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police

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Undercover — The Power of Sleep: Reflecting on the impacts of poor sleep in police organizations

By Julien Heon, Vice-President, HALEO Clinic



SLEEP IS ONE OF the key pillars of health. We all sleep. In fact, humans sleep the equivalent of a third of their life. Sleep is essential. Its regenerative functions provide physical and mental health benefits, and studies are showing a direct connection between several chronic diseases and lack of sleep.

Society and work have become more complex, information-rich and technologically dependent thereby creating a form of competition between our finite human cognitive resources and what seems to be an infinite number of problems waiting to be solved. As former Halifax Regional Police Chief Jean-Michel Blais writes in his book *Working the Blue Lines – Lessons in leadership from policing and hockey*, the unfortunate victim in this competition for our focus and finite attentional resources is often our sleep.

After two years of a pandemic where police officers have been in greater demand and facing more stress than ever, the quality of their sleep is still an underestimated and overlooked tool in their kit as they stand on the front line of public safety.

A HIGHLY PREVALENT ISSUE

Current survey data shows that over 50% of the Canadian population is suffering from symptoms of insomnia and nearly 1 in 5 is diagnosed with chronic insomnia. When it comes to members of police organizations, those numbers are multiplied, with over 90% of first responders suffering from insomnia symptoms, and over 50% of police members being diagnosed with chronic insomnia. A University of Ottawa study demonstrates that 24% of front-line workers have seen an increase in the prevalence of insomnia since the beginning of the pandemic.

Rotating shift schedules are considered to be a key driver of sleep disorders amongst police officers. Studies also show that the highest prevalence of insomnia is driven by the high-risk and high-stress situations that police officers face every day.

INSOMNIA AND MENTAL HEALTH

Poor sleep is one of the first symptoms of a mental health disorder. The impact of insomnia-related disorders is high, with affected individuals having a three- to seven-fold

greater likelihood of suffering from mental health disorders if they perform the function of first responder.

Sleep disturbance is strongly correlated with the severity of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the symptoms of which can worsen during the day as an individual becomes more fatigued. Untreated insomnia is associated with a risk of major depression.

Compared to people without sleep disorders, those who suffer from sleep problems and insomnia are more likely to experience greater physical distress, mental distress and disorders, chronic pain, substance use, burn-out, anxiety, depression, and suicidal urges. This can result in poorer health and quality of life outcomes, including reduced cognitive and social functions. As a result, the professional and personal lives of police officers suffering from poor sleep are impacted by such things as greater irritability and personal friction.

INSOMNIA POSES HEALTH AND SAFETY RISKS IN THE WORKPLACE

Several studies demonstrate the impact of sleep disorders on officer safety:

- Among police officers, the number of accidents attributable to sleep is much higher among workers with atypical schedules.
- Among police cadets, the likelihood of at least one professional error decreases with each hour of sleep.
- Sleep disturbances among police officers lead to reduced job performance (e.g., administrative errors, falling asleep while driving, disciplinary violations).
- Officers suffering from insomnia will be more than twice as likely to go on disability leave.
- Sleep disturbances affect the level of alertness and the reaction of personnel to the high-risk challenges associated with their day-to-day duties.

Policing is an environment recognized for longer tenure. This is important because, as members get older, they are also known to have more difficulties coping with night shifts. While younger members are more adaptable to poor sleep hygiene, members with 10 or more years of service require

special attention to their sleep routine to reduce the impact of shift schedules on their sleep patterns.

ORGANIZATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH SOLUTIONS

There's been great progress made in recent years to encourage conversations around mental health. The reality is that there's still a great deal of stigma around mental health disorders and too many officers will wait too long before asking for help and, when they are ready to do so, they often don't know where to go.

Encourage your members to be conscious of their sleep quality and to take action to improve their sleep because doing so means they will be better equipped to deal with the high level of stress their duties entail. Sleep does not carry the stigma of mental health, yet its evaluation and treatment will both reveal and treat mental health disorder symptoms.

Good employee sleep not only ensures the health and wellbeing of police personnel, but it will also help drive down absenteeism and presenteeism (the rote attendance of an individual at work), as well as reduce disability risks and the risk of workplace incidents.

The research is clear: officers with better sleep are better equipped to respond to emergency situations, assist their community, and provide higher performance levels to their organizations. ♦

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