



## Tired Workers Cheat And Use Bad Judgment

Insights

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I have always assumed that exhaustion affects our judgment, makes us sloppy and unsafe, and more prone to anger. Behavioral research supports my assumptions. Perhaps our first wellness step should be a campaign to get employees to sleep . . . and to follow our own advice!

Dr. Christopher M. Barnes posted a provocatively titled May 31st blog, *“Sleep-Deprived People Are More Likely To Cheat”* on the Harvard Business Review Blog Network. Barnes pointed out that:

*the workplace has many temptations that employees must resist, from the petty impulse to claim credit for someone else’s work to the unscrupulous lapse of lying in a negotiation context, to the criminal act of misrepresenting financial numbers. Recent research indicates that self-control is a key determinant of whether or not people fall to or resist such temptations. When their ability to exert self-control is high, they can resist.*

University of Kentucky professor and DeWall Lab Director, Dr. C. Nathan DeWall, has lectured and written on self-control and “self-regulation depletion.” To grossly oversimplify some of his conclusions, he has documented how metabolic depletion (lack of energy) and sleep deprivation limits one’s self-control.

Dr. Barnes also cites various researchers who have established that: the act of using self-control draws upon this fuel, which exhausts the fuel. Thus, one’s ability to exert self-control can become depleted.

Dr. Barnes has himself carried out fine research, including a focus on what could be termed, “ethical behavior.” It strikes me that even a limited number of occasions of not getting enough sleep can influence ethical decision-making.

As I write this blog, my preternaturally perceptive son commented, *“duh . . . of course a lack of sleep causes ethical lapses.”* So, it goes without saying that sleep deprivation also affects the judgment and reflexes often required to work safely.

So why don’t employees get enough rest? In my case, it is often pure macho arrogance. I ran in college and was a distance runner and mixed martial arts fighter until I was fifty. I dismissed concerns that a lack of sleep would catch up with me. I was wrong. I don’t know about women, but I suspect that this *“manly contempt”* causes many men to ignore that common sense voice imploring

them to get some sleep. Other reasons include working multiple jobs or ignorance about the effect of even modest under-sleeping. Many of us have also convinced ourselves that we are virtuous for *"sacrificing"* ourselves in order to complete needed tasks or to serve others or our organization.

As employers, we cannot necessarily address employees having to work more than one job, or the harsh demands of our ever-changing society. However, we can educate employees and encourage rest, and perhaps consider such needs in our staffing and strategic decisions. As a wise old coach once told me, "rest is training."

### **Action Points**

1. Set a good example.
2. Emphasize sleep in wellness programs.
3. Consider fatigue and lack of sleep in incident investigations.
4. Dr. Barnes recently tweeted about research showing that lack of sleep can contribute to prejudice, so this issue may affect a wide range of investigations of employee behavior.
5. Consider how you, the employer, can assist employees in getting better sleep, such as through scheduling, staffing and more effective management.
6. Incorporate the subject into supervisor development and employee training. Address the self-imposed attitudes leading to poor decisions about sleep.
7. Include "self-control" in your investigation of why an employee violated rules, engaged in potentially harassing behavior or reacted inappropriately to a supervisor. You may determine a way to counsel and improve the employee, or you may determine that the underlying self-control issues warrant parting ways. But don't treat "judgment and self control" as psychological or disability issues. We're talking about everyday normal behavior!
8. Keep up with behavioral scientists such as DeWall and Barnes. Their work is thorough and fascinating, and has many implications for safety and management.

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### ***Related People***





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