



The pursuit of wellness



4 Tips to Thrive With an Inconsistent Work Schedule

Humans are creatures of habit; that's why we thrive when we set and stick to routines. But for those who live at the mercy of an unpredictable or inconsistent work schedule, following any sort of regimen can feel just about impossible — and that inconsistency has a substantial effect on well-being. “Having irregular shift times, including on-call work, is associated with experiencing more frequent stress,” Lonnie Golden, Ph.D., a professor of economics and labor-employment relations at Penn State University, Abington, tells Thrive. This is especially true for hourly-paid workers, who are also more apt to experience work-family conflict, according to Golden's research for the Economic Policy Institute.

So, what's one to do if “on the clock” means something different each day or week? Whether you find yourself working far beyond the “end” of your shift or getting called to work a late night or early morning (when you were expecting to do the opposite), it's important to control what you can, and take small steps — like the suggestions that follow — that give you a sense of calm and consistency.

Set aside screen-free time for yourself — even if it's just a few minutes

When we stumble upon a few minutes to ourselves, many of us reach for our devices to “recharge.” The truth, though, is that a break spent scrolling isn't a break at all. Find moments throughout the day to put your screens away and stay in the present moment. Maybe you take a few breaths or do some light stretching — whatever makes you feel good. Even better, take time each morning or night before you head into work to do something that brings you joy.

When in doubt, list it out

There are several ways you can use lists to your advantage when navigating an ever-changing work schedule — and you can start the night before. Before bed, try making a list of your priorities for the next day. You'll get your plans, worries, and to-dos out of your head and onto



paper, that way they don't keep you up all night long. End each day on a similar note: Write down three things you accomplished at work, no matter how big or small. You will have something positive to reflect on, and you'll feel more motivated and engaged heading into work in the A.M.

You can also try keeping a master list of sorts outlining your favorite (and easy) go-to meals that can be prepped in advance. Making simple, healthy foods in bulk will help you save time and stress when you're called in unexpectedly or simply feel too tired to cook when you get home.

Find creative ways to build movement into your day

Mood and exercise go hand-in-hand, and according to the American Psychological Association, as few as five minutes of movement is enough to make you feel better. And while you may not be able to hit the gym or go for a run while you're on the clock, you can find creative ways to move more and stress less during the day. Whether you take the stairs instead of the elevator, park further away than you usually do, or get off public transit one stop early to walk the rest of the way, your steps will add up and boost your mood.

Have a compassionately direct conversation with your supervisor

At the end of the day (or night), you might realize that you're still struggling to thrive with an inconsistent work schedule. Start an open dialogue with your manager and let them know your current schedule is not allowing you to do your best work. You might be surprised by how willing they are to compromise — but if the inconsistency is simply unavoidable, try discussing small ways you can add more predictability or downtime to your day. Would it make a world of difference to come in an hour later or leave an hour earlier? Is it possible to switch certain shifts with a flexible co-worker? Explore different possibilities and continue taking small steps throughout the day to find your center.

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