

STOP THE

How Employers Can Curb Workplace Fatigue and Drive Productivity

by | Lawrence Epstein, M.D.



GRIND:

Sleep-deprived workers are not only less productive but also less healthy. How can employers help workers get the sleep they need?

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Yawning during a shift. A third cup of coffee before noon. Falling asleep at their desks. All are signs of fatigue in the workplace. Unfortunately, many workers wear these signs of sleep deprivation as badges of honor. However, today’s “always on,” hyperconnected culture can have damaging effects on workplace performance.

Sleep deprivation is widespread across the United States (Figure 1). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 35% of U.S. adults are not sleeping seven or more hours per night, as recommended by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine (AASM),¹ making sleep deprivation a public health problem.²

Think about the typical sleep schedule. How many people sleep at least seven hours a night on a regular basis? Chronic insufficient sleep leads to an increased risk of several serious health problems, including cardiovascular disease, hypertension and type 2 diabetes (Table).³ Research also suggests that poor or insufficient sleep may contribute to the development of Alzheimer’s disease.⁴ The increased health problems of fa-

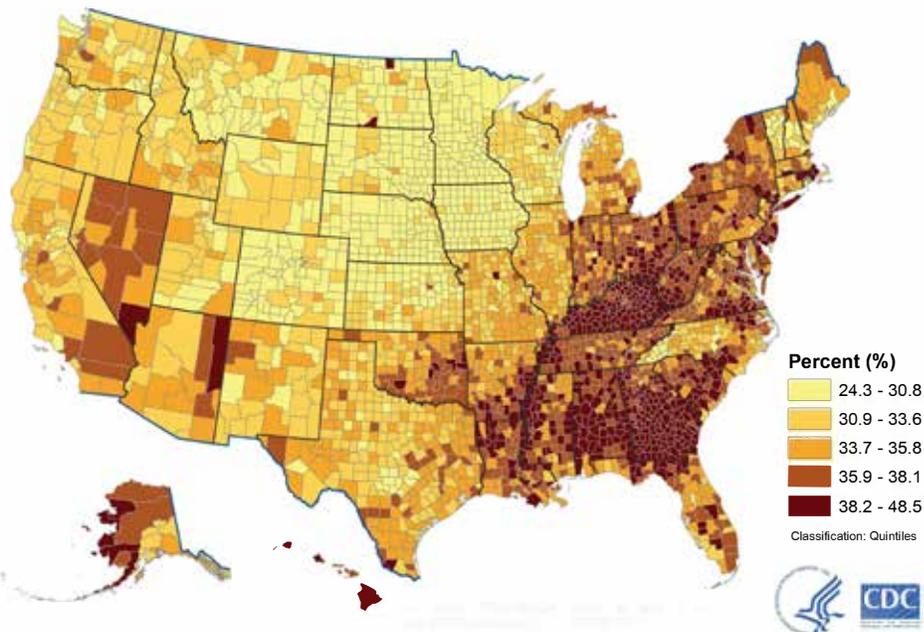
tigued workers drive up employer health care costs, a trend that can be reversed by screening for and treating sleep disorders.⁵

Poor sleep not only affects workers’ health, but it also carries a hidden threat that organizations should pay attention to if they want to maintain the well-being of their staff while gaining a competitive advantage. In addition, being mindful of employee fatigue can help prevent possible catastrophic events. Take, for example, the Chernobyl nuclear explosion,⁶ Exxon Valdez oil spill⁷ or the most recent Long Island Rail Road crash.⁸ Each of these incidents could have been prevented, and lives saved, had steps been taken to address healthy sleep and treat sleep disorders.

Mounting evidence suggests that U.S. workers are tired. A National Safety Council survey found that nearly 90% of U.S. employers have been negatively impacted by tired employees, with half of employers having a worker fall asleep on the job.⁹ What’s more, 43% of employees admitted that they may be too tired to function safely at work.

FIGURE 1

Prevalence of Short Sleep Duration for Adults Age 18 Years and Older by County in the United States



Note: The percentage of sleep deprivation in the country varies widely by state and by county. In Colorado, South Dakota and Minnesota, for example, less than 30% of adults are sleep-deprived. However, Hawaii and Georgia have upwards of 40% sleep deprivation. Overall, the highest percentages were in the southeastern U.S. and in states along the Appalachian Mountains.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System 2014, Census 2010, ACS 2010-2014.

TABLE

Age-Adjusted Percentage Reporting Chronic Health Conditions by Sleep Duration in the United States

Chronic condition	Short sleep (less than seven hours)		Sufficient sleep (more than seven hours)	
	Percent reporting	95% Confidence Interval	Percent reporting	95% Confidence Interval
Heart attack	4.8%	4.5-5.0%	3.4%	3.3-3.5%
Coronary heart disease	4.7%	4.5-4.9%	3.4%	3.3-3.5%
Stroke	3.6%	3.4-3.8%	2.4%	2.3-2.5%
Asthma	16.5%	16.1-16.9%	11.8%	11.5-12.0%
COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease)	8.6%	8.3-8.9%	4.7%	4.6-4.8%
Cancer	10.2%	10.0-10.5%	9.8%	9.7-10.0%
Arthritis	28.8%	28.4-29.2%	20.5%	20.2-20.7%
Depression	22.9%	22.5-23.3%	14.6%	14.3-14.8%
Chronic kidney disease	3.3%	3.1-3.5%	2.2%	2.1-2.3%
Diabetes	11.1%	10.8-11.4%	8.6%	8.4-8.8%

Note: Adults who do not get the recommended seven hours of nightly sleep were more likely to report up to ten chronic health conditions versus those who sleep seven or more hours per night.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014). *Short Sleep Duration Among U.S. Adults*.

Understanding the Impact of Sleep

To stop the grind and help employees wake up, it's important to understand the full impact of sleep and the effect it has on absenteeism, accidents, incidents and mistakes, which can cost the U.S. economy up to \$411 billion each year (Figure 2).¹⁰

Research shows that improving sleep quality and quantity can increase both physical performance and stamina.¹¹ It's a fact that professional sports players, like NFL quarterback Tom Brady, know well. Brady has said, "Sleep is important because I break my body down so much with my sport. It's the only place I get the recovery I need."¹² Proper sleep is relevant whether the workday is on a field, in an office, in a vehicle or on a warehouse floor. The physical effects

of fatigue can be significant and keep employees at home.

Lack of sleep also has a profound impact on feelings and mood. According to a review published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, there are direct correlations between lack of sleep and the occurrence of anxiety and depression,¹³ which have negative effects in the workplace. Conversely, regular, healthy sleep can help drive a more positive outlook, enhancing the ability to recognize the emotions of others, in turn improving relationships at work and home.¹⁴ The cognitive and mental effects of sleep deprivation can be felt across the employee spectrum, regardless of seniority. Notably, Microsoft founder Bill Gates has spoken about the effect sleep has on his mental state, admitting, "I like to get seven

hours of sleep a night because that's what I need to stay sharp and creative and upbeat."¹⁵

When workers are tired, they risk more than poor interpersonal communication. Drowsy driving and workplace injury are increasingly common dangers, with the National Safety Council reporting that 13% of workplace injuries can be attributed to fatigue.¹⁶

Fighting Fatigue in the Workplace

Despite the overwhelming impact of sleep deprivation, research suggests that 74% of employers underestimate the prevalence of fatigue in the workplace, and only 27% communicate with their employees about fatigue.¹⁷ Employers across all industries might consider implementing a workplace well-

FIGURE 2

Impact of Sleep Deprivation on U.S. and Global Economies



Note: Globally, sleep deprivation has a large impact on the economy, costing more than \$680 billion per year. The United States is impacted the most by this, at \$411 billion each year.

Source: RAND Corporation. *Why sleep matters—the economic costs of insufficient sleep*, November 30, 2016.

ness program to help workers get more sleep. This program could include dedicated sleep components to ensure that employees regularly achieve the recommended sleep quantity and sufficient quality without compromising workflow.

When evaluating a wellness program, four steps are essential to make real change. The first is education. Before a lifestyle change can occur, it is important for employers to speak with employees about the value of healthy sleep—and the costs of sleep deprivation. This can come in multiple formats such as an on-site seminar by a sleep expert or an online webinar.

The second step involves offering tips and feedback based on participants' tracked sleep data to improve overall health and sleep habits. Sleep data can be recorded in numerous ways, such as a wearable health tracker or simply self-recordings in an online diary.

Once employees understand the value of sleeping seven or more hours on a regular basis, the third step is to take note of any potential sleep disorders that could prevent healthy

sleep. While up to 70 million people in the U.S. are afflicted by a chronic sleep disorder, many warning signs go unnoticed.¹⁸ A simple online assessment tool can help employees understand their risk factors and recognize the warning signs of a sleep disorder.

Obstructive sleep apnea and chronic insomnia can cause problems at work, including daytime sleepiness. Untreated, sleep apnea puts individuals at risk for several heart problems, including heart failure and stroke.^{19, 20} However, with treatment, individuals can see improvement in their health and even reverse these risks. Offering employees a way to connect with a board-certified sleep physician, such as through an interactive physician locator, can help create dramatic improvements in their health and work quality.

For added benefit, as the final step, employers can increase the chance of employee participation by offering incentive programs as part of a sleep wellness program. Promotional items, gift cards or even extra paid time off can serve as positive reinforcement and motivation for employees. This can

go a long way to encourage workers to participate in the program, even if they otherwise believe their sleep habits are fine or do not want to share sleep health details with employers. Data privacy is very important, and each employer should determine the level of data needed to monitor employee participation. When working with an outside wellness partner, for example, all of the sleep data should be funneled directly through the vendor without employer involvement.

Workplaces around the country are creating a movement toward healthy sleep. Some companies are offering employees online programs with tips for better sleep, complimentary yoga classes, meditation seminars and on-site fitness programs to help cope with stress.²¹ To promote healthier behaviors, employers and even insurance companies are encouraging employees to record data, including sleep, with activity trackers.²²

Employee sleep monitoring tools aren't restricted to wearable devices. Employers can now partner with online wellness platforms that offer individualized programming and resources to help employees master their sleep patterns and, if needed, direct them to a board-certified sleep physician for help.²³

Those seeking nondigital options to fight fatigue in the workplace could consider sleep pods. Companies around the U.S., including Ben & Jerry's, Google, Mercedes-Benz, PwC, Uber and Zappos, are installing sleeping hubs to help employees get a midday jumpstart.²⁴ Napping can help supplement nightly sleep and can be a nice refresher.²⁵ The goal should be to sleep seven or more hours at night on

takeaways

- More than one-third (35%) of U.S. adults don't get the recommended seven or more hours of sleep per night.
- A National Safety Council survey found that nearly 90% of U.S. employers have been negatively impacted by tired employees, with half of employers having a worker fall asleep on the job.
- Shift workers, including medical professionals, law enforcement officers, emergency responders and transportation operators, may be more prone to having sleep disorders.
- Employers can address lack of sleep among workers through a workplace wellness program that starts with education and may include assessment of sleep habits and incentives for getting a healthy amount of sleep.

a regular basis to avoid feeling the need for a nap; however, if needed, a 20- to 30-minute nap can help workers regain concentration and boost productivity. These nap pods are designed for quick naps, and it is important to make this clear to employees. To make this a success, the sleep pod needs to be respected and the rules understood. This includes establishing a sign-up protocol, as well as parameters on how to recoup billable time.

Shift Workers: The Biggest Hurdle

When considering who struggles the most with healthy sleep, it is important to remember shift workers, such as medical professionals, law enforcement officers, emergency responders and transportation operators. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that almost 15 million people in the U.S. work full-time on evening, night or rotating shifts.²⁶ Overnight, early-morning hours and rotating shifts can create upheaval for the body's circadian rhythm and its natural sleep/wake cycle. According to AASM, shift workers may sleep up to four hours less per night than those working traditional

hours, increasing the risk for injuries, accidents and drowsy driving.²⁷ CDC reports that serious long-term health problems, such as an increased risk for type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and obesity, are a concern for people who are chronically sleep-deprived.²⁸

Surprisingly, professional athletes also can be categorized as shift workers. While these employees may bring in millions of dollars, consecutive performances in different time zones can wreak havoc on their circadian rhythms. The adrenaline generated during and after a night game, for example, directly impacts an NBA player's ability to fall asleep. As such, many organizations, including the Chicago Bulls, are hiring sleep coaches to help ensure players can optimize their sleep to enhance recovery and improve performance.²⁹

In addition to third-party sleep coaches, dedicated wellness departments, such as the one established by the Indianapolis Police Department, have helped foster stronger law enforcement organizations.³⁰ With 40% of officers reporting at least one sleep disorder, and one-third of those individuals suffering from sleep apnea, the

bio



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city knew that a lack of sleep posed a serious threat to public safety and proactively took steps to address it, including increasing overall sleep education among officers.³¹

For shift workers and others, it can be helpful to use a sleep tracker to monitor sleep over 24 hours. Naps are especially important for shift workers to stay refreshed, whether during a 20-30-minute break or right before a shift.

To the Future of Productivity

The benefits of sleep cannot be stated enough. Both employees and employers have a vested interest in maintaining and improving a high standard of workplace wellness. Employers may realize immediate benefits in terms of higher productivity and better product quality as well as reduced conflict, absenteeism and presenteeism. Improving worker well-being, work engagement and job satisfaction can enable employees to be more active and productive.

Providing employee wellness programs that foster healthy sleep habits can help ensure workers are successful at the office and at home. When employees make healthy sleep decisions, it can create a trickle-down effect on other lifestyle choices, in turn possibly decreasing the cost of health care expenses down the line. Companies that have implemented sleep wellness and screening programs report reductions in health care costs that more than make up for the cost of the programs.³²

Sleep may be the key to stop the grind at work. Promoting healthy sleep can produce a healthier, happier and more productive workforce, as well as a safer workplace. 

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