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How to beat night shift dread

It's not unusual to feel anxious before starting a run of nights but there are ways to tackle this, **Abi Rimmer** hears

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Get a structured handover

Arafat Mulla, specialty trainee year 4 in respiratory medicine, North West deanery, says, “Be in control and get to work early. Nothing is worse than running late for handover and having your heart racing before anything has even happened.

“Actually, there is something worse: not having a handover. The best night shifts I've done have always had a structured, friendly, and relevant handover. If your hospital doesn't do this, it's the first thing you should be working on.

“Once you know what needs to be done, have a discussion about how to prioritise tasks. If you're not sure, talk to your team. Sometimes it isn't possible to do everything. Make sure the important things are done overnight and know what you can leave for the day team.

“When you're working during the day, think about how to make the night shift team's life easier. Handover specific tasks—for example, ‘Please review patient x's fluid status at 2 am’ is better than, ‘Just to be aware, patient x might be getting overloaded with fluids.’

“Be friendly. Having a good handover is critical for patient safety but having a good time is also important. Make friends with the people you work with. Have a sit down together at 2 am to chat about how the night is going and ask each other for advice. Include nurses and other specialties too—you can support and learn from each other.

“Once the shift is over, get breakfast together. Remember, even the most junior member of the team can call the most senior and invite them for a cup of tea and a chat. When everyone is comfortable with each other it's easier to discuss the little things that might be worrying you. These, by the way, are never ‘little’ and are usually crucial for patient safety. Don't let there be barriers to talking to each other.”

Get to know your team

Mary Randles, specialty trainee in geriatric and internal medicine, Cork, Ireland, says, “Firstly, don't underestimate the importance of food. It will make or break your week of nights. Plan delicious meals and snacks that you will look forward to. This will help you to pace your nights and avoid relying on vending machine snacks that will send you on a sugar rollercoaster. It will also stop you worrying about missing the canteen's brief opening hours.

“Be wary of too much coffee—it could send you jumping sky high every time the bleep goes off and

create further difficulty when you try to sleep the next day.

“Clear your schedule for the week if you can and try to leave your night shift week for work and rest. This is not the time for reorganising your wardrobe or painting the kitchen.

“Acquaint yourself with your team—introduce yourself to your colleagues on the ward and if you are a registrar give your phone number to any juniors you are supervising. If you are approachable, they will be more likely to contact you early about patients and you can put a plan in place to prevent deterioration.

“Bring a notebook to write down jobs and reminders. Don't be afraid to look up correct drug doses and algorithms. No one will judge you for having to look up the loading dose of phenytoin infusion at 4 am.

“In the days before covid-19 I would have strongly recommended booking a massage or a spa day for the day you finished nights. However, the sentiment still stands—having something to look forward to at the end of the week helps it fly by. At the moment, a nice walk or bath will have to suffice.

“Try not to be cranky. Except for the nocturnal few, most of your colleagues in nursing and medicine probably had night shift dread too.

“Finally, never call a senior doctor or a doctor in another specialty and say, ‘Sorry for bothering you.’ Try saying, ‘Thanks for taking my call.’ An old tip but a goodie.”

Let yourself relax the day before

Victoria Kinkaid, military junior doctor, Frimley Park Hospital, says, “The night before your first shift try to stay up later to start switching your body clock into night shift mode. Hopefully this will make you sleep in the morning of your shift, to start changing your body clock.

“Relax the day of your night shift—don't put yourself under pressure to sleep but do take it easy. Have a lie in, take a nice bath, read a book, and have a big lunch and dinner.

“If you want to drink coffee during the night, do so at the start of your shift, but switch to decaf towards the end so that you can sleep when you get home.

“When you get home, as much as you want to just fall into bed, make yourself a big breakfast. This will stop you waking up earlier because of a grumbling tummy.

“At the end of your nightshift stint, come home and relax that day but try not to sleep. If you do sleep,

have a nap after your shift but try to get yourself up around midday and do small tasks for a sense of achievement.

“If, like me, you suffer from post-night shift bloating, try things like mint tea or hot water bottles, and just take it easy.

“Have an early night, to attempt to get your body clock back into the right time zone. And there you have it—easy, right?”

Use time off to rest

Scott Mabbutt, specialty registrar in obstetrics and gynaecology, University Hospitals of Leicester, says, “By far my biggest piece of advice is to invest in some blackout blinds. They keep the room cool or warm depending on the season and give you the darkness to help you sleep.

“Try to get an afternoon siesta for two to three hours before your first night shift. This can help set you up for the night ahead.

“It’s tempting to try and live some sort of life between night shifts. It may be appealing to fit in errands while you’re not at work and the bank is open; however, I would recommend against this. It always seems to backfire with unforeseen delays that eat into your sleep time.

“The same goes for booking your own medical appointments between night shifts. Sitting in a dentist waiting room at 10 am isn’t fun. Save your energy for your commute.

“I eat my meals at their normal time. You might want to eat breakfast when you wake up at 5 pm, but I have mine after my night shift finishes in the morning—at the time of day I normally would. Then I eat dinner when I wake up at 5 pm. The only meal that I have which is out of sync is ‘lunch,’ which I have during my night shift.

“Another way I try to get through is to plan something nice to do the evening after my last night. This is something to look forward to during the more difficult parts of your shift and it can help to bring your sleep pattern back to normal.

“Lastly, think of the positives. Work on nights is usually urgent and fulfilling with minimal extraneous stresses or paperwork, and there will be space in the car park.”

Focus on the present, not what might happen

Giles P Croft, doctor, writer, speaker, and coach, says, “Night shifts—who likes them? Their presence looms large almost as soon as you’ve recovered from the last lot, and as the time draws nearer, the feeling of dread builds—and they’ve not even started yet.

“So, what can be done? The key to feeling better about them is hiding in plain sight, in that last sentence: ‘They’ve not even started yet.’ So often our minds dwell in the fiction of the future.

“In short, we make up scary stories, we live our lives as if they were true, and then we forget who made them up. You could call it the human condition—falling for this simple trick of the mind, over and again.

“To see that our feelings can only ever be coming from our thought processes in this very moment—that what we fear most is not actually happening—is to gently rouse ourselves from a daymare of our own making.

“So what can be done? Slow down. Look around. What problem exists, right now? Is there one? Be honest.

“While it may look like your feelings of dread convey some urgent and important information about the night shifts to come, that is

not possible. Those feelings can only ever tell you about the quality of your thinking, right now.

“And when the nights actually arrive, the same holds true. Whether they go well or go badly, they’ll be happening now. It’s the job you’ve been trained for and you’re built for the reality of the present moment. You got this.”