

Health and Fitness

Stay Awake Without Caffeine: Lessons from the Graveyard Shift

by Angie Mansfield

It's time to think about cutting back on caffeine.

I know what you're going to say: "You want me to do *what?*"

On the surface, giving up caffeine seems to go against the very nature of freelance work. After all, who can function without a cup of coffee (or two) in the morning?

The problem arises when that cup of coffee no longer gives you the energy it did at first. The pep wears off sooner than it used to, and now you find yourself indulging in another cup midmorning, then another one after lunch. Soon the caffeine starts affecting your ability to sleep; you wake up still tired in the morning and fight fatigue throughout the day. So you reach for more coffee, soda or high-caffeine energy drink.

But it isn't just your sleep cycle affected by caffeine.

Even if you find it easy to fall asleep at bedtime, your caffeine intake may be interfering with the depth and quality of your slumber. In his book *Caffeine Blues*, Stephen Cherniske cites studies that show caffeine's interference with regular users' sleep, causing them to wake often through the night and limiting the amount of time spent in Stage Four (the deepest stage) sleep. And one particular study debunked the notion that caffeine only interrupts sleep when

taken late in the day: a moderate dose of caffeine was given to study participants at seven in the morning. By 11 that night, the caffeine level in their blood had dropped by 80 percent, but they still experienced sleep disturbances, especially in Stage Four.

But it isn't just your sleep cycle affected by caffeine. Regular use can also contribute to raised blood pressure, irregular heartbeat, accelerated breathing and anxiety. And caffeine is a mildly addictive drug, meaning that your body builds up a tolerance over time (which is why it takes more coffee to keep you awake now than it used to). Also, those trying to quit cold turkey may experience varying degrees of withdrawal symptoms, including headaches, irritability, inability to concentrate, nervousness and sleepiness. These symptoms can appear after only a few hours without caffeine.

So how do you give up on caffeine and still be able to stay awake all day while maintaining enough energy to complete those mountains of work?

Actually, there are several ways; and in my years of working the graveyard shift I tried them all. Here are a few of my favorites; they'll help you cut down your caffeine intake without your kids or spouse finding you facedown and snoring on a stack of paperwork:

The Power Nap. Far and away the most effective energy boost I found was the power nap. Short naps have been shown to have a great regenerative effect, increasing alertness and mental clar-

ity. But there's a trick to avoiding sleep inertia (that groggy feeling upon waking): Keep your nap either twenty minutes or less, or at least an hour. In either case, you stand less of a chance of waking up in Stage Three (slow wave) sleep which forces your brain to work overtime to catch up.

Change Things Up. Follow sedentary tasks with more active ones to keep your mind engaged and keep boredom (and the resulting fatigue) at bay. Work on that writing project for a couple hours, then take a few minutes to organize your desk, dust your work area, or some other activity. Just be careful with this one: don't get so caught up in organizing your office that you never get back to your project!

Take A Walk. Let's face it: even in the most ergonomic of workspaces, sitting at a desk all day can be draining. When you feel those eyelids beginning to droop, it may



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Energy Snacks

We've established that going hungry and eating sugary foods have similar effects: they interfere with blood sugar levels, causing fatigue. The following four types of snacks provide energy without the crash:

Berries. High in vitamins, fiber and antioxidants. Also high water content and low calories.

Nuts. Many are high in protein and nuts help you feel full to tide you over to your next meal.

Crunchy Vegetables. Many vegetables contain cancer-fighting compounds, as well as vitamins, minerals and fiber.

Whole Grains. Loaded with protein, vitamins, minerals and fiber, as well as many of the same antioxidants as fruits and vegetables. Try a slice of whole grain bread with peanut butter for a quick boost.

be time to step out—literally. Take a short walk, even if it's just to the kitchen for a drink. Exercise, even in the form of a few minutes of walking, improves circulation and is a great energizer. If you simply can't get away from your desk, you can substitute stretching exercises, which you can do right in your chair.

Frequent Breaks. Instead of taking one long lunch break, take several short breaks throughout the day. As little as ten to fifteen minutes can help clear your mind and give you that "recharged" feeling and boost your productivity. A study conducted by Louisiana State University comparing three different schedules for computer users found that briefer, more frequent breaks were better in terms of fighting fatigue.

Drink Plenty of Water. Dehydration is another energy thief, making you feel lightheaded, dizzy and fatigued. You've heard the advice about drinking at least eight glasses of water a day; now you have another reason to follow it.

Avoid Sugar. It's tempting to replace your quick caffeine pick-me-up with a quick sugary pick-me-up. However, sweets cause a rapid rise in blood sugar (which is what gives you the short energy boost) and then a sharp decline (the sugar "crash"). When the blood sugar level drops, it causes drowsiness—which is what you're trying to avoid.

Snack Right. The wrong snacks (see "Avoid Sugar" above) can rob you of energy instead of boosting it. But the right snacks, such as fresh fruits and veggies, are an even more effective source of energy than your old caffeine habit. Complex carbs, like whole grains, will also give you a boost without the crash.

Avoid That Tummy

Growl. While we're on the subject of food and snacking, here's another important point: don't skip meals. Going hungry affects your blood sugar levels, which will make you tired and reduce mental clarity.

Meditate. I know; when you think of meditation, your mind conjures a person sitting cross-legged in the candle light, eyes closed and perhaps chanting a mantra. And while I'm not saying that level of meditation is bad, it's not necessary to get that involved to reap the benefits. There have

been many studies showing that meditation, even short three-to-five minute sessions, can fight both fatigue and stress. Just close your eyes, concentrate on your breathing (slowly, in through the nose and out through the mouth), and imagine a calming scene. You'll be surprised at the effect it can have—especially without those coffee jitters. ☐

Angie Mansfield lives, works and writes in southern Minnesota. She lives with a mouthy cat and a neurotic dog who are glad she gave up caffeine long ago.

How To Quit Without Withdrawals

Caffeine withdrawals can last one to five days and range from headaches and sleepiness to irritability and depression. Here are some ways to cut down without the withdrawals, according to Stephen Cherniske in his book *Caffeine Blues*:

Drink half-caf. Make your morning pot of coffee with half regular, half decaf beans—or buy one of the half-and-half blends available.

Use a smaller cup. It seems silly, but you can "fool" yourself into drinking less coffee by using a smaller mug.

Brew weaker coffee. If you like your coffee strong enough to dissolve your spoon, you may be able to cut down your caffeine a bit by gradually weakening your brew.

Add more milk. The added milk reduces the amount of coffee in the cup and therefore the amount of caffeine.

"Wean" yourself off. Gradually replace your regular coffee with decaf or herbal coffee. Cherniske recommends making the replacement over a period of two weeks to avoid withdrawals.