



**OSCAR KILO**  
**Family Life**

# Craving better sleep?

**11 tips for shift workers  
and their families**

Dr Sophie Bostock, The Sleep Scientist, shares her expertise and tips to help everyone cope.

# Introduction

Living with a shift worker can take its toll on your entire family. It's not always easy to harmonise different schedules so everyone gets the right amount of quality sleep. The optimum is typically between seven and nine hours in a 24-hour period for healthy adults.

Keep reading to explore some common sleep issues shift work can cause and what steps your family can take to overcome them. Many of these tips will be helpful for everyone in your household.

**Sleep deprived people are at a higher risk of heart disease and high blood pressure when only sleeping five to six hours a night.\***

\* [www.sleepfoundation.org/sleep-deprivation/how-sleep-deprivation-affects-your-heart#references-79092](http://www.sleepfoundation.org/sleep-deprivation/how-sleep-deprivation-affects-your-heart#references-79092)



# Shift working can have a negative knock-on effect at home.

- › Everyone has to adapt their activities depending on who's sleeping when
- › Partners of night shift workers often have to take on more responsibilities
- › A lack of sleep over time can lead to a change in mood, diet and poorer health, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes and sleep disorders

Sleep deprivation and insomnia make policing more difficult.

This is due to increased fatigue, lower concentration levels and impaired alertness. Watch this YouTube video explaining how working at night and sleeping during the day upsets our body's **circadian rhythm**

There are ways you can overcome the impacts of disturbed sleep, however. So we've teamed up with renowned Sleep Scientist, Dr Sophie Bostock, to share 11 practical steps to accommodate shift work into your family routine.





## Planning family time

It's essential everyone is aware of when you or your partner's shifts are in advance. Not only will this reduce the likelihood of disturbed sleep, it will also make it easier to schedule non-negotiable family time such as date nights (might sound a bit cheesy but can be really important!), day trips and holidays. Planning can be as simple as using a shared online or wall calendar, so everyone can see upcoming shifts at-a-glance.



## Using visual reminders

If you've got young children at home, you can use notes to remind them that your partner is sleeping - a short message or drawing on a whiteboard on a bedroom door, for example, will stop them from bursting in and waking up sleeping beauty.

Other ways to cut out unwanted noise include putting phones on silent and using high-quality earplugs. Getting woken up by a doorbell or loud knocking can take the edge off the excitement of a parcel arriving!

**Being awake for 24 hours is comparable to drinking enough alcohol to exceed the drink drive limit.\***

\* Rajaratnam, S. M., Howard, M. E., & Grunstein, R. R. (2013). Sleep loss and circadian disruption in shift work: health burden and management. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 199, S11-S15.





## 3 Ships passing in the day?

Good communication is easier said than done when your partner works shifts and you don't spend much time together. Sleep deprivation rarely brings out the best in people - stress, irritability and negativity are all typical behaviours.

One easy way to improve this situation is to communicate with each other even when you're not physically together. For example, sending a text, voice message or leaving short notes around the house can help keep your connection positive.

**“I met one couple who would write and hide surprise notes for the other to find later – they said that helped them stay connected through 15 years of shift work!”**

**Sophie Bostock, The Sleep Scientist**



## 4 Investing in peace of mind

Not having your partner around overnight might make you feel less safe in your home. If this is the case, you could look at extra security measures such as CCTV, a video doorbell or an intruder alarm.





## Quality time at the right time

To avoid burnout, it's best to focus on a suitable block of family time each day, such as breakfast, your evening meal or before starting a shift. That way, everyone will get the best version of your partner when you do spend time together and not the half-asleep one.



## Making your lives easier

Another way to simplify things is to explore where you can save time. Practical ways to do this include:

- › Getting help with cleaning, if possible
- › Doing a weekly online food shop
- › Batch cooking and freezing meals



Our **Mission Nutrition PDF guide** has healthy eating tips for shift workers (and their families).





## Learning to say 'yes'

When you and/or your partner are tired, you may not feel like going out for a walk or meal together. However, when a friend or family member offers you a window to catch up on sleep in a child-free house or get out into the fresh air to clear your head, these will have a beneficial impact, so take them up on the offer wherever possible.



## Enhancing your sleeping environment

The ideal bedroom temperature for sleeping is 17-19°C. Going to bed at different times during the day or night can affect this, so for some couples, sleeping in separate rooms makes things easier.

Proper hydration, keeping curtains closed during warm weather, and having central heating set to the right times can help maintain an ideal sleeping temperature.





## Establishing pre- and post-sleep routines

Consistent sleep is all about having good routines in place. This is vital for everyone but takes on even more importance for shift workers. Read this PDF for tips on how to have a **good bedtime routine**, so that you can wind down physically and mentally. Another helpful guide explains how answering a few **simple questions** about the day and what's happening tomorrow can help clear the mind before sleep, reducing insomnia.



## Why napping at home can be a necessity

Night shift workers typically sleep at least an hour less than day shift workers, and have worse quality sleep. However, most forces don't allow napping during working hours.

Those on night shift find it difficult to sleep for more than four or five hours during the day. If they can't keep their eyes open, it's infinitely safer for them to have a nap than to try to drive, or rely on caffeine to maintain their alertness.

Naps should be factored into your family's routine to help ensure your partner feels as refreshed as possible before starting their night shift.





## Focusing on positives

Finally, while shift work has downsides, it definitely has some upsides too. Research suggests that those people who are able to focus on the positives and be grateful for the good times tend to have better wellbeing, health and sleep.

Every time you're able to do something with your partner and children because of shift work, such as going to the school play or sports day, remind yourself this is possible because of working shifts, and savour it.

To help you savour the good stuff before bed, try and think about three things you're

grateful for. They could be big things, like family, best friends, or little things, like a delicious chocolate brownie.

You might like to download our '**gratitude prompts**' to help.

### **With around 3.5 million shift workers in the UK, you and your family aren't alone.**

Taking small but positive steps with sleep over time can transform relationships at work and home. Of course, you don't need to do all the above at once, but there's no better time to start than today.

**44% of police officers and 28% of police staff in the UK don't get enough sleep.\***

\* Data from the 2021/22 National Police Wellbeing Survey conducted by independent researchers from Durham University in collaboration with the National Police Wellbeing Service. A total of 36,633 police officers and staff were asked about their sleep levels over the previous three months. Fewer than six hours sleep per 24 hours is considered insufficient levels of sleep.





## Checklists and Resources

More checklists and resources are below to help you and your family rediscover refreshing sleep and a healthier home.



### **Are you getting enough sleep?**

Find out by going through this quick PDF checklist.



### **Dr Sophie Bostock's Better Sleep Toolkit –**

an online hub with webinars, videos, information and an online course that tells you everything you need to know.



### **Further sleep advice for shift workers**

– a two-page practical PDF from The Sleep Charity.





College of  
**Policing**



**The National Police  
Wellbeing Service**

If you have a family member or close friend who works in the police,  
we're here for you too. It's a role that throws up unique challenges  
and this can have a wider impact on the wellbeing of families.

You'll find more resources and support  
for families and friends on our website:



[www.oscarkilo.org.uk/family-life](http://www.oscarkilo.org.uk/family-life)