



FaithWorks Counseling

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A Practical Guide to Improve Sleep, Energy, and Emotional Stability

Working long shifts—especially in healthcare, caregiving, or high-stress jobs—can significantly disrupt sleep, mood, anxiety, and physical health. The goal is not perfection, but creating consistent recovery habits that help the body regulate despite an inconsistent schedule.

Primary Sleep Challenges with 12-Hour Shifts:

- Irregular bedtime/wake time
- Difficulty “shutting off” after work
- Physical exhaustion but mental overstimulation
- Shift-related anxiety or racing thoughts
- Caffeine dependence
- Poor eating habits affecting sleep
- Sleep debt on off days

Core Treatment Goal:

Protect sleep like it is part of medical care.

1. Create a “Sleep Anchor”

Even if bedtime changes, keep ONE consistent routine:

Choose a regular wind-down pattern after every shift:

- Shower
- Comfortable clothes
- Light snack if hungry
- No emotionally intense conversations
- Dark room
- Relaxation exercise

Why? This trains the brain to recognize, “Now we sleep.”

2. Use the 30–60 Minute Decompression Rule

After a 12-hour shift, many clients feel physically tired but mentally wired.

Avoid immediately:

- Scrolling social media
- Conflict conversations
- Bills/problem-solving
- Bright lights
- Heavy meals

Instead:

- Warm shower
- Calming music
- Stretching
- Journaling brain dump
- 4-7-8 breathing
- Herbal tea (non-caffeinated)

3. Manage Light Exposure

If working days:

- Get sunlight early after waking
- Dim lights 1 hour before sleep

If working nights:

- Wear sunglasses driving home
- Blackout curtains
- White noise
- Cool room

Why? Light strongly impacts circadian rhythm.

4. Strategic Caffeine Use

Helpful:

- Early shift only
- Stop caffeine at least 6 hours before sleep

Avoid:

- Energy drinks late in shift
- “Just to get through” caffeine near end of shift

5. Protect Off Days Without Oversleeping

Common mistake: Sleeping all day off to “catch up,” which disrupts rhythm.

Better:

- Sleep slightly more
- Keep wake time within 1–2 hours of workdays
- Use naps strategically (20–90 min)

6. Nutrition for Sleep

Avoid before bed:

- Heavy greasy meals
- Sugar
- Alcohol
- Excess fluids

Better:

- Protein + complex carb snack

Examples:

- Peanut butter toast
- Yogurt
- Banana
- Oatmeal

7. Address Racing Thoughts

Many clients struggle with:

“I should have done more.”

“What if tomorrow is awful?”

“I can’t turn my brain off.”

Use: Brain Dump Journal:

Write:

- What happened today
- What can wait
- What I release until tomorrow

8. Use Grounding Skills

Helpful:

- 5-4-3-2-1
- Five-Finger Breathing
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation
- Prayer/Meditation
- Scripture reflection (if faith-based)

9. Sleep Environment Matters

Optimize:

- Cool room
- Blackout curtains
- White noise
- Eye mask
- No phone in bed if possible

10. Know When Sleep Problems Are Clinical

If you experience:

- Frequent waking
- Panic at bedtime
- Nightmares
- Snoring/gasping
- Persistent insomnia

Consider:

- Anxiety treatment
- Trauma treatment
- Sleep apnea referral
- Medical consult

Sample Sleep Routine for 12-Hour Shift Worker

After Shift:

1. Light snack
2. Shower
3. No screens 30 min
4. Breathing exercise
5. Dark/cool room
6. Sleep

On Days Off:

- Maintain general sleep/wake structure
- Prioritize recovery
- Avoid “revenge bedtime procrastination”

Emotional Health Reminder:

Sleep deprivation worsens:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Irritability
- Emotional reactivity
- Trauma symptoms

Sleep is not laziness—it is nervous system repair.

Helpful Affirmations:

- “Rest is productive.”
- “My body needs recovery.”
- “I do not have to earn sleep.”
- “Sleep helps me function better for myself and my family.”

Weekly Goal:

Ask:

- What helped me sleep best?
- What disrupted my sleep?
- What one habit can I improve this week?

Final Encouragement:

For clients working demanding schedules, improving sleep is about routine, boundaries, and nervous system recovery—not perfection. Small, consistent habits can significantly improve sleep quality, emotional regulation, and resilience.