbeing and performance. Bringing our best self to work each day starts by ensuring we get a good night's sleep every night. 



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