

➔ The most challenging aspect of designing and implementing a men's health program for most HR practitioners is engaging men so they want to take part and remain involved. This is where positioning and image are all important.

The culture and norms of each workplace will determine the best positioning for a men's health program. All workplaces, however, will benefit from giving any health initiative a positive flavour. Positioning health as something that helps men make better decisions at work or achieve life aspirations is more appealing than introducing a program because men have 'problems'.

Ensuring that initiatives are convenient, relevant, accessible and seen as an acceptable, mainstream activity is also critical.

Finally, it's important not to underestimate the importance of pride, prestige and status. Hayes recommends that a health program be positioned as a prestigious process to be involved with, especially for white-collar workers.

### "Men are sensitive to the health industry viewing them in a negative light."

Identifying a champion for the initiative from senior management can make all the difference, as Llewellyn-Smith and Russell knew when they launched their Men at Work program. Part of their unique engagement strategy involved identifying an advocate from a senior level who was prepared to put his face to the program. A creative launch with live skits from the performance 'Certified Male', together with a free lunch helped cement worker commitment.

Extra time spent up front considering how best to engage men in a sustainable way is rarely wasted. When delivered and positioned well, a men's health program can bring about change, as early results from the Men at Work program suggest. For example, after taking part in Men at Work 63 per cent of the 86 participants reported seeking assistance in balancing work and life, compared to 25 per cent before the program.

Some 44 per cent said they would be likely to use relationship services, compared with 29 per cent in the pre-course survey. Sixty per cent said they had the information and skills to achieve a balance between their work and family/life needs, compared to only 17 per cent before the program.

So much for the unhealthy, recalcitrant male.

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# It's all in the rhythm

**Mother was right: eat a proper breakfast to kick-start your day.**

■ BY PETER WEBB

It's four o'clock in the afternoon. You have a critical report to finalise by close of business today, and you're sitting in a meeting going nowhere. Tired, hungry and angry, you override the other participants and force through a decision to close the meeting early. Later you find out that your decision proved far more costly than the solution the other participants had tried to propose. What happened?

The quality of management decisions is influenced not only by information but also by the time of day. According to research into the body's circadian rhythms you are 50 per cent more likely to make an error of judgment in the early afternoon than before noon or in the evening.

Evidently we all march to the same drum when it comes to the function of our body, and particularly our brain. Knowing how circadian rhythms influence people can help HR professionals significantly enhance the decision-making, mental acuity, stress resilience, energy and peak performance of managers and team leaders.

**The circadian rhythm** is an internal body clock calibrated to the annual rhythm of the earth's voyage around the sun, the moon's

28-day cycle and the earth's rotational 24-hour day/night cycle. It now appears that the body's chemistry is affected by these cycles to a greater degree than previously recognised. Even a small time shift can have a measurable impact.

For example, traffic accident rates rise significantly in the period immediately after the changeover to daylight saving time. Both the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant accident in 1979 and the Chernobyl meltdown in 1986 have been linked to shift workers overlooking critical information at a time of day when the body's circadian rhythms are at their lowest ebb.

Much of the original research into chronobiology—the effect of circadian rhythms on the body—was supported by the US military, which wanted to learn how to beat jet leg in troops transported across several time zones ahead of combat.

The answer was found to be a combination of exposure to light, caffeine and food, with particular attention to the timing of protein and carbohydrate intake.

HR professionals, it turns out, can also apply these and other findings to improving management "combat-readiness"

Stress hormones follow a circadian cycle and respond to stressful situations in a typically

## Check up

**How in tune are you with your body's circadian rhythms? (Tick any of the following statements that apply to you):**

- I usually eat foods like cereal, juice, toast, bagels or muffins for breakfast.
- I often skip breakfast because I just don't feel hungry.

- I sometimes get up in the middle of the night to eat.
- I have more than two caffeinated beverages per day (coffee, tea, cola).
- I often have something sweet to eat in the afternoons (chocolate, cake, muffins, jelly beans, M&M's, biscuits, etc.).
- I drink a little too much alcohol more than twice a month.
- I often have difficulty falling asleep at bedtime.

- I often delay eating because of my work schedule (even if I feel hungry).
- I usually feel like a coffee, tea, or other caffeinated beverage to get me going in the morning.
- I usually find it hard to wake up when the alarm goes off.

0	good
1-2	fair
3-4	below average
5-10	poor

rhythmic fashion, peaking between 6am and 8am then declining gradually to hit their lowest levels at night.

We are least effective at handling stressful projects or intellectual challenges in the afternoon, beginning around 3pm to 4pm, when stress hormones are low. We are often tired and hungry and our concentration and focus are on the wane. This is because the levels of 'alarm hormone' (corticotropin-releasing hormone) and 'jump-starting' hormone (adrenaline) are low, while the stress hormone cortisol continues to exert a re-fuelling influence, driving us to eat sweets, snacks, and junk food.

**So, how do** you manage these circadian rhythms for improved performance at work? Firstly, it pays to plan what you are going to eat during the day, preferably preparing and taking your own food to work. Always have an emergency eating kit packed for unexpected meetings.

Whenever you feel stressed or tired, get up and move—this completes the normal fight/flight response and helps to mobilise energy. Go for a brisk walk, do some stretching, jump up and down. Use exercise as a way of destressing. Research has shown that moderate exercise can reduce stress and relieve symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Eat breakfast no later than 9am, emphasising protein (eggs, tofu, cheese, yoghurt, milk, fish, nuts, soy, chicken, beans, and meat, or a protein-rich 'shake', for example). Eat a small mid-morning snack no more than three hours after breakfast, again focusing on protein (such as a fat-free unflavoured yoghurt or a piece of low-fat cheese). Try to have lunch no later than 1.30pm. It should also be a protein-based meal (chicken salad without the bread, fish or meat without the chips, or cheese, yoghurt, or tofu vegetable stir-fry without the rice). Get out in the sunshine if possible.

Have a mid-afternoon snack within three hours of lunch, this time emphasising carbohydrate foods (soup with crackers, fruit, yoghurt and fruit, or low-fat cheese and fruit, wholegrain bread, seeds). Fresh fruit is best eaten in the afternoons.

Drink plenty of water throughout the day to hydrate the brain for mental acuity, and only have caffeinated beverages between 3pm and 5pm, when the effects are circadian

neutral. Coffee in the morning has the effect of lengthening your day. Coffee in the evening shifts your body clock in the direction of shortening your day.

Try to complete dinner by 8pm ('eat after eight, put on weight'), emphasising nutrient-dense carbohydrates (bread, cereals, grains, pasta, seeds, sprouts, starchy vegetables like potatoes and sweet potatoes). Above all, don't skip meals.

Establish a regular time for going to bed at night and getting up in the morning, and maintain an exercise regime. Some exercise is better than none, and more is usually better. Exercise helps to train your body to be more stress-resilient.

According to circadian rhythms specialist Dr Sid MacDonald Baker, observing these

## S statistics

People are **50 per cent** more likely to make an error of judgment in the early afternoon than before noon or in the evening

simple guidelines can lead to better performance under stress, better planning of daily activities for peak efficiency, improved mental acuity and emotional balance, and improved work/life harmony. Truly, 'the rhythm of life'.

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## information

### The Circadian Prescription,

Dr Sidney MacDonald Baker and Karen Baar, (Putnam Publishing, 2000).