



by Stephanie Conn

# Tired of being tired

It's no secret that the demands of police work make getting good sleep difficult. Poor sleep – which could be due to shiftwork, organizational stress, personal life stressors or a traumatic event or accumulation of events – has been associated with poor job performance, accidents, increased alcohol use and health problems.<sup>1</sup> Let's take a look at each factor and how it can be countered.

### Shift work

Shift-work disorder (SWD), a mismatch between internal sleep-wake cycle and the timing demands of shiftwork, affects many police officers. Unfortunately, its impact extends beyond the shiftwork years, even into retirement, because the body has never readjusted.

Research indicates that those who work straight days tend to get more sleep than those who work evenings or overnight shifts. This is, in part, due to the impact of lightness-darkness on the sleep-wake cycle. Those who work night shift are more prone to sleepiness due to the absence of light during their waking hours and the presence of light while trying to sleep.

There are several things you can do to help. If you're having trouble falling or staying asleep, taking melatonin three hours before going to bed may help – it promotes sleepiness. Making your sleep area as dark as possible and getting as much light as possible during your waking hours is also suggested. If you're sleepy before going to work, a 20-minute nap can help.

### Organizational stressors

One aspect of organizational stress is feeling you have no control over your personal time. A low sense of control combined with heightened levels of stress chips away at officers' resilience and, consequently, their health. You probably can't pick your work schedule but you can choose how you spend the hours outside work. Fill your free time with things that refill your tank – exercise, recreation, hobbies, rest, etc.

There are many other organizational stressors that would require a book (or several) to cover. Suffice it to say that you have to determine what is within your control and what's not. If you can't change something, let it go. If it doesn't help the situation to think about it and lose sleep over it, there's no point in persisting to do so.

If thinking about it was going to be helpful, something would have changed by now, right?

### Personal life stressors

Having a family may make getting sleep even more difficult. Kids may not understand why mom or dad needs to sleep during the day. I remember waking up to find that my nephew had surrounded my bed with army toys so we could do battle the moment I awoke after my overnight shift.

It may also be difficult for partners, friends and adult in your life. You may feel internal or external pressure to forgo sleep so as to not miss spending time with others who have a normal schedule. Resist this urge! You wouldn't wake your family up at 3 a.m. to watch a movie, would you?

Talk to your family and friends about your need for sleep and how it affects your health and safety, then look for ways to focus on them during your waking hours or days off. It might seem that you're occasionally missing out on events but that's far better than completely missing out later when you are suffering from physical health problems related to sleep deprivation or the aftermath of an accident due to fatigue.

Various personal life stressors such as financial strain, health concerns or relationship difficulties may also compromise your ability to get good sleep. Thoughts of these difficulties may prevent you from being able to fall or stay asleep.

Keep a notebook by your bed to write down your concerns. If you find thoughts interfering with your ability to drift off, write them down and schedule a time to "worry" about them. I know it sounds strange but it works! Each time the thought comes back, remind yourself that you can't do anything about it at the moment and have set aside a time to deal with it later.

### Traumatic event(s)

Sometimes the intrusive thought is a memory of a traumatic event you have experienced or witnessed. This occurs because the memory hasn't been stored in your brain properly due to the overstimulation of your amygdala.<sup>2</sup> It will continue to intrude until you take measures to process the event.

Essentially, the brain has a natural drive to heal so it keeps reminding you of the event until it "learns" it has actually ended (see Shapiro's book for a more comprehensive description). A counsellor trained in trauma, particularly EMDR, can assist you with this process and offer additional suggestions for better sleep.

Getting good sleep shouldn't be a nightmare. Instead, diligent attention to healthy habits can result in sweet dreams.

1. Neylan, T. C., Metzler, T. J., Best, S. R., Weiss, D. S., Fagan, J. A., Liberman, A., & Marmar, C. R. (2002). Critical incident exposure and sleep quality in police officers. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 64, 345–352.

2. Shapiro, F. (2012). *Getting past your past: Take control of your life with self-help techniques from EMDR therapy*. Rodale Books.

**Stephanie Conn** is a registered clinical counsellor and former communications dispatcher and police officer. To find out more visit [www.conncounsellingandconsulting.com](http://www.conncounsellingandconsulting.com) or email her at [stephanie@blueline.ca](mailto:stephanie@blueline.ca).

## Sgt. Bruce MacPhail Award for Academic Excellence at Dalhousie University



Constable Robert Warren of the Saanich Police in Victoria, British Columbia, is the 2013 recipient of the Sergeant Bruce MacPhail Award for Academic Excellence in Dalhousie University's Police Leadership Program. This award represents the attributes, ethics and self-confidence Sgt. Bruce MacPhail demonstrated in his own personal life to attain personal and professional success. The award was established in 2001 by Phyllis MacPhail in memory of her son, and commemorates his dedication to life-long learning in the field of law enforcement.

Rob joined the Saanich Police in 2001. During his police service, Rob has spent nine years as a Patrol and Traffic Safety Officer in the Uniform Division and three years in the Detective Division's Family Protection Unit conducting child abuse and internet child exploitation investigations.

Rob has worked as a Legal Update and Response Options Instructor for the Saanich Police and teaches on occasion for the Justice Institute of British Columbia's Police and Public Safety Academies.

Rob has been a Hostage/Crisis Negotiator since 2009 and serves as the Crisis Negotiation Team Leader with the Greater Victoria Emergency Response Team.

Rob received his Certificate in Police Leadership in the Law and Justice Concentration by completing the Police Leadership and Management Development, Legal Issues in Policing, and Policing and the Law of Human Rights courses. He also completed the Managing Police Performance: Coaching Skills for Police Supervisors course and practicum, earning his designation as a Dalhousie University Certified Police Coach.

Prior to joining the Saanich Police, Rob served as an Artillery Officer with the Canadian Armed Forces and worked as a Secondary School Teacher in the Saanich School District. Rob earned his Bachelor's Degree in Military and Strategic Studies from Royal Roads Military College in 1994 and his Secondary School Teaching Certificate from the University of Victoria in 1997.

Rob's wife Rachel and their three children provide him with ongoing encouragement and support in his personal and professional endeavours. Rob would like to thank both the Saanich Police and his course instructors for their assistance with his studies at Dalhousie University.