

# Mentally Healthy Workplaces and COVID-19: Emerging Issues



## The hidden impact of COVID-19 on sleep

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Australian Government  
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**THE MENTALLY  
HEALTHY  
WORK  
PLACE ALLIANCE**

## Overview: COVID-19 and sleep



Inadequate sleep can impact productivity, concentration, performance and mood. It can also create significant safety concerns, particularly in high-risk roles.



Changed circumstances and concerns about COVID-19 may impact the quality or amount of sleep people are getting, leading to tiredness and fatigue.



Workplaces can increase awareness of healthy sleep behaviours or adopt fatigue management strategies where people are at risk of poor sleep.

## Introduction

COVID-19 brought new challenges for many people that may have disrupted their sleep. This includes having blending work and sleep environments and working longer hours, through to increased anxiety or worry about loved ones or financial concerns.

This disrupted or inadequate sleep can have major impacts on physical and mental health.

This guide helps organisations understand what they can do to support awareness of the health benefits of quality sleep and promote action to improve sleep.

“Organisations need to be authentic and realistic about supporting people’s sleep. It’s very easy to say, ‘make sure you get enough sleep, because it’s good for you.’ But if the work or workplace is not supporting sleep, or people are being discouraged when reporting issues with sleep or work making them tired, then that’s a problem.”

**Professor Sally Ferguson**, Director of the Appleton Institute

# About COVID-19 and sleep

There are a range of ways that COVID-19 may have impacted sleep within your workplace. These include

- Longer shifts or workdays creating less time for sleep.
- Sleep difficulties from blending work and sleep environments while working from home.
- Worry and anxiety about things such as COVID-19, work or finances.
- People working later to fit work around other responsibilities such as home schooling or caring for others.
- Disrupted daily routines impacting sleep routines.
- Staying awake to check in on family and friends in different time zones.
- Disruption to regular exercise routine, such as gyms being shut down for cleaning or being short staffed.
- Being on call for work.

## Impacts of poor sleep

Poor quality sleep, or not getting enough sleep, can lead to people experiencing difficulties functioning during the day. This can reduce productivity and the quality of work, as well as increase safety risks. Inadequate sleep is a key risk factor for fatigue (see the companion guide in this series, *Identifying and managing fatigue and burnout during COVID-19*, [available here](#)).

All organisations need to consider how inadequate sleep affects their people, says Dr Teri Lillington, Occupational and Environmental Physician and Fellow of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine.

Dr Lillington points to research into the effect of sleep deprivation on cognitive abilities that found being awake for 17 hours is equivalent to having a blood alcohol concentration of .05, which is the legal limit for driving in Australia.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, experts such as the Sleep Health Foundation emphasise that sleep is as fundamental to health as diet and exercise. The Sleep Health Foundation notes the impacts of inadequate sleep can include:

- Difficulties thinking clearly and making decisions.
- Difficulties concentrating at work.
- Becoming irritable, angry and upset more quickly.
- Experiencing anxiety and worry greater than normal.
- Reduced physical health (e.g. activity levels).
- Reduced immunity and ability to fight infections.



## Scale of the issue

The *Bedtime Reading* report from the Senate inquiry into sleep health in 2019 noted the cost of lost productivity and accidents due to poor sleep in 2016-17 was over \$24 billion.<sup>2</sup>

Professor Sally Ferguson, Director of the Appleton Institute, says reports such as *Bedtime Reading* show that 16% of people define themselves as shift workers and about 40% of those experience clinical sleep problems across their lifetime.<sup>2</sup>

There is up to 50% increased risk of occupational injury, absenteeism and errors attributed to fatigue in people with sleep disorders, according to Professor Ferguson.

"From a COVID-19 perspective, we've been using the term 'non-standard hours', which is anything that sits outside 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday. COVID-19 has turned many of us into non-standard hours workers, and this has the propensity to impact our sleep," says Professor Ferguson.

Dr Lillington, who has a special interest in work-related fatigue and sleep, says the issue of quality sleep affects many people.

She says previous research has found 40% of Australians report getting inadequate sleep and 60% report experiencing sleep problems one to three times a week.<sup>3,4</sup>

## Sleep disorders

One in five Australians are affected by a major sleep disorder, with sleep apnoea and insomnia accounting for most cases, according to *Bedtime Reading*, the report of a Senate inquiry into sleep health in 2019.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to fatigue, sleep disorders can contribute to health conditions such as diabetes, obesity and cardiovascular disease.

Many people with sleep disorders report experiencing stigma due to their condition.

Organisations can support people who may be experiencing sleep disorders by connecting them to appropriate resources and support.

As up to 80% of people experiencing sleep apnoea, a common sleep disorder, may be under-diagnosed, organisations can also promote the importance of screening and assessment.<sup>2</sup> Workplace health programs can highlight and promote the need for sleep disorders screening as it can be the cause of sleepiness and or fatigue.

Visit:

[Sleep Health Foundation, Common Sleep Disorders](#)

[healthdirect, Sleep disorders](#)

# How organisations can respond



## 1. Promoting healthier attitudes

At a cultural level, Dr Lillington says organisations can help change existing attitudes around sleep.

“For too many people, not getting enough sleep is almost a badge of honour. There’s an attitude that ‘I only got four hours sleep and I can still do all this work’. This is incredibly unhealthy and unhelpful,” she says.

## 2. Raising awareness and action

Organisations can help address problems with sleep by promoting an awareness of the importance of sleep for physical and mental health, as well as cognitive performance. They can also promote activities people can do to improve their sleep.

Dr Grace Vincent, Senior Lecturer at the Appleton Institute, says there are practical ways that organisations can help promote sleep awareness.

“That might be an education session delivered by a sleep expert, or it might be an online module of some kind,” says Dr Vincent.

“Other things we’ve seen work well can be healthy sleep workplace challenges, like the physical activity challenges in workplaces. These challenges aim to get people thinking more about their sleep, that awareness of the importance of good quality sleep and promoting that conversation. Another option could be providing potential napping areas or place for people to sleep if they become tired,” she says.

## 3. Creating authentic organisational action

Professor Ferguson says organisations need to be authentic and realistic about their support for their people’s sleep.

“It’s very easy to say, ‘make sure you get enough sleep, because it’s good for you.’ But if the work or workplace is not supporting sleep, or people are being discouraged when reporting issues with sleep or work making them tired, then that’s a problem,” Professor Ferguson says.

Workplaces can look at things like rostering, work hours, workloads, after-hours communication or how people manage work across multiple time-zones to identify ways that the workplace may be contributing to concerns about sleep. Where work demands impact on someone’s ability to get enough sleep, this should be managed like other hazards and risks as part of workplace work health and safety obligations.



## How to promote good sleep

### Organisation-level actions

Steps organisations can take:

- **Understand the issue:** Identify and mitigate workplace demands and environmental conditions that might impact people's sleep.
- **Respond to issues:** Put appropriate control measures in place to address hazards and risks related to poor sleep that you cannot remove.
- **Measure and monitor:** Review measures to ensure they are working as intended.
- **Adequate sleep spaces:** If sleeping environments are provided by the organisation or business, ensure they support quality sleep (e.g. dark room, slightly cool, reduced noise).
- **Promote awareness of healthy sleep:** Encourage education and awareness about sleep within the workplace, including strategies for creating a healthy sleep routine and the importance of screening for possible sleep disorders.
- **Reinforce education efforts:** Explore initiatives like sleep education sessions and sleep workplace challenges to reinforce education efforts.

## How to promote good sleep

### Individual-level actions

Ways individuals can improve their sleep include:

- **Switching off before bed:** Turn off electronic devices a while before bedtime to reduce exposure to strong light and disconnect from work.
- **Make an unwind routine:** A consistent routine to relax and unwind before bed can train your body and mind to prepare for sleep. You can try listening to something calming, reading a book or doing a relaxation exercise.
- **Take care of your body throughout the day:** Activities such as exercise, eating healthily and limiting alcohol and caffeine can help improve sleep.
- **Reserve your bed for sleeping:** Using your bed to watch TV or do work can make it hard for you brain to recognize when it is time for sleep. Reserving your bed for sleep can make it easier for your brain to recognize that being in bed means it is time for sleep.
- **Get out of bed if you cannot sleep:** It may sound unusual, but if you are tossing and turning for a while, get out of bed to do something quiet and calming. Go back to bed when you feel ready to fall asleep. This helps prevent stress about not falling asleep and helps create healthy associations in your brain between bed and sleep.
- **Manage worries keeping you awake:** If worries are keeping you awake, you can try talking them through with someone you trust, writing them down to come back to the next day or you can reach out to a helpline. If worries feel unmanageable, you may also benefit from connecting with a mental health professional to learn more strategies to manage worry.
- **Keep a regular sleep-wake routine:** Going to bed at the same time each night and getting up at the same time each morning is important for getting into a good sleep rhythm. For those working irregular shifts, develop a sleep routine based on shift type and maintain this as much as possible.
- **Managing sleep anxiety:** Not getting enough sleep can be stressful, and worrying about your sleep can make it harder to sleep. This can create a vicious cycle of anxiety and poor sleep. Try and take the pressure off yourself and remind yourself you can make it through the next day – and if you are tired – chances are you will sleep better the following night.
- **Talk to a sleep professional:** If you are feeling tired all the time or having ongoing difficulties with your sleep, you may benefit from talking to your GP or sleep professional for further assessment and management.

Sources:  
[Sleep Health Foundation](#)  
[Appleton Institute](#)

# Where organisations can get support



[Sleep Health Foundation, Getting good sleep during COVID-19 pandemic](#)

[Sleep Health Foundation, Shiftwork](#)

[Sleep Health Foundation, Technology and Sleep](#)

[Australasian Sleep Association, Resource Centre](#)

[Safe Work Australia, Work health and safety consultation, cooperation and coordination Code of Practice](#)

[Appleton Institute](#)

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## References

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- 2 Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport. *Bedtime Reading - Inquiry into Sleep Health Awareness in Australia*. 2019, April. Available from [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House/Health\\_Aged\\_Care\\_and\\_Sport/SleepHealthAwareness/Report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Health_Aged_Care_and_Sport/SleepHealthAwareness/Report)
- 3 Adams RJ, Appleton SL, Taylor AW, Gill TK, Lang C, McEvoy RD, Antic NA. Sleep health of Australian adults in 2016: results of the 2016 Sleep Health Foundation national survey. *Sleep Health*. 2017 Feb;3(1):35-42. doi: 10.1016/j.sleh.2016.11.005. Epub 2017 Jan 24. PMID: 28346149.
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## About this guide

This guide is part of the *Mentally Healthy Workplaces during COVID-19: Emerging Issues* series, created by the National Mental Health Commission and the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance.

The series explores key issues workplaces are facing due to the challenges created by COVID-19. Each guide provides a summary of the issue, expert guidance on actions organisations can take and, links to further resources.

This guide has been developed in association with:

- **Professor Sally Ferguson**, Director, Appleton Institute, CQUniversity Adelaide.
- **Dr Grace Vincent**, Senior Lecturer, Appleton Institute, School of Health, Medical and Applied Sciences, CQUniversity.
- **Dr Teri Lillington**, Occupational and Environmental Physician and Fellow of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine.
- **Professor Shantha Rajaratnam**, Chair of the Sleep Health Foundation.

### Read more

- The guides in this series include:
  - Helping people return to workplaces after extended periods working at home during COVID-19.
  - Strategies to support wellbeing of decision makers through periods of sustained pressure.
  - Identifying and managing fatigue and burnout during COVID-19.
  - The hidden impact of COVID-19 on sleep.
  - Creating mentally healthy hybrid teams in the recovery from COVID-19.
  - Responding to COVID-19 concerns in the workplace.
  - Supporting people experiencing post-COVID-19 syndrome.
- [Visit the Commission's website](#) to download the series.



## National Workplace Initiative

- The National Mental Health Commission and Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance are developing the National Workplace Initiative to create a national approach to mentally healthy workplaces.
- [Visit the Commission's website](#) to learn more about the National Workplace Initiative.

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