It’s no secret that the demands of police work make getting good sleep difficult. Poor sleep—which could be due to shiftwork, organizational stress, personal life stressors or a traumatic event or accumulation of events—has been associated with poor job performance, accidents, increased alcohol use and health problems. Let’s take a look at each factor and how it can be countered.

**Shift work**
Shift-work disorder (SWD), a mismatch between internal sleep-wake cycle and the timing demands of shiftwork, affects many police officers. Unfortunately, its impact extends beyond the shiftwork years, even into retirement, because the body has never readjusted.

Research indicates that those who work straight days tend to get more sleep than those who work evenings or overnight shifts. This is, in part, due to the impact of lightness-darkness on the sleep-wake cycle. Those who work night shift are more prone to sleeplessness due to the absence of light during their waking hours and the presence of light while trying to sleep.

There are several things you can do to help. If you’re having trouble falling or staying asleep, taking melatonin three hours before going to bed may help—it promotes sleepiness. Making your sleep area as dark as possible and going to bed may help—it promotes sleepiness. Thoughts of these difficulties may prevent you from being able to fall or stay asleep.

Keep a notebook by your bed to write down your concerns. If you find thoughts interfering with your ability to drift off, write them down. If the thought comes back, remind yourself that you can’t do anything about it at the moment and have set aside a time to deal with it later.

**Traumatic event(s)**
Sometimes the intrusive thought is a memory of a traumatic event you have experienced or witnessed. This occurs because the memory hasn’t been stored in your brain properly due to the overstimulation of your amygdala. It will continue to intrude until you take measures to process the event.

Essentially, the brain has a natural drive to heal so it keeps reminding you of the event until it “learned” it has actually ended (see Shapiro’s book for a more comprehensive description). A counsellor trained in trauma, particularly EMDR, can assist you with this process and offer additional suggestions for better sleep.

Getting good sleep shouldn’t be a nightmare. Instead, diligent attention to healthy habits can result in sweet dreams.


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