

THE NIGHT SHIFT

**IS YOUR DAY JOB TURNING
INTO A 24/7 SLEEP THIEF?
YOU'RE NOT ALONE**

ARTICLE BY MATT DRISCOLL

Nearly every business owner knows the experience: you toss and turn all night or wake up in the small hours, your mind busy wrestling with problems and seeking solutions. The next day you push your fatigue aside and carry on with your day.

Business owners Debbie DeCaire and her husband Steve Blanchet know the feeling well: if one of them isn't awake, it seems the other one is.

"Nighttime is active in our house. Generally Steve is up at two, and I'm up around four o'clock," says Debbie. "There are lots of nights like that. It can go months at a stretch."

Although it isn't usually something that's discussed openly, many business owners and entrepreneurs suffer through the same problem.

The link between long hours at work and shorter nights of sleeping is clear: according to Statistics Canada, if you work more than nine hours a day you probably sleep almost an hour less than people who spend less time on the job.

Statistics Canada doesn't track the cause and effect relationship of work and sleep, but anecdotal evidence is clear: over the course of weeks and months, that hour or two every night can add up.

Steve Blanchet of CSR Cosmetic Solutions and Debbie DeCaire of Skipwith and Associates

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“You learn to deal with it, but you end up closing your eyes at terrible times,” says Debbie, who runs Skipwith and Associates in Barrie, a company that specializes in the design and development of employee group benefits and pensions plans. “When you have the grandkids over, they want to play and you just can’t keep your eyes open. You try but you just can’t be as present as you should be or want to be because it’s just been a rough week.”

Debbie’s husband Steve owns CSR Cosmetic Solutions, a Barrie cosmetics manufacturer with over 100 employees. Between the concerns of staff, clients and the bottom line, the stresses can add up.

“If you’re both working until 7:30 or 8 p.m., by the time you have dinner and wind down a bit you want to connect and share what you’re worrying about or working on,” she says. “The problem is those conversations sometimes don’t start until 9:30 and 10 p.m., and then your brain can get re-activated and you’re wired.”

Then again, sharing the stress with your partner can be an effective way to relieve it. Debbie says their best coping mechanism is to rely on one another during times of intense stress to lighten the load on their partner.

Another Barrie business owner who knows all about the challenges of sleep deprivation is Chris Whatley. In fact, Chris’s own challenges with getting proper sleep led him and his wife Irene to open Unique Sleep Solutions.

“I wasn’t getting the sleep to perform the way I needed to in the day. I was irritable and I was tired,” says Chris. “The days I would commute to work, it was tough. There were days that you’re almost falling asleep behind the wheel because you’re not getting enough sleep. It affects everything – from how you interact with people to how productive you are.”

In his 40s Chris suffered through intense back pain, to the point he needed to use a cane just to get around. After

some success with a chiropractor, Chris eventually began producing his own line of latex mattresses to compliment the chiropractic work and help him sleep better.

He says the difference was night and day, so to speak, and the ability to get a good rest made him more effective in his business.

“In today’s day and age business owners aren’t looking for time to take naps, they’re looking to be more productive and to be pleasant in front of their customers and employees,” he says. “They need to be on their game as often as possible.”

It’s also important to keep your family involved in the process, says Chris.

“Talk to your wife or your spouse and let them know so they understand why you’re being irritable. It’s not because you don’t like them; it’s because you’re not getting the sleep you need,” he says. “Together you might come up with a solution.”

Chris and Irene now devote much of their time to research in the area of what is called “sleep hygiene.” Chris says they’ve found some guidelines that hold particularly true for business owners; many of whom have come to

Unique Sleep looking for sleep solutions.

“It is very important for business owners to develop consistent and effective bedtime routines,” says Chris. “Everything from the sleep environment, to the foods and beverages consumed in the hours leading up to bed, as well as activities like computer work, watching movies or reading all can have an impact on the quality of one’s sleep. Just going to bed at the same time each night can help.”

Psychotherapist Eric Rubel agrees that a routine can be a key aspect of getting your body and mind ready for sleep.

Eric is the national clinical director for Aspiria, a company that provides counselling and wellness services to organizations

across Canada. Eric’s specific background is in addictive behaviour but he deals regularly with individuals experiencing sleep problems, and also makes presentations to groups on the subject.

“Whether you’re a business owner or not, a lot of sleeping issues tend to be pretty similar,” says Eric. “Many tend to have some stress or anxiety issues that they’re dealing with. Some could be on a chronic basis, while other individuals have anxiety or stress issues that are more situational.”

When it comes to getting the right amount of sleep, everyone’s different, says Eric. For a typical person eight hours is the recommended guideline, but anywhere between seven and nine could be suitable depending on the individual.

“We’ve all heard people who say, ‘all I need is four hours sleep and I’m fine,’” says Eric. “Some people can function on lower levels of sleep for a while, but over the long term sleep deprivation adds up.”

The consequences can include impaired cognitive function and slowed reaction time, which can impact everything from your business acumen to your safety behind the wheel. It can also affect your immune system, lowering your defenses and making you more susceptible to illness, says Eric.

There are options and solutions (see sidebar). But it’s also helpful just to acknowledge that sleeping well is a problem that many business owners share.

“The worst thing you can do in business is to freeze and not be able to make decisions,” says Debbie Decaire. “But when you’re tired sometimes you just can’t, and then you’re even further behind the eight-ball.”

Taking steps to deal with it can help everyone rest easily.

TAKE THE RIGHT STEPS TO GET A GOOD NIGHT’S SLEEP

Not getting enough sleep can have a profound impact on all areas of your life. It can impair your ability to think properly, slow your reaction time, and affect your ability to deal rationally and calmly with challenges.

Stress can be a major cause of sleeplessness, particularly if you’re running your own business. And while there’s only so much you can do to reduce stress, psychotherapist Eric Rubel says there are ways to improve your sleep.

Sleep in a dark, quiet room - “If you’re trying to sleep in a room next door to where the television is on or the radio is playing that could affect having a good night’s sleep,” says Eric.

Use the office for work and the bedroom for sleep. “A lot of people will bring their work with them or they will watch television. All of those things are very stimulating. You don’t want to stimulate your nervous system so you’re alert; you want to be calming down.”

Take a hot bath, meditate or read a chapter of a book prior to bed. Sometimes called “sleep hygiene,” doing calming activities before going to bed can have a profound effect on your rest.

Use white noise to block out other sounds. White noise generators are inexpensive and effective. You can also try just running a fan. Several streaming audio services have white noise playlists.

Avoid alcohol, caffeine and cigarettes. “Those are stimulants and they can interfere with the sleep cycle, so avoid them for four to six hours before going to sleep.”

If necessary, use a sleep aid in the form of a mild tranquilizer or sedative – “If people do choose to do that they need to work with their doctor very closely in terms of their prescription, because those can be very addictive.”

Use melatonin – Our bodies naturally produce this hormone at night, and melatonin supplements are an over-the-counter way to ease insomnia. Some people find that melatonin gives them unpleasantly vivid dreams or leaves them feeling groggy. As with any medication, talk to a doctor or pharmacist about possible side-effects, particularly if you may become pregnant.