How Sleep and Work Performance Are Connected and 5 Tips to Boost Both

Whether your place of work is in your home or another building, poor sleep makes it tough to finish your work and get through each day.

January 12, 2022 By Michael Breus, PhD

A good night's sleep and work performance are more closely related than just feeling alert and ready for the next day— though that is a major part of it.

A lot of people may sacrifice sleep for work. This can create a vicious cycle of sacrificing sleep for work, and working more to replace lost productivity. On the other hand, losing sleep at night can make it much harder to perform well at work, and not performing well can make you feel stressed out and even more exhausted.

You don't have to be caught in this cycle. A good night's sleep is key to better work performance, but there are actions you can take throughout the day that can help set you up for better sleep at night. I'll get into those later, but let's first take a look at the ways that poor sleep affects your work performance.

How Does Poor Sleep Affect Work Performance?

If you've ever had to work after a night of poor sleep, then you know how miserable it is to get through the next day. A lack of quality sleep at night can lead to a lot of issues the next day at work, including:

- Reduced focus and workplace productivity
- Higher risk of getting sick
- Impaired decision-making skills, and more impulsive or risk-taking behavior
- You're more emotional or irritable
- Higher risk of undesirable behavior, such as absenteeism, rudeness, vandalism, or cheating on work projects

Poor sleep and poor work performance can impact each other in some very frustrating ways. Not sleeping well can make work hours more difficult and stressful, while poor work performance can

make you feel anxious and stressed out when you're trying to sleep. The cycle repeats as another night of poor sleep contributes to another frustrating shift at work. And it's not just those with a 9 to 5 schedule that are feeling that stress.

People who work outside of normal work hours, such as the graveyard shift, are especially vulnerable to poor sleep and sleep disorders. It's difficult to work against your natural circadian rhythm, and it can be hard on your body. Disorders like insomnia or shift work sleep disorder are common because people with these conditions are hard at work when their body wants them to be sleeping.

Even if you have a flexible schedule and high job satisfaction, you can still be setting yourself up for potential sleep problems, and you may not even realize it.

Productivity Struggles When You're Self-Employed or Work from Home

It can be a blessing to set your own work hours or to do your normal job duties at home, as many of us have discovered because of the pandemic! However, this can be a curse as well. Having the creature comforts of home can definitely make the transition more comfortable, but it can also make focusing during the day or creating a work-life balance a challenge.

You can help yourself focus by creating a designated workspace for yourself, and not working from the couch or bed. Working from bed can remove the association that the bed is a place for relaxation, which can make it tougher to fall asleep at night. Your bed should be for sleep or sex only, not for work.

How Sleep Loss Affects Your Body

The negative physical, emotional, and psychological effects of sleep loss on the human body are well-documented. Unfortunately, sleep loss is a very common problem with many adults, and once you have a sleep debt, it can take an extremely long time to undo and get back to your baseline.

Many workers nowadays are experiencing irregular or disrupted sleep patterns, and it's not just the people who work nights. A growing number of day workers— or those who work what are considered normal hours— experience poor sleep due to work-related stress.

When you're sleep-deprived, your brain adapts to this sleepiness by creating a stable, but reduced level of your normal performance. These changes can persist even while you recover from sleep loss and can prevent you from quickly getting back to your normal performance.

In short, if you're sleep-deprived, your body and your brain keep you going through the day's motions, but you're not firing on all cylinders. You need a good night's sleep to function at your best—running on empty is not only bad for you, but it can also be bad news for your employer.

How Sleep Deprivation Affects the Employer

A sleep-deprived employee can end up costing their employer a lot of money! In a study published by The American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, employees who got insufficient sleep were significantly less productive, performed worse, and presented more safety risks than well-rested employees. The study also noted that fatigue-related productivity losses cost employers $1967 per employee each year.

However, it's important for employers to ensure that their workers are happy and well-rested, especially in our post-COVID world. How can they do this? By prioritizing sleep, mental health, and overall wellness.

Employers can be proactive in tending to their employees' sleep needs by allowing flexible work schedules where applicable, looking at sources of employee stress and finding ways to fix them, as well as making sleep treatment more accessible to those who need it. This is especially helpful for workers who may have a sleep disorder, such as obstructive sleep apnea, which requires a special device like CPAP to treat.

Innovative companies are using chronotypes to better understand employee effectiveness by incorporating schedules built around employees' chronotypes. You can discover your chronotype by taking this short quiz.

How Much Sleep Do You Need to Be Productive?

If you've been reading these articles for a while, then you know that healthy sleep isn't just how many hours you sleep. Sleep duration is important, but you also need to make sure those hours go towards restful sleep and not poor quality or fragmented sleep.

Most people need between 7 and 9 hours of restful, healthy sleep per night. However, the right amount of sleep for one person may be inadequate for another—how much sleep you need per night, as well as your peak productivity windows during the day, are based on your unique circadian rhythm. Knowing your chronotype can also help you create your ideal sleep schedule more easily.

Creating an ideal bedtime according to your wake time can help you start each day feeling rested and energized. If you're not sure when the best bedtime for you is, I recommend using my sleep calculator tool.

How to Boost Sleep and Job Performance

I talk a lot about solutions that help improve your sleep in other posts— After you finish this article, I recommend reading the one I wrote about 5 subtle signs you need more sleep.

A good night's sleep is one of the best ways to boost your job performance— but there are a few other steps you can take to boost both, starting at your place of employment.

1. Create a Work-Life Balance By Having a Hard Stop Time

This can be easier said than done—especially if you're self-employed or work from home. However, this is one of the most important steps you can take to getting better sleep each night.

It's not productive to stress over work when you're at home or off the clock. I understand how tempting it can be to answer one last email, or take one last call, until it becomes several emails and several calls. Creating a clear work-life balance will help you keep your thoughts about work on the back burner when you're not working, so you can be present in your life outside of your place of employment.

Have a hard stop time for work each day. One of the best things to do is to have a transitory activity, like going to the gym, taking a walk, or doing some other non-work-related task. This allows you to move out of your work environment both physically and mentally, so you won't be tempted to do just one more thing.

In short: give work its fair share and then give yourself the time you deserve to recuperate, unwind, and prepare to be effective the next day.

2. Talk to Management

A well-rested and happy employee is in the employer's best interest, so be sure to talk to your manager, your boss, or Human Resources—whoever is in charge—and see if they can work with you to help you get better rest.

Sometimes this can be done by giving you a different shift. Most times, this is done by helping you find your options with company benefits or employee assistance programs (EAP). This can vary depending on your employer though, so it's always a good idea to get in touch to see what your options are.

3. Improve Your Sleep Hygiene

Sleep hygiene is another term for your pre-bedtime habits. This can include taking care of chores before bed, relaxing, or personal hygiene like brushing your teeth or showering. Poor sleep habits are one of the worst ways you can ruin your sleep. But there are a few easy changes you can try today to improve your sleep hygiene. This can include:

- Stick to a regular sleep schedule— wake up and go to bed at the same times each day and night, even on the weekends.
- Stop using your electronic devices at least an hour before bed.
- Give yourself 60 to 90 minutes each evening to finish any last (not work related!) business like washing dishes, taking care of pets, et cetera.
- Try some relaxation techniques to help you unwind and take your mind off work, or anything else that may be weighing on your mind.

By giving yourself this window of time to get any remaining to-do's finished, you also get your body relaxed and ready for sleep. This will make falling asleep and staying asleep much easier.

4. Take a Short Nap

A nap won't solve your sleep problems, but it can help you feel more rested if you're starting to drag during the afternoon. Be careful not to nap too late in the day—this can delay your regular sleep schedule and make falling asleep at your normal time more difficult.

Ideally, you want to take a nap between 1:00 and 3:00 pm, since this is when your circadian rhythm creates those natural cues for you to sleep. I recommend either taking a 20 to 30-minute nap, since napping for too long can have you feeling disoriented or groggy after waking up. You definitely don't want that!

5. Talk to Your Doctor or a Sleep Expert

Even if you're doing everything right in your evening routine and leaving your work at work, it's still possible to experience poor sleep and wake up feeling awful. If this is the case then you need to contact your doctor or a sleep expert as soon as possible, especially if you're experiencing any of these symptoms:

- Loud snoring, or gasping and choking during sleep—these are symptoms for obstructive sleep apnea (OSA), a dangerous condition that requires specialized treatment
- Feeling exhausted even after a full night's sleep
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep

If you're not sure where to find a sleep expert or a sleep center in your area, I recommend using this tool by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine.

The Importance of a Good Night's Sleep

Getting a full night of healthy sleep is one of the best things you can do not only for your work performance but for your overall health as well. The two go hand-in-hand—if you take care of one, then you're also taking care of the other.

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