

NIGHT RIDERS

Eric Berger's how-to list for all those working the owl shift

When Samantha Shaw started a new job as a research technician for a sleep-related study at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston in the US in 2021, she was excited to work on a cause that felt extremely personal.

Since high school, she said, she had trouble falling and staying asleep. So she jumped at the chance to work with experts in the field.

The researchers were looking into whether a medication could help with excessive daytime sleepiness in people who worked night shifts, often in transportation or construction, that started between three and seven in the morning.

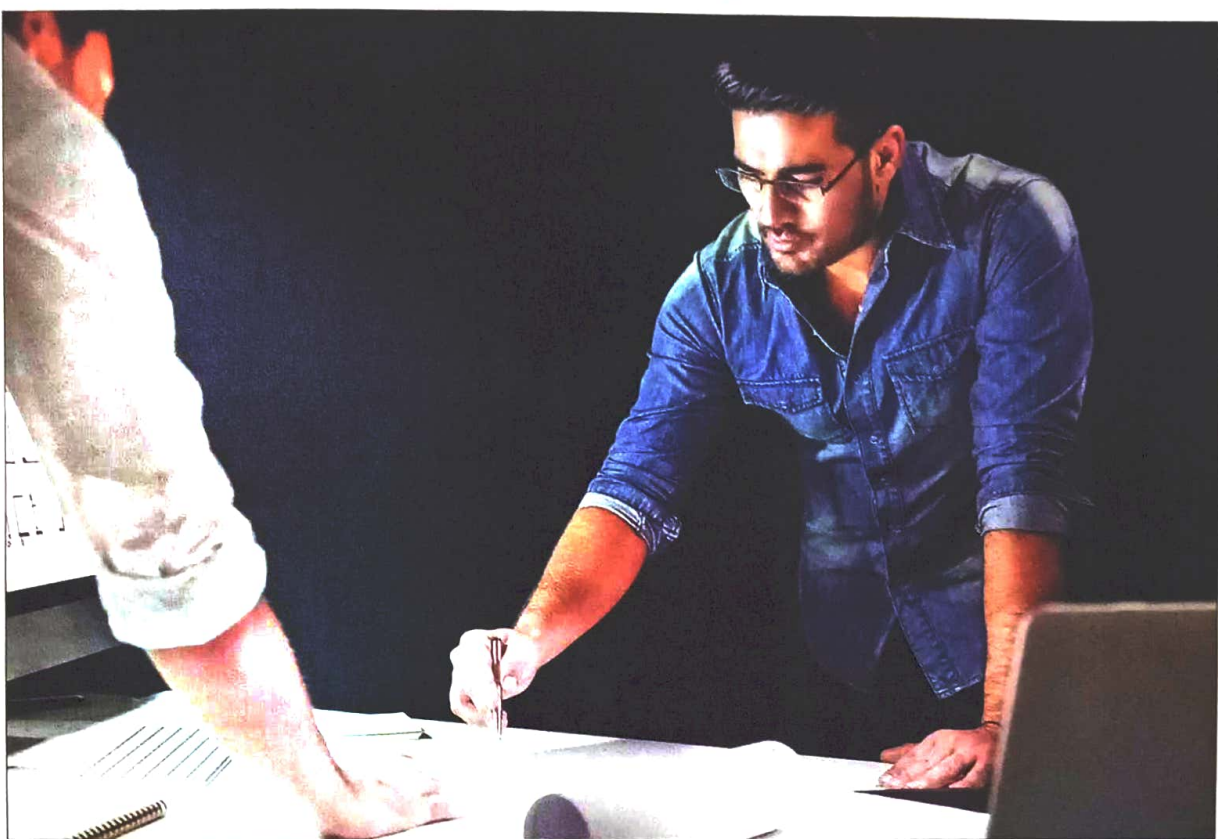
Shaw, 27, found the work enjoyable. She also became a shift worker herself — often clocking in between 2am and 4am, heading home in the early afternoon and then slinking into bed around 6pm. Despite her exhaustion, she'd struggle to fall asleep, sometimes getting fewer than four or five hours of sleep before it was time to wake up. She began drinking up to six cups of coffee a day, developed frequent colds and had little time to make friends.

Insomnia, poor sleep quality and short sleep duration are common among the 11 million people in the US who work night shifts, according to federal officials. And shift workers often struggle to follow healthy diets or maintain relationships with family and friends.

That can have serious long-term consequences for health, said Jeanne F. Duffy, a professor of medicine at the Harvard Medical School in the US, who co-led the study at Brigham and Women's Hospital.

Research suggests that shift workers have higher risks of developing various health conditions such as gastrointestinal disorders, mood disorders and cardiovascular disease. They are also more likely to be involved in car crashes and to develop infections such as colds, flu and stomach viruses.

"Our whole physiology is oriented to being asleep at night and awake during the day," Duffy said. "So when you



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try to stay awake at night to work, you're fighting this internal biology."

Shift workers are also at higher risk for obesity and type 2 diabetes, said Michelle Drerup, director of the behavioural sleep medicine programme at the Cleveland Clinic in the US. That's in part because it's challenging to eat healthy food while working at night, she said.

When "lunch time" comes around at 12.30am, for example, what is available for a worker to eat? "Well, it's stuff in the vending machine if they haven't prepared food," Drerup said.

Night-shift hours have also been described as "unsocial" in scientific literature because they conflict with the usual rhythms of society. That can strain family dynamics and, as in Shaw's experience, put a damper on socialising.

If a worker then tries "to keep up with social and health responsibilities" at the cost of their own rest, they're left

with "less time to recover from work", said Imelda Wong, an occupational hygienist and epidemiologist who works for the ministry of health in British Columbia, Canada.

Sleep experts make many of the same health recommendations for shift workers as they do for everyone else.

Maintaining a healthy diet is key to preventing some of the chronic diseases shift workers are at risk for. When working unusual hours, try to prepare healthy foods that are easy to bring to work, such as vegetables, hummus, fresh fruit and almonds, Drerup said.

"Planning ahead is essential," she added, such as doubling recipes and freezing individual portions on the weekend or your days off.

If your energy is flagging during a shift, even just a 15 to 20-minute power nap (if you can find a quiet spot to take it) can help you feel more alert

and refreshed, Duffy said.

To make falling asleep easier when you get home, be mindful of how much caffeine you consume throughout your shift. Drerup recommended limiting yourself to no more than two cups of coffee within the first few hours of your shift, and to avoid drinking any for the last four to five hours.

Once you're home, dim the lights around your house. Bright lights cue your body to wake up, which can make it harder to fall asleep, Wong said.

Then, get to sleep as quickly as possible, she said.

Blackout curtains, sleep masks and white-noise machines can help create a sleep-conducive environment, Drerup said.

If you have daytime responsibilities that you can't sleep through — such as picking up your children from the bus stop after school — Drerup said, try to schedule naps before and after such interruptions.

Although there are many things you can do to make shift work a little less hard on your body, some of that responsibility falls on employers, too, Wong said. They can help night-shift workers by avoiding scheduling them for consecutive nights, keeping shifts to eight hours or less and providing meal and rest breaks, according to the US National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

As for Shaw, the more than two years of overnight work heightened her appreciation for how disruptive shift work can be. The study she was working on ended in April last year, and she said it took her about four months to return to her normal sleep pattern.

Asked if she would work those hours again, she was hesitant. It would depend on the project, Shaw said, "because it did take a toll on my physical health and my mental health".

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