

PARAMEDIC MENTAL HEALTH: YOU ARE WHAT YOU SLEEP

BY STEVE SUNNY WHITFIELD AND ALI RENGERS



INTRODUCTION

It's no secret that shift work can alter and adversely affect the health and well-being of paramedics. Yet paramedics are increasingly getting less and less sleep. Studies show that people are now averaging six to seven hours of sleep per night which is on average two hours of sleep less per night than our counterparts from the 20th century.

The root cause is multifaceted, however social media, handheld

devices, light pollution, and television are largely attributed to this change in human behaviour. As society evolves and becomes busier, people are viewing sleep almost as an inconvenience that interrupts life. Yet, a lack of sleep can have a profound effect on physiological and psychological health, affecting many aspects of a paramedic's work and personal life.

Aristotle said, "With regard to sleep and waking, we must consider what

they are: whether they are peculiar to soul or to body, or common to both." It was a philosophical enquiry into the nature of sleep, and whilst nowadays we have a deeper understanding of the brain's inner workings, the impact on sleeplessness on mental health is profound. What we now know is that adequate sleep is vital to our physical and mental health.

IN PARAMEDIC CARE

Paramedics are constantly faced with increasing workloads that are physically and mentally confronting and, therefore, emotionally tiring. This not only compromises the safety and the efficiency of the care provided, it can also affect paramedic wellbeing.

While majority of paramedics entered the role in order to provide care, increasing policy targets, rapid changes to skills and policy procedures as well as increased workload have detrimentally affected the caring aspect of the role. These factors are also causing exhaustion and sleeplessness in themselves due to paramedics' concerns with fulfilling these performance related goals.

Compassion fatigue is a somewhat common ailment of paramedics caused by the culmination of working with traumatised individuals and human suffering. Compassion fatigue can lead a paramedic to feel fatigued and absent of energy, which can result in a decrease in empathy toward patients and emotional exhaustion. Without employing elements of self-care that

include obtaining an adequate amount of sleep, paramedics are more likely to become burnt out, provide subquality patient care and make medical errors.

Studies have shown that shift work can trigger insomnia due to interruption of normal sleep cycle and circadian rhythm. While night shift workers reported greater interrupted sleep patterns and less sleep had, overall disruption to the circadian rhythm caused by any form of shift work is detrimental to achieving adequate sleep. This shift-work induced sleep deprivation can increase the risk of accidents shift work disorder (a sleep condition characterised by excessively sleepiness) and chronic disease. Lost sleep can result in cardiovascular disease and metabolic disorders as well as depression, chronic fatigue and anxiety.

STRATEGIES TO REDUCE FATIGUE

Whilst it is clear paramedics and shift workers need sleep, this can be

challenging. Sleep loss can be one of the most significant issues associated with poor mental health amongst shift workers and it is vital to sustain as normal of a sleeping pattern as possible. Bearing in mind that, often, daytime sleep is usually more disturbed due to light, noise and warmer temperatures. For these reasons it is a recommendation to make your sleeping area as conducive to sleep as possible. Rest or try sleeping before your night shift. If that doesn't work, try and sleep immediately after you finish. Studies show that our brains are not resting when scrolling through a social media feed or watching television. Reduction in screen time before sleep or rest, picking up a book or just relaxing with your eyes closed are conducive to a restful sleep.

CONCLUSION

Ironically our brains are not less active when we sleep, they are just differently active. Sleeping gives our body a chance to process information. In fact, many sleep scientists now



believe sleep is part of a process to clear unnecessary memories and make way for new learning material each day. As paramedics operate in a physically and psychologically demanding environment, adequate sleep is one of the first steps in combatting these demands and supporting our mental health.

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