

My Partner and I Have Opposite Schedules

Advice from relationship experts and couples who deal with these challenges for how to live happily and improve your sleep when you have this lifestyle.

BY DIANA KELLY LEVEY

WHEN MY NOW HUSBAND and I first started dating, he worked “midnights” as a New York City police officer and I was a freelance writer working days, including a part-time editor job in an office. Though I found him charming, his schedule was unappealing. I tended to wake up around 8 a.m. and go to bed at 11:30 p.m. He went to work at 10 p.m. to start his 11:30 shift and finished around 8 a.m.

Throughout our courtship, he would text me during his overnight shift and let me know he was thinking about me. I’d text him in the morning when he was taking the train home. Then he’d go to sleep, and we’d text or talk later in the day, when I was done work and he’d be getting ready to start his day.

Getting together in person was a challenge as well. My husband would be a total champ—going out with my friends—but then he’d be awake during the night while I slept. The next morning, he’d sleep in and I’d scale back any early activities to give him time to rest. He was extremely tired during many of our dates but didn’t complain. Though he was doing most of the sleep switching, I wondered how long we were going to have to follow this schedule—the rest of our lives?

This type of partnership is more common than you might think—especially among nurses, doctors, firefighters, police officers, truckers, factory workers and security guards.

“Some couples can find

this to be a strain on their relationship, and others adapt to it well,” says Rita Aouad, M.D., sleep medicine/psychiatry expert at Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center. “How [successful you are with it] is how well you handle the stress in a relationship,” she says.

Here’s how couples make it work, plus advice from relationship experts on how to make the best of this situation.

Carve Out Time

April S. has been working the night shift for about 14 years and prefers it to working days. She and her live-in boyfriend work opposite schedules in rural Pennsylvania. “I work from 7 p.m. to 6 a.m. He works from 8 a.m. to



5 p.m.," she says. April sees her boyfriend briefly in the morning, then sleeps until about 4 p.m. and has dinner with him when he comes home from work. "I see him for about an hour or so, every Monday through Thursday, and then we have the weekends off together," she says.

"I've been on this schedule since before I met my boyfriend," April says. "I try not to change my schedule too drastically, because I've seen what happens when you do the turnarounds...switching from day to night, day to night, incessantly. You mess up your internal clock," she says.

"When you don't have time together, it can be hard to stay connected," explains Robert Solley, Ph.D., a couples therapist in Noe Valley, California. "Most people like to have some time together every day when they can check in. Not having that can create distance."

Make the most of the time that you do have together, suggests Solley. Plan some fun activities for the two of you. When April and her boyfriend worked opposite schedules in New York, they'd go driving at night and make a game out of finding out what places were open 24 hours.

Find Creative Ways to Stay Connected

It was always nice to wake up to the sweet texts my husband sent while he was working. I used to occasionally slip a note into his backpack or lunch for him to find later at work.

"Stay in touch as much as possible during the week by leaving notes, messaging

each other and calling each other during work times if that's possible," suggests Solley. Touch base and let your partner know you care, says Solley.

"Some of the ingredients of romance are sacrifice, surprise and attention for the other person," says Solley. "It's a small sacrifice to write out a note instead of texting it. It takes more effort and is fun to receive. That makes it more meaningful," he says.

Be Respectful of Each Other's Sleep

Within about 10 months of us dating, my husband switched to a more "normal" schedule—3:30 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. It's better, but it's still a challenge in many respects. He gets home in the early hours of the morning, and I'm usually passed out by then. Occasionally, I'll stay up to chat—or we'll have a conversation in bed that I don't remember well the next morning—but then I'm still getting up around 8 a.m. to start my workday and am tired from staying up.

I'm fortunate that my husband is always quiet and respectful of my sleep when he comes into our dark bedroom. In the morning, I try to get dressed as quietly as I can. We manage to work it out—but there are many days/nights when our sleep is messed up by his work schedule.

"My sleep was getting worse over time," says Eve K., who worked as a night nurse two or three nights a week since 2004. "I used to sleep well before we had kids—and then I had a hard time making myself sleep during the day once they

MORE THAN 15 MILLION AMERICANS WORK A PERMANENT NIGHT SHIFT, WHICH AFFECTS THE BODY'S CIRCADIAN RHYTHM.

came along [they're now 4½ and 20 months]. I just couldn't do that anymore," says Eve, who has been working a daytime schedule as a psychiatric nurse practitioner since April.

"I became obsessed with getting sleep and didn't want to be disturbed," says Eve, who admits occasionally getting angry with her husband when he called, having forgotten that she was sleeping.

Her husband would keep the children quiet in the morning when she was sleeping. At night, Eve was quiet with whatever she was doing in another room while her husband slept.

Be Patient with Your Partner's Moods

When one person is doing shift work, that may mean that sleep is difficult for either of those partners if their circadian rhythms are off, says Solley. "There are studies that show how sleep deprivation increases emotional reactivity, which makes it more [challenging and stressful] when difficult things come up."

I am quite sensitive and have to remind myself

that when my husband does not feel like talking much before work, it's likely because of his lack of sleep. I try to practice more patience about not taking it personally.

"Try not to take mood swings out on your partner," April advises night-shift workers. "I know that waking me up is often like poking a bear," she says.

"Working variable shifts can disrupt sleep quality and make the person irritable," says Dr. Aouad. Try not to be too sensitive about your partner's moods, since they're likely related to their sleep problems, she says.

Stay connected with messages and notes.



remember that this is how it can feel to do activities during the day for someone who works the night shift.

"The social aspect definitely was difficult," says Eve. "People would want to do things with my husband and me on the weekends, and I couldn't. I used to try and stay awake to socialize during the day, but I would be so tired, it would make me feel sick. So I stopped [pushing through] and just said no to things. I missed a lot of parties, get-togethers and holidays, and that was kind of tough."

"When you can tell that your partner isn't sleeping well, don't push an activity on them if they need to sleep," suggests April.

Some people find it easier to stay on a nighttime sleep schedule, even on their nights off, says Dr. Aouad. "That can also be isolating for some people, because everyone else is asleep."

Both Eve and April said that it can be lonely being awake at night when it seems that the world is asleep. "Working nights can be isolating for the person on that shift and isolating for the partner who's left alone at home at night," says Dr. Aouad.

"Planning ahead and making quality time together, without any distractions, just the two of you, is so important."

Many couples have figured out how to make this work. As with any relationship, communication and trying to understand your partner's situation can go a long way. It's important to make time to talk and to let your partner get the sleep they need so they can function at their best.

Make Time to Talk

These days, my husband and I usually hang out together before he goes to work. It's his "chill" time, and it's when we catch up on what happened the day before and can have any important discussions.

"It can be harder to coordinate about practical things to work out, if you don't have time to work on [them] close to [when] it happened," says Solley.

Choose Your Time for Physical Contact

Some people might enjoy getting a kiss goodbye, even though they're asleep, while other folks might

not want to be disturbed, says Solley. You'll have to discuss with your partner what they want—and don't assume it's the same thing you desire.

Having different schedules was difficult when it came to sex, admits Eve. "When I was working nights and he would be interested in the morning, I [was] like, 'Go away. I'm tired.' Then at night, I'm sitting alone because he's passed out asleep. Trying to get on the same page with that was struggle."

"It's good, with any relationship, to discuss needs and expectations for intimacy," says Dr. Aouad.

There's no right or wrong answer when it comes to making time for sex in your relationship; it's just personal preference, she says. "Communicate your needs and expectations and come to a consensus as a couple."

Give Your Partner a Pass on Socializing

Think your partner's going to be his or her usual chipper self at the family barbecue you're dragging them to when they're used to sleeping? Guess again. Just as you probably wouldn't be super-happy to get up and go socialize in the middle of the night,