Working Rotating Shifts Without Losing Your Balance

With Janet Kittams-Lalley, counselor with Avera Outpatient Behavioral Health Services, and Avera’s Employee Assistance Program.

Besides the pay, what should I consider if I’m offered a job with rotating shifts? Careers in emergency services, law enforcement, health care, transportation, manufacturing, and more may involve shifts that rotate between days, evenings and nights. While rotating shifts might offer flexibility, people don’t always realize the impact on their health and personal life.

What are the greatest areas of impact?
As far as your health is concerned, you may experience sleeping disorders or gastrointestinal difficulties. Plus, research has shown a possible connection to heart disease and prostate cancer. In terms of personal life, people who work rotating shifts often have difficulty with family life and social interactions.

What types of sleeping disorders might crop up?
It could present itself as insomnia – not being able to sleep – or feeling sleepy all the time. Typically, rotating shift workers struggle because their biological clock is constantly being asked to switch back and forth between when they’re supposed to be awake and when they’re supposed to be asleep. So they often experience fatigue or disorientation – similar to jet lag. When sleeping during the day, often their sleep is not as long or as deep as if they were sleeping during the nighttime hours.

Research studies have demonstrated that people who work rotating shifts have significantly lower levels of serotonin, a hormone and neurotransmitter that plays a role in sleep. Lower levels of serotonin are also connected to anxiety and depression disorders.

Loss of sleep results in symptoms like excessive drowsiness or “sleep attacks” during your awake times, depressed mood, anxiety, difficulty concentrating, irritability or decreased memory.

Why gastrointestinal problems?
This is most often related to poor eating habits. People working rotating shifts tend to eat more greasy food and rely on caffeine, so they experience indigestion or heartburn.

How is personal and family life affected?
Because your daily schedules are not in sync and always changing, your children or spouse are never quite sure when you’re going to be home. Planning family outings can be a challenge, especially if your shifts aren’t scheduled far enough in advance. For working couples, the person who is not working the rotating shift often feels like they’re carrying a greater burden of the child care or household chores.

Socially, it can be hard to fit social activities, like being in a sports league, into your schedule. So people working rotating shifts might experience more loneliness and isolation. Sometimes, these difficulties can lead to depression.
What strategies do you recommend?
First, work with your employer. Ask that your shifts rotate forward – day, evening and night in that order. This makes it easier for your body to readjust. Also ask your employer to schedule shifts far enough in advance so you can plan family events or social activities.

Second, take care of your own health. Eat healthier foods, and stay away from junk food, caffeine and alcohol.

Develop healthy sleep habits. After working a night shift, help your body adjust by limiting your exposure to light. Wear dark sunglasses on the way home. Make sure your home is a dark, quiet environment. Work with others in your household to establish “quiet hours” for sleep. This can be challenging if you have small children at home. Stay away from over-the-counter sleeping pills if possible. Learn deep breathing relaxation and muscle relaxation techniques that can help put your body in a mode for sleep.

Lots of people survive and even thrive working rotating shifts! But it’s important to note that making this adjustment might require some time and effort in order to protect your own physical health, as well as your mental and emotional health.