



Well@Work Podcast Episode 4: Sleep

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is being brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA to the Department of Behavioral Health. On this episode of the podcast, Dr. Scott LaJoie discusses how the quality of our sleep affects our ability to function at our best, and give some tips on how to improve sleep.

Hello, I'm Dr. Scott LaJoie, a behavioral scientist and professor in the School of Public Health at the University of Louisville. Thank you for listening to this Well@Work podcast. It is our hope you will find information that helps you adapt to the demands and stressors brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Today's discussion is about sleep. The global pandemic has been a major disrupter of our lives, impacting our ability to carry out normal daily activities. For some, child care demands have increased. Options for leisure activities are limited. The work environment has fundamentally changed. And for many health care and behavioral health professionals the pandemic has increased the number of patients with contagious diseases to be treated. This adds an additional layer of risk to personal health.

These new demands have disrupted sleep patterns, with the majority of nurses and doctors who treat COVID-19 patients reporting longer and more frequent work schedules. With other changes in life, sleep patterns are much different than during normal times. Healthcare and behavioral health professionals are being asked to take on greater risks and burdens to ensure that their patients get the best care possible. Sacrifices to safety and comfort are being made. You might have weighed the risks and benefits of getting less sleep and decided you can sleep when the pandemic is over. Moreover, you might be experiencing higher levels of stress and anxiety and find it harder to sleep, harder to fall asleep, to stay asleep, and to sleep soundly. As professionals, you accept this as part of your job. And may ask, what's the harm of getting a few hours less sleep at night short-term? The harm is minimal and can be overcome with a good night's sleep. But the long-term with long-term disruptions to sleep, such as we are experiencing with the pandemic, the harms aren't quite so benign.

Sleep is restorative. Research has shown sleep plays a critical role in allowing our body and mind to function properly. Sleep deprivation and disruptions to the circadian rhythm lead to reduced functioning of the immune system, changes in metabolism, and increased impairment of memory, judgment, learning, and attention, and this is just a small part of the extensive list of hardships the body endures when sleep is disrupted. So, a weakened immune system for people who are treating patients with deadly contagious diseases obviously isn't good. Impaired memory and difficulty regulating attention can lead to medical errors that harm the patient and/or oneself. The inability to consolidate new information to long-term memory deprives us of the critical ability to learn new ways of doing things, like treating patients on ventilators, when we don't normally do so. Plus, lack of sleep makes us irritable, more easily frustrated, and less fun to be around. In the broader picture, perhaps foregoing sleep to be available for patients is more harmful than beneficial. We can't neglect our work obligations, so what can be done?

The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress at the Uniformed Services University offers nine suggestions for sleeping better. Upon waking, get at least 15 minutes of bright light, preferably sunlight.

Some indoor lights like those that mimic daylight work well too. The light signals your circadian clock that it's time to start your day. Exercise. Exercise when you wake, not before you sleep. Exercise increases the body's metabolism and produces energy, the opposite of what we need to fall asleep. Take naps. In many cultures, napping is built into the work day because it is recognized that 20 minutes of sleep can revitalize the body and mind. Caffeine. Be careful when consuming caffeine. A strong cup of coffee can provide a quick but short short-lived burst of energy. However, drinking coffee within six hours of when you want to be asleep can make falling asleep difficult. You're better off switching to water. Limit alcohol before bed. For many people a glass of wine or bourbon helps calm nerves and lets us shake off the day. However, overindulging in alcohol will hurt the quality of sleep. Sleep/wake schedule. Keep a regular sleep wake schedule, go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, even on weekends or days off, doing so helps protect your circadian rhythm. Create a bedtime routine. Before sleep, try to do the same calming activities every time, like washing your face with warm water, brushing your teeth and meditating. While calming, these bedtime activities also signal your body that it's time to sleep. Limit alerting activities. Close to bedtime, turn off the light emitting screens. Avoid engaging in conversations that fire you up. Skip the anxiety-inducing news broadcast. The goal is to be calm, not alert. And lastly, optimize your sleep environment. Rooms that are dark, cool, quiet, and comfortable are conducive to sleep. A sleep mask and a white noise generator might help. Get some good, comfortable ear plugs if your bed partner snores.

The takeaway message is that if you sacrifice your sleep for your job, you're not doing anyone any favors. Sleep is necessary to keep us alert, healthy, attentive, and pleasant to be around. For more information on sleep, check out the link in the video description below or visit our website. Thank you for your attention, and we hope that you found this information helpful. Please look for additional podcasts by us on healthy coping during a pandemic and remember to stay well at work. Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast. Follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work.