

Why Sleep Matters in Policing



Blue Ground

Sleep is the Foundation of Operational Readiness.

It affects reaction time, decision-making, emotional steadiness, memory, and physical safety. In policing, disrupted sleep is common due to:

- Rotating shifts
- Night work
- High vigilance that doesn't switch off
- Exposure to stress and adrenaline
- Irregular routines and unpredictable overtime

Understanding sleep pressure and how to stabilise it helps officers protect their performance and long-term wellbeing.

How Shift Work Impacts the Body

Shift work disrupts the body's circadian rhythm — the internal clock that regulates sleep, alertness, digestion, and hormones. Officers often experience:

- Difficulty falling asleep
- Waking frequently
- Feeling wired but tired
- Reduced deep sleep
- Fatigue during night shifts
- Mood changes or irritability

The Three Pillars of Sleep for Shift Workers

1. Sleep Pressure (Homeostatic Drive) - Sleep pressure builds the longer you're awake. It resets with sleep.

Key insight: Even short naps reduce sleep pressure and improve alertness.

2. Circadian Rhythm (Body Clock) - Your internal clock prefers regularity. Shift work disrupts this.

Key insight: Light exposure is the strongest way to influence your rhythm.

3. Vigilance Load - High alertness during shift increases adrenaline and delays sleep.

Key insight: Down-regulation before bed improves sleep quality.

Practical Strategies for Shift Workers

| Before Night Shift | During Night Shift | After Night Shift |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Take a 20–90-minute nap if possible● Reduce bright light exposure in the hours before shift● Eat a light, balanced meal● Use a micro reset to lower pre-shift tension | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Use bright light to stay alert● Take short movement breaks● Use micro resets to reduce vigilance spikes● Stay hydrated and avoid heavy meals | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Wear sunglasses on the way home to reduce light stimulation● Keep your wind-down ritual simple and consistent● Aim for a sleep window of 4–6 hours initially● Use a cool, dark, quiet sleep environment |

Protecting Sleep on Rotating Rosters

Forward-Rotating Shifts (Day → Afternoon → Night)

Easier on the body. Try to maintain consistent sleep and wake times.

Backward-Rotating Shifts (Night → Afternoon → Day)

Harder on the body. Prioritise naps and micro resets.

Quick Adjustments That Help

- Keep your bedroom dark and cool
- Use white noise or earplugs
- Limit caffeine 6 hours before sleep
- Avoid screens 30 minutes before bed
- Use breath pacing to down-regulate

These small behaviours help your body shift gears faster, reducing sleep disruption across rotations.

Vigilance, Adrenaline & Sleep

High-vigilance work increases adrenaline and cortisol. These chemicals:

- Delay sleep onset
- Reduce deep sleep
- Increase night waking
- Make the body feel “on” even when exhausted

How to Reduce Vigilance Before Sleep

- Use a micro reset (90-second reset or breath ladder)
- Take a warm shower to trigger a cooling response
- Dim lights
- Avoid debriefing high-intensity events right before bed
- Use a simple grounding ritual

When adrenaline stays high after shift, your system needs a deliberate down-shift to move back toward sleep.

What Good Sleep Rhythm Looks Like for Shift Workers

- Falling asleep more easily
- Waking less often
- Feeling more alert on shift
- Less irritability
- Faster recovery after nights
- More capacity at home
- Feeling more steady across roster changes

Good sleep for shift workers is not about perfection — it’s about pattern stability and recovery.

Shift work makes sleep harder — not impossible. Small, consistent adjustments protect readiness, recovery, and long-term wellbeing.

