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Cyclical rhythms of work and rest

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News
Published: May 06, 2008, 00:11

The increasingly blurred distinction between being 'on-duty' and 'off-duty' has played havoc with our traditional rhythms of work and rest.

The cycle is inexorable. Your sleep is invaded by thoughts of a hundred so-called emergencies, draining your energy for the next day, so the pressures intensify further. Despite the risks, you know that a steady intake of coffee will improve concentration, but that effect actually builds up slowly through the day, leaving you hopelessly wakeful at night. And so your general state further deteriorates.

One logical solution is to strengthen yourself, physically and mentally, with a regular exercise regime - to counteract the effects of a heavy work schedule, determined to show stress who's boss. But, your conditions of employment are liable to make this inconvenient, if not impossible. The mix of long hours and continual crisis-management, works against either regular gym-visits during the day or the freedom to take part in sporting events, in the evening.

Another is to make a fine art of 'compartmentalisation' - practice being determined about 'switching-off' from one problem as you turn to concentrate on another, or declaring firmly when you are 'off-duty'. Significantly, this strategy is often mentioned in interviews with Rich List tycoons, so it obviously has much validity.

Understandably, talk of insomnia will elicit scepticism with many employers. Younger staff will be suspected of indulging in too many late nights, and even be reminded that Margaret Thatcher ran Britain for years on just four hours sleep a night. And in professions with a public-safety remit, like airlines or road haulage, irresponsible employees know they'll probably just be told to go home and rest until they're feeling better, and that their 'condition' is unlikely to be actively investigated.

But insomnia is no joke, and it can affect both performance and the general atmosphere around the workplace - a major cause of anxiety, irritability and lack of concentration. Anyone not able to enjoy three full nights' sleep a week should recognise that they're got chronic sleep problems, and seek help.

With over 80 known sleep disorders from snoring and sleep-walking to the more

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serious narcolepsy (random sleeping during the day), you need to try to identify your particular problem, and then consult your doctor or HR department.

Me? I'm a 'power-nap' devotee myself. However, it's important to limit your cat-nap to just 15 minutes, when your body will usually wake you up anyway, and you experience an energetic feeling of being revived. Some countries including Germany and Japan actually provide nap-rooms for this purpose. Perhaps the UAE may do the same.

The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.

Key points

Stress and sleep

--Inability to switch-off from duty can seriously invade your sleep at night.

--Your body needs three good nights' sleep a week to recharge its batteries.

--The short power-nap is remarkably effective at restoring concentration.

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