



Watch Your Circadian Rhythms

Circadian rhythms are physical, mental, and behavioral changes that follow a roughly 24-hour cycle, responding primarily to light and darkness in a person's environment.

The loss of one night's sleep causes ten days of discomfort.
~ Chinese proverb

I seldom thought about circadian rhythms in the last hours of night shifts between on 0300 and 0600. Sleep was the main thing desired by my mind and body. I thought about the words from a song. "The darkest hour is just before dawn," sung beautifully by Emmylou Harris on her *Roses in the Snow* album. She reminded me that I was not the first or only person suffering on the graveyard shift. That thought did not lessen my individual suffering or sleepiness, so I would get up and walk around outside for a few minutes. Sometimes I would even sing the song, though not as beautifully as Emmylou.

When the sun began rising over the rock bluff overlooking the Cumberland River in Nashville, the light perked me up and I felt better. That light was helpful in one sense, but harmful in another. We exchanged shifts at 0800 and the drive home took forty-five minutes. That exposure to sunlight perked me up even more. Even though I needed to sleep, my brain was awake because a person is supposed to be awake in the daytime and asleep at nighttime. Human beings are *diurnal*, created for the day. Shift workers are sometimes diurnal, sometimes nocturnal. These unnatural disruptions to the circadian rhythms make it difficult to achieve that seven to nine hours of sleep human beings need out of every twenty-four hours.

If one's circadian rhythms are disrupted every time the shift schedule changes, how does one cope with those changes? The only cure is a proper amount of sleep every twenty-four hours, but that does not happen for most people. Some pipeline controllers tell me they go home after a night shift, go to bed, and sleep eight hours. That is not typical, I think. Some studies indicate that a person who works nights gets two to four hours less sleep than a person who always works days and sleeps at night. [Pacific Sleep Center Shiftwork](#) I considered myself fortunate when I slept five hours after working night shift.

The suggestions for sleeping the daytime are well-known by shiftworkers: avoid sunlight on the way home, avoid caffeine the last few hours on night shift, sleep in a dark room in a bed, keep the room cool and quiet, ask the family and others not to disturb you. All of those are helpful, but not always realistic. The suggestions below are realistic and within your control.

Do not use the daytime hours to run errands, complete household task, or take care of children during the hours when you need to be trying to sleep. Working the night shift and using the time off to get other things done may make a person feel more productive. But that night will bring more of those darkest hours. Make sleep a priority in the daytime, if you are going back to work that night. It is difficult to cope when we disturb our circadian rhythms, and we have to make our best efforts.