

How can workplaces support the 74% of UK adults who've reported a decline in quality sleep over the past 12 months?

3 years ago



A new [Nuffield Health](#) survey of 8,000 UK adults has highlighted that nearly three-quarters of its respondents are reporting poorer sleep compared to last year.

This is especially concerning given that Nuffield Health's 2022, '[Healthier Nation Index](#)', also revealed that 1 in 10 people are only getting between 2-4 hours of sleep per night.

The number of people experiencing insomnia [rose to one in four](#) since the pandemic, with many turning to the internet for support. Google searches for 'insomnia' [soared](#), with most made in the early hours, around 3am.

According to Nuffield Health's research, 35-44-year-olds get the least sleep, with almost 50% only getting 5-6 hours per night. Only 33% get the recommended 7-8 hours of sleep per night.

These findings are especially pertinent during September's 'Sleeptember', which focuses on promoting better sleep quality.

Sleep deprivation is believed to cost the UK economy [£37 billion a year](#) in lost productivity, with poor sleepers having reduced reaction times and trouble concentrating. They also have an increased likelihood of having accidents or making costly mistakes, highlighting both a need and an opportunity to provide people with sleep hygiene support in UK workplaces.

Ultimately, chronically disrupted sleep increases the risk of work absence by [171 percent](#). However, just

over half of people don't believe quality sleep builds immunity.

Gosia Bowling, National Lead for Emotional Wellbeing at [Nuffield Health](#) commented on the findings: "Many businesses have adopted a 'hybrid' approach to working and it's important to note this 'new normal' won't automatically facilitate perfect sleeping patterns. That's why it's crucial employers 'wake up to sleep' and work with their healthcare providers to support their workforce.

"Taking a holistic view on health - including offering interventions that cover the full range of risks - is the only way to get back to maximum wellbeing and create a healthier nation."

Gosia offers advice on how employers can play their part in creating holistic health interventions to enhance sleep quality among its workforces:

#1 Outline expectations

Businesses tend to overvalue individuals who undervalue sleep. However, for those looking to maximise employee potential and nurture a positive, productive workforce, it's important to reduce the business and health risks of sleep deprivation.

Employers should outline their expectations from the outset. This means defining working hours and letting employees know they aren't expected to reply to emails outside of them. Employees should also be encouraged to work around their natural sleep patterns where possible, for example, avoiding scheduling early-morning or late-evening calls.

#2 Train for triggers

Just as important as it is to lead a company with a sleep-positive attitude, it is essential managers can spot the signs of a sleep-deprived co-worker in their teams.

For example, are mood swings, poor attention, or distraction common among certain team members? Are they yawning and drinking copious amounts of coffee to get through the day? These can all be signs of a poor night's sleep.

Line managers should be able to spot these signs and be trained to guide co-workers to access the appropriate occupational health services available.

Ensure any training given to team leaders is evidence-based so the company understands why incorporating sleep support is important and should be part of the company's core values.

Appropriate training may also include helping people understand how to structure their day, like avoiding putting in potentially stressful meetings late in the afternoon, when they risk taking the stress home with them when their body needs to relax.

#3 Promote physical health

It is also important to emphasise the benefits of exercise in regulating sleep patterns, just not right before bed, as we remain in an 'activated' mode for a while after exercising, making it difficult to sleep.

Instead, an outdoor run or power walk during lunch hours not only gets employees away from their desks

but also exposes them to natural daylight, promoting healthy sleep hormones.

Employers who are concerned that their teams are not taking healthy breaks or are reluctant to switch-off may even consider arranging group exercise classes. For example, inviting a fitness instructor to run a lunchtime session over a video call and letting employees know they're encouraged to attend. It's important to lead by example and announcing directors and managers will be attending these sessions can boost uptake throughout the wider company.

Offering advice around nutrition and caffeine can help individuals make healthier choices, avoiding unhealthy habits which may exacerbate feelings of tiredness or fatigue, or stimulants that have the opposite effect, raising their heart rate and making them especially alert, interfering with rest and sleep.

#4 Offer specialist support

Stress from outside the world of work – like finances, addiction, or family problems – can negatively impact sleep. Nuffield Health's research showed fewer people with lower household incomes (£15,000 or less) got the recommended 7-8 hours of sleep per night than people on the highest incomes (over £75,000). This implies having lower financial resources may impact people's sleeping patterns.

The relationship between mental health and sleep isn't entirely understood but according to [neurochemistry studies](#), an adequate night's sleep helps enhance mental and emotional resilience equally.

Chronic sleep disruptions might generate negative thinking and emotional sensibility. It's also thought treating insomnia may help alleviate the symptoms associated with an anxiety disorder and vice versa.

Where signs of emotional difficulty are identified, employers should signpost individuals towards the relevant emotional wellbeing support available to them. This may include offering [cognitive behavioural therapy](#) (CBT) or Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) which provide individuals with direct access to specialists.

Some of the confidential support they receive may help employees to address the factors keeping them awake at night. Or help employees recognise and break unhelpful thought patterns which trigger anxiety and stress preventing sleep.

Additional employer support may include inviting a sleep specialist to run an online seminar on best practice habits before bed, such as avoiding blue light devices and keeping the bed for sleep only – not work.