

FATIGUE MANAGEMENT: A WAKE-UP

'Dr. Don' on the risks of – and remedies for – worker fatigue

BY ROBERT J. HOLT

You wouldn't let a friend polish off five bottles of beer and get behind the wheel of their car. It's dangerous, of course, and everyone knows it. And yet, when you or your crew show up to the job site tired, you may be walking into a situation that's just as dangerous.

"We have to realize," says Dr. Don Melnychuk, "that in the same way we look at drug and alcohol impairment, fatigue is just as severe... when we say fit for duty, we have to put in there, alcohol-free, drug-free, *fatigue-free*."

Melnychuk is a psychologist with over 21 years of experience, specializing in stress and fatigue management. He's also a nationally-recognized speaker, trainer and writer who has worked with clients like Epcor, Telus and the Alberta Roadbuilders and Heavy Construction Association. 'Dr. Don' helps his clients to develop fatigue risk management systems, educating workers and supervisors about the dangers of fatigue on the job and how to overcome them.

Simply put, fatigue is the feeling of extreme tiredness or exhaustion. When we work too hard for too long, without appropriate recovery time, fatigue sets in. And, as Dr. Don is quick to point out, it can be a very real hazard in the construction industry.

Melnychuk cites an Australian study which found that after being awake for 17 hours straight, a person's reaction times can be just as impaired as someone with a blood alcohol content of 0.05 per cent. In most provinces (including Manitoba), that would be enough to earn an instant license suspension if you were behind the wheel.

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"We've got the science to back that up," says Melnychuk, "and that's the one that's really hitting home for a lot of workers."

The solution to fatigue may seem straightforward – try and avoid the all-nighter – but Dr. Don is quick to point out there's far more to it than that. "A *sleep debt* will accumulate, that's the other thing our construction workers have to be aware of," he explains. Let's say you need eight hours of sleep to feel rested the next day, but you've only been getting five hours a night. In one work-week, all those missed hours add up to 15 hours of recovery time your body hasn't gotten.

"The further away you get from not having the right number of hours of sleep you need," says Melnychuk, "the harder your brain will force you to eventually sleep." Over time, that sleep debt can be just as detrimental – and dangerous – as staying awake for 18 or 20 hours all at once.

Of course, there are a number of sleep disorders – insomnia and sleep apnea being among the most common – which can severely impact

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Photo courtesy of Dr. Don Melnychuk

Dr. Don Melnychuk is a psychologist, nationally recognized speaker and trainer

worker fatigue and for these Melnychuk recommends professional treatment.

“Most sleep disorders can be treated,” he says, “and the result could save your life.”

Fatigue risk management is about far more than just getting in your 40 winks each night. The field of strategies to combat the issue within workplace safety is diverse and involves employers and employees alike.

“We have a tipping point here,” says Melnychuk. “Industry, government and science are all together on this now, and what they’re forming is a whole new emphasis when it comes to fatigue risk management ... the whole idea is not to be punitive, it’s to be constructive and helpful. It’s to give [workers] counter-measures and fatigue-proof them from the dangers, the risk that they’re involved in. It’s a win-win.” 

For more on Dr. Don, be sure to check out www.donmelnychuk.com.

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