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Waking Hours

By Amitabh Baxi
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Gaurav Kumar's joy knew no bounds when he got a message from a call centre that he had been appointed as an executive at an attractive salary and perks. Only 21 and just out of the college, this seemed the most appropriate break he was looking for.

However, three months down the line, Gaurav felt something was amiss — long travel time to workplace and back, odd shift hours and glued to the computer for long hours — all were taking their toll. He was last seen by his colleagues at a psychiatrist's clinic, unable to cope with the biological, psychological and social stress emanating from working in night shifts.

Make no mistake — Gaurav is not alone. In fact, a growing tribe of people in jobs involving late working hours/ night shifts are falling prey to physical and pyscho-somatic disorders. Explains Dr Samir Parikh, psychiatrist and chief of department of mental health and behavioural sciences, Max Healthcare, "Let's understand the key stress factors that affect people who tackle a late night shift. Apart from the regular work stress, the late night shift-specific stress is due to the odd working hours and its impact on the biological, psychological and the social life of an executive."

Basically the primary factor of shift working is that the internal biological clock inside our body is unable to adjust to the day-night shift. "Our bodies work according to the circadian rhythm, which, put simply, is the sleep-wake cycle. Now, if this cycle is broken over a continued period of time, this can make an individual more prone to mood swings, psychological diseases such as depression, epileptic seizures and others," says Dr Pushpendra Renjen, senior consultant, neurology, Indraprastha Apollo, New Delhi.

Undeniably, night and rotating shifts involve several safety and health risks. These hours have a serious impact on the executives and their families. They get little opportunity to interact in social or family gatherings, and are under enormous strain and stress in coping with everyday issues, both on and off the job. Doctors also say that continued disruption of the "natural" routine can also lead to sleep disorders, fatigue, heart disease, high blood pressure, gastrointestinal upsets and can speed the onset of ulcers.

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Indeed, the long hours of work and odd timings, if not dealt effectively, may contradict appreciable living. There are ways to cope with night shift working stress, though. Says Dr Parikh: "To improve the work efficiency during night shifts, taking multiple breaks is an effective way to maintain concentration and efficiency, and in these breaks socialising with colleagues would help relax, and also build team relationships. It's advisable to avoid long consistent period of a night shift, and have regular shifts in between. It's also important not to have a sudden long shift change so that the body is able to adapt gradually," Dr Parikh points out.

Making work friends and having a good interpersonal relationship help develop not just the team spirit at workplace, but also act as a de-stressor for all. "Talk to people around you, make work friends and try loving and enjoying your work as much as possible. Once you start loving the work that you do, half of your work-related stress go despite the odd schedules that you are following," says Dr Parikh.

Doctors also feel that to counter the biologically-odd shift hours, people should try giving a counter effect by maintaining a good health. "As far as possible, have a balanced diet, exercise on a regular basis, use relaxation techniques, have some leisure time and enjoy life. Having a healthy lifestyle is an effective way to keep the mind and body healthy," says Dr Ambrish Mithal, senior consultant, endocrinology at Indraprastha Apollo Hospital. Dr Renjen feels that the best possible action is to get out of the stress-causing situation.

However, if you aren't in the position to do so, it's advisable to get acclimatised and indulge in relaxation solutions such as yoga. "To balance the home-work interface, people should try and interact with family and friends and spend time with them so that one does not lose touch with the main social network of the self," he reasons.

"There are stresses in all kinds of work, and there are problems in the life of all people. What's important is to handle them effectively and have a positive approach in life," sums up Dr Parikh. Well, that's the ultimate stress-buster.