

Shift Work, Sleep, and Mental Health

Many shift workers work outside of the typical 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. traditional daytime working hours. Nontraditional shift-work can include working rotational shifts, fixed night shifts, or extended days.¹ According to data from the 2017–2018 American Time Use Survey, 6% of all U.S. workers have evening shift schedules, 4% work nights, and 2% work rotating schedules.² Men, racial and ethnic minorities, and those with family income below the poverty level are more likely to do shift work.³

Impact on Sleep

Shift workers often have to be awake and alert when their bodies' natural rhythms are signaling that it is time to sleep. This leads many shift workers to get less and lower-quality sleep. Some common sleep problems faced by shift workers include:

- chronic insomnia
- sleep disturbances
- poor-quality sleep
- shorter sleep duration (less than 7 hours a day).⁴

Mental Health Consequences

Research suggests that the sleep problems that come with shift work are associated with higher risks for mental health problems and burnout. A number of studies have explored the effects of shift work on mental health and have found that shift work has a variety of impacts on mental health and behaviors, including:

- increased rates of depression and anxiety
- increased risk of suicidal ideation
- higher usage of drugs and alcohol to help stay awake or to help go to sleep
- decline in cognitive function
- dissatisfaction with overall well-being.⁵

See reverse for recommendations on how to support the mental health of shift workers.



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Recommendations for workplaces to support mental health of shift workers^{6,7}

- Limit night work as much as possible.
- Limit the number of consecutive night shifts.
- Set adequate rest days between shifts, particularly after night shifts.
- Tailor mental health supports to the needs of shift workers (for example, being able to access mental health services outside regular business hours).
- Rotate shifts clockwise, rather than counterclockwise.
- Check in with team members frequently.
- Create a work culture that supports employees' mental health.
- Educate employees about sleep and mental health, and encourage them to consult with their doctor if needed.



Sources:

- ¹Plain Language about Shiftwork (97-145). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 6 June 2014, <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/97-145/default.html>.
- ²Job Flexibilities and Work Schedules Summary. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 24 Sept. 2019, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/flex2.nr0.htm>.
- ³A Demographic Profile of U.S. Workers around the Clock. PRB, <https://www.prb.org/resources/a-demographic-profile-of-u-s-workers-around-the-clock/>.
- ⁴Cheng WJ, Cheng Y. Night shift and rotating shift in association with sleep problems, burnout and minor mental disorder in male and female employees. *Occup Environ Med*. 2017 Jul;74(7):483-488. doi: 10.1136/oemed-2016-103898. Epub 2016 Nov 3. PMID: 27810939.
- ⁵Brown JP, Martin D, Nagaria Z, Verceles AC, Jobe SL, Wickwire EM. Mental Health Consequences of Shift Work: An Updated Review. *Curr Psychiatry Rep*. 2020 Jan 18;22(2):7. doi: 10.1007/s11920-020-1131-z. PMID: 31955278.
- ⁶Partners, Mind Share. "Five Ways to Support the Mental Health of Shift Workers." Mindsharepartners, Mindsharepartners, 13 Oct. 2022, <https://www.mindsharepartners.org/post/five-ways-to-support-the-mental-health-of-shift-workers>.
- ⁷Shiftwork: Challenges and Managing Risks - National Safety Council. <https://www.nsc.org/getmedia/606abdbb-1dfb-4192-9707-23e8399b956d/fact-sheet-shift-work.pdf.aspx>.