

Risks of Sleep Deprivation: Get Your Beauty Sleep for Safety



By Erin Gloeckner

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: HR Risk and Employment Practices

Did you know that on average, today's worker sleeps an hour and a half less each night than they did 50 years ago? In the workplace, sleep deprivation does more damage than you might think.

In her interview with Charles A. Czeisler, professor of sleep medicine at the Harvard Medical School, freelance writer Tamara Lytle discovered that lack of sleep has "a profound effect on workplace safety." Her article, "[A Nation Sleep-Deprived](#)," published by the Society for Human Resource Management (www.shrm.org) also notes:

- An employee awake for 17 straight hours has the "the performance ability of a person with a 0.05% blood alcohol level." (As a reminder, all fifty states have set 0.08% blood alcohol concentration as the legal limit for driving under the influence. Who knew sleep deprivation could be likened to drunkenness?!)
- Sleep deprivation leads to accidents and poor decisions in the workplace, and insomnia costs the nation a whopping \$63 billion per year in lost productivity.
- Companies with sleep-deprived employees have five times higher workers' compensation costs than companies whose workers get adequate sleep.
- Inadequate sleep is linked to cancer and cardiovascular disease, and people who get less than six hours of sleep per night have a 56% increase in risk for Type 2 diabetes.
- A common cause of sleep deprivation is lack of exposure to natural light, such as by spending all day indoors. Exposure to natural light signals the human body when to stay awake or when to sleep.

Sleep deprivation obviously impacts the nonprofit sector and our valuable leaders more than we may realize. After a cup of caffeinated tea and with a newfound interest in sleep health, I dug deeper into the detrimental effects of sleep loss.

- 37% of adults say they are so tired during the day that sleepiness interferes with daily activities (Source: National Sleep Foundation 'Sleep in America' Polls).
- Though many people assume that boredom causes sleepiness (e.g., long, dry workplace meetings), boredom merely unmasks sleepiness. Sleepiness is caused by sleep deprivation. (Source: National Sleep Foundation *Sleep IQ Quiz*)
- The human body never fully adjusts to night shift work. Due to circadian rhythms—a human's built-in 24-hour biological clock—people are most likely to feel sleepy between midnight and 6:00 am.
- A person cannot force himself or herself to stay awake—if you are sleepy enough, you can fall asleep anywhere. It's even possible to experience 'microsleeps' and fall asleep for a few seconds without even realizing it. (Source: National Sleep Foundation Sleep IQ Quiz. Imagine what could happen if a sleepy

employee experienced a microsleep while driving on behalf of your nonprofit? Additionally, almost 20% of all serious car crash injuries in the general population are associated with driver sleepiness (Source: Institute of Medicine, *Sleep Disorders and Sleep Deprivation: An Unmet Public Health Problem*).

Help Your Team Members Get Their Safety Sleep

To reduce the likelihood of workplace accidents and poor decisions caused by sleep-deprived staff, consider the following steps:

- Stop rewarding employees who work 12 or 14 hour days. Instead, provide support to enable team members to work more efficiently within healthy workday schedules.
- Stop ignoring the ill effects of sleep deprivation. Speak to any employee who comes to work appearing sleep deprived. Let the employee know that you care about his or her health and well being, and that adequate sleep is key to high performance.
- During high-stress projects or periods when your employees must work overtime, reiterate that employee health comes first. Reduce the stigma that napping or going home to rest indicates laziness. Allow your employees to head home before they burn out. If possible, ask your employees to set their own overtime schedules, enabling them to work extra hours when they are most comfortable doing so.
- Encourage your employees to take the National Sleep Foundation's [Sleep IQ Quiz](#) and to visit [Sleep.org](#), a new publication from the National Sleep Foundation that offers sleep health tips.
- Be considerate and respect employee privacy when addressing your concerns about sleep deprivation. Show your employees that you care, but be careful not to ask about underlying medical issues or other protected information.
- If you really want to be progressive, institute a 20-minute afternoon nap (or mental resting time) throughout your office. For team members who can't nap comfortably in the office, suggest a brief walk outdoors or a short reading break. [The National Sleep Foundation states that a brief nap](#) of 20-30 minutes can help improve mood, alertness, and performance. The Foundation also states that many distinguished people have been fans of napping, including Winston Churchill, JFK, Ronald Reagan, and Albert Einstein.

It's absolutely amazing that something as simple as sleep can have a tangible effect on your nonprofit's mission. Interestingly, Tamara Lytle's article states that organizational leaders may have greater ability to influence their employees' sleep habits than other health habits such as nutrition and exercise routines. Make a worthwhile investment in your mission and your team—make sure everyone catches some Zzzzz's tonight!

Sleep Health Resources

For more information on the nexus of sleep deprivation and workplace safety and productivity, review the following resources. Also read our article about workplace safety featured in the employment edition of [Risk Management Essentials](#). See: "[Hitting the Nail on the Head: Prioritizing Safety at Your Nonprofit](#)," by Emily Stumhofer.

- [Tuck.com](#), a collection of educational resources on sleep-related topics (sleep health, sleep disorders, mattress reviews, etc.)
- [Mattress Guide](#), Consumer Affairs
- [A Nation Sleep-Deprived](#), by Tamara Lytle
- [Sleep and Sleep Disorders](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- [Sleep: A Business Case for Bedtime](#), MAXIS GBN
- [Sleep, Performance & the Workplace](#), National Sleep Foundation
- [Sleepy and Unsafe](#), Safety + Health Magazine, National Safety Council
- [How to Achieve the Perfect Nap](#), by Isabel Edwards, editor and author of the [Siesta In Style](#) blog by Hafco Ltd. Textile Specialists

Erin Gloeckner is the former Director of Consulting Services at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center.