

Working Parents Are Sleep Deprived When It Matters Most for Their Career: Here's How to Cope

These are the years when you're supposed to be busting your butt to get ahead—but all you can think about is going back to bed. Here are helpful ways to balance work and weariness so you can stay on top of your job, especially when you don't have adequate paternity leave to fall back on.

By Mary Squillace | February 10, 2020



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It's a story that probably sounds familiar: I became a mom, and so began several months of operating on no more than three consecutive hours of rest. I felt like a sleepwalker, rarely getting shuteye but never being quite awake either. When I was on maternity leave and my only job was caring for my newborn, these zombie-like tendencies weren't a big deal. My performance goals were low—putting on a clean pair of pants was promotion-worthy. And since my boss stayed alert for only a couple of hours at a time, I could usually get away with dozing during the workday.

However, returning to my actual workplace 12 weeks postpartum was another story. I fought drooping eyelids and mental fog as I tried to write emails to colleagues. Emails that mattered. Emails that people would read. And despite my brain sputtering at half speed, I had to work faster than ever in order to dash out the door on time for day-care pickup.

It's not just new moms who need a lot of coffee, though. Research has shown that parents face disrupted sleep for up to six years after the birth of their first child. (Just when things seem OK, your preschooler's sleep regression can land you back at square one.) Being exhausted isn't just a nuisance; it can make you more irritable and affect your relationships at work, says Shalini Paruthi, M.D., medical codirector of St. Luke's Sleep Medicine and Research Center, in St. Louis. You may start moving more slowly and take longer to perform even basic tasks.

"And if the deprivation increases, the next thing to go is accuracy—you start to make mistakes," says Dr. Paruthi. "You might catch some before they cause trouble, but others may be harmful, especially if you operate heavy machinery," including a car. "If you cut out an hour of sleep every night for a week, by the end of the week you're no more alert than a person who is legally drunk," says James B. Maas, Ph.D., author of *Power Sleep, Sleep for Success!*, and *Sleep to Win!* When Ashley Jacobs, a former morning news anchor, was balancing early motherhood with the 1:30 a.m. wake-ups required for her job, she realized her lack of sleep had reached dangerous levels after she was pulled over for swerving. "I was falling asleep at the wheel. I didn't know what exit I was at," she says.

Aside from your own safety, not to mention others on the road, you may be worried about the health of your career. It's a bitter coincidence that a woman's prime childbearing years coincide with some of the most pivotal years for her professionally. So how do you lean in when all you really want to do is lie down? Try these expert-backed tips for feeling more awake at work.

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Enforce an Early Bedtime Routine

As tempted as you may be to squeeze in all the chores (or all the Netflix) in those precious hours between your kid's bedtime and your own, don't. "Go to sleep as early as possible, even if it's a time that seems comically early," says Laura Vanderkam, author of *168 Hours: You Have More Time Than You Think*. "Even though there are a million things you could be doing, just go to bed." You may be destined for wake-ups later in the night, but getting a few continuous hours of sleep earlier is especially crucial when it comes to feeling refreshed come morning.

A consistent sleep routine—going to bed and waking up at the same time within an hour or so every day—is key to feeling rested. "We almost always have a wake-up alarm to tell us it's time to get out of bed, but I think it's also important to have a bedtime alarm. We get caught up in whatever we're doing, and before we know it, it's way too late," says Dr. Paruthi. She suggests setting an alarm 15 to 30 minutes before you intend to hit the sheets so you have time to wind down. (FYI: iPhone has a 15-minute bedtime warning when you use the bedtime alarm.) Then keep your phone and tablet out of sight because the blue light they emit can stimulate your brain, making nodding off trickier.



Adam Kuylenstierna/EyeEm/Getty Images

Share the Sleep Debt

Whether you're dealing with wee-hour feedings or night terrors, getting uninterrupted sleep may be out of the question. But if possible, don't bear that burden solo. You shouldn't be "on duty" more than three nights in a row if there is a partner who can help. One of you should be on call for wake-ups for three nights and then off for three nights, recommends Dr. Maas. (If you breastfeed, you can pump for your nights off or at least have your partner bring your baby to you and handle any diaper changes.) A system of three on, three off gives your biological clock a chance to reset, whereas switching off every other night puts your body into a jet lag–like state every two days. And if single, consider asking a relative or friend to sleep over if possible.

Lighten Up

That gleaming orb in the morning sky is one of your best allies for feeling human again. As soon as you wake up, flood your room with as much sunshine as possible, suggests Whitney Roban, Ph.D., a sleep specialist at SolveOurSleep.com. "This signals to your body that it should suppress production of melatonin, and it resets your circadian rhythm for the day, giving you energy immediately." Aim for about 15 minutes of bright light in the a.m., which you can achieve while walking the dog or taking your child to day care.

When you get to work, make your office as bright as possible, and try to go outside for even a minute or two of sunshine anytime you start to get sleepy. While gray skies may make you feel drowsy, you'll still receive the daylight-spectrum light your internal clock needs, but in a less powerful dose.

If you don't have access to natural light, an inexpensive light-therapy lamp can make a huge difference, says Dr. Paruthi. It just needs to be bright enough (look for one around 10,000 lux) and placed at the correct distance from your eyes (14 to 18 inches). You can use it for about 15 minutes in the morning and when you feel yourself getting worn out at work before noon.

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Get Moving

Being active may also give you a boost, says Jennifer Lea, a performance coach at Johnson & Johnson's Human Performance Institute. "You're enhancing circulation and asking your cells to create energy," she says. And we're not talking about a 30-minute workout—or even a 10-minute one. As little as one to two minutes can give you a lift. "One of my favorite things to do is find a private space, pick a high-energy song, and have a little dance break for 40 seconds," says Lea.

If you're in a workplace that's not conducive to dance breaks, just put a favorite up-tempo tune on in your earbuds and go for a walk instead. A quick outdoor jaunt can provide a triple boost: fresh air, sunshine, and pumping endorphins. Taking a lap around the office floor or even climbing up or down a few flights of stairs will suffice if weather prevents you from an alfresco stroll.

Fuel Your Day

A vending-machine candy bar may seem enticing when you're running on fumes, but the lift it provides will be short-lived. Samantha Cassetty, R.D., director of nutrition at TheHealthyMommy.com, says, "You want energy that's going to be slow and steady. What brings you that is the combination of carbs, protein, and fat." Good choices: a banana with nut butter, red-pepper strips and guacamole, or pumpkin seeds and dried fruit.

And remember to drink water. "Lots of people don't realize that being dehydrated is a major cause of fatigue," says Cassetty. The less water you have in your system, the lower your blood volume—and that means your heart has to work harder to get oxygen to your brain. "Busy moms may not think about drinking water throughout the day, but it can really reinvigorate you." She recommends putting a bottle at your desk in the morning and aiming to drink 32 ounces by the end of the day and another 32 before bed.



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Caffeinate Carefully

There are some days when the strength of your parenting skills feels directly proportional to the strength of your coffee. “I now have a deep appreciation for cold brew,” says Mollie Smith-Wood, a director of special education at a high school in West Philadelphia, who had to go back to work when her daughter was just 5 weeks old.

Nobody’s going to pry that cherished cup of joe from your hands, but experts do advise imbibing intentionally. “Caffeine will help you power through the morning, but it stays in your body longer than you think,” says Dr. Roban. Research suggests that consuming caffeine as many as six hours before bedtime can make it harder to fall asleep. Even if that java is calling your name, cut off all caffeine consumption (including chocolate and decaf, which isn’t entirely uncaffeinated) by 2 p.m.

If your exhaustion is seriously compromising your work or putting you in danger, consider taking a sick day that will get you off the road and into bed.

Make Time to Nap if You Can

Steal a page from your little one’s agenda. A 10- to 30-minute catnap is an effective way to feel more awake and may improve performance. Just make sure you don’t nap too long (snoozing for more than a half hour could put you into a deeper sleep, leaving you groggier) or too late in the day (this could interfere with your ability to sleep at night).

“I would go to my car, put the seat down or get into the back seat, and put my jacket over my eyes for darkness. Then I would set an alarm so I could get up after 20 to 30 minutes,” says Sara Abate Rez, a branding expert in Vaughan, Ontario, whose sleep deprivation affected her mood, memory, and focus when her first child was an infant. “It really refreshed me, and I could better deal with the rest of the afternoon.”

If sneaking away for 15 minutes is out of the question, tide yourself over with shorter periods of rest, even if that means just closing your eyes on the toilet for a few minutes.

Know When to Declare a Sleep Emergency

If your exhaustion is seriously compromising your work or putting you in danger, consider taking a sick day that will get you off the road and into bed. “I’m a big proponent of taking a mental-health day, but using it just to sleep will throw off your circadian rhythm,” says Dr. Roban. “Instead, use the day to relax, and if you do need to sleep, end your nap before 3 p.m.”

You should also think about whether it makes sense to discuss your sleep deprivation with your manager. Even if you feel comfortable speaking up, frame it carefully. “Bosses don’t want to hear about problems; they want to hear solutions,” says Lisa Durante, a career consultant and strategist for working parents in Toronto. Prior to your chat, assess the situation and figure out what you think you can change to achieve a different outcome. Maybe you’ll try a new sleep-training tactic or enlist your partner’s help for nighttime wake-ups. Rather than opening the conversation with, “I’m so exhausted I can’t concentrate,” say, “This is what’s happening right now, but I want to let you know that we’re taking these steps to fix it at home,” and go from there, suggests Durante.

Sleep deprivation may feel like a parent’s rite of passage, but that doesn’t mean you need to suffer unnecessarily. If you think it might work for you, consider enlisting professional help, in the form of a sleep consultant to address your child’s sleep issues or a doctor who can rule out a potential sleep disorder. Most important, know that this torture will not last forever, says Lea. “For new moms, especially, that fact can get lost in the shuffle. But I’m here to tell you that this too shall pass. You’re not destined to be exhausted for the rest of your life.”