

FEAR NOT THE GRAVEYARD SHIFT

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First timers will assert that night shifts aren't called graveyard shifts for nothing. The idea of working through the night, struggling to stay awake is nightmarish to many. Scary tales are told of what happened when the customer service executive attended to a call in a state of half slumber. The statement, 'I've got a night shift today' is often met with responses like 'poor you.'

"The most immediate problems are caused due to the disturbance of our biological clock," says Manish Pradhan, who works for an internet service provider company. "The eating and sleeping habits become irregular. The digestive system goes for a toss. Acidity and gastric problems are common."

Although it has been a year since Pradhan worked a night shift since his transfer to another department last year, he still describes his first night shift as 'spooky'.

What has to be realised is that there are sometimes no alternatives to night shifts. Hospitals, for example, have to have staff working at night. BPOs cannot function without night shifts, as most of their clients are based abroad and operating on their time zone is a given necessity. In newspaper offices, the night shift is the busiest as that is when the newspaper goes to print. 24 hour news channels function round the clock, and someone has to work nights.

Thus, night shifts are now an accepted part of many jobs. Subsequently, the focus has shifted from avoiding night shifts to coping with them. Employees are now realising that the night shift is not as bad as it looks from afar. It can be dealt with if you know how to.

Before The Shift

- Make sure you have a good meal and get plenty of sleep before going to work
- Engage in a light work-out before the shift. This will give you energy and keep you alert.
- Going out before a night shift is not a good idea. It will only make you tired, and alcohol will make it worse.

During The Shift

- Working in silence will make you feel sleepy. If the work environment is not noisy, listen to songs on the radio or a portable player if your workplace permits.
- Take short breaks whenever possible. During breaks, getting a little exercise helps ward off drowsiness. While this does not mean doing push-ups in the lobby or jogging to the boss's cabin and back; a short walk, a climb up the stairs or some stretching of the muscles usually does the trick.
- If you are working at a computer for long hours, looking away from the screen every thirty minutes helps ease the heaviness in the eyes. Also, staring at a far-off object for a couple of minutes every now and then helps relieve the strain.
- Interacting with colleagues whenever you can will keep you alert.
- At meal times, avoid spicy and oily food. A light and healthy meal is ideal for night shift workers.

After The Shift

- When you have to sleep, you have to sleep, period. Understand that you must sleep this morning if you are going to work tonight. As your biological cycle is reversed, sleeping conditions have to be night like, just as working conditions need to be day-like. Your bedroom has to be dark and quiet. Lock the door and post a Do Not Disturb sign if you have to.
- Unwind a little before heading for the bed. Avoid stimulants like caffeine and nicotine.
- Take care not to grow dependent on sleeping pills or tranquilisers. See a doctor if you have trouble getting sleep.
- Some food items may suit you, while some may not. Consulting a dietician would be a good idea if you suffer from repeated indigestion.

The Employer's Perspective

With the growing necessity of night shifts, companies have now started being proactive towards the needs of night shift workers. There is a general agreement that if they're going to work nights, make sure they can work nights.

"A healthy workforce means a productive organisation," states Manuel D'souza, executive VP human resources, Intelenet Global Services. "We at Intelenet ensure that our employees maintain a healthy work-life balance. In a business such as ours, which is predominantly servicing the US & UK market, it is imperative to have night shifts. To cope with this, we give our employees an 'Open Office environment' i.e. informal, transparent, stress-free & friendly."

Companies have now started making provisions to help employees cope with night shifts. Home pick-ups and drops are provided; there are doctors on call, and employees are encouraged to provide feedback through anonymous drop box facilities. Cafeterias are open 24 hours a day. Also, night shifts are spread evenly over the week or month.

Besides, some organisations have facilities like in house gymnasiums, yoga classes and fitness counseling.

Night shifts are fast becoming just another shift on the job. And if handled right, that's exactly what they are.

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