



Lisa Winsor has become used to starting work at 12.30am.

Photo / Sylvie Whitray

morning to cross over with New York. "I'm finding it a lot better. It means you're not eating into your sleeping time." Sleep therapist Johnston says constant lack of sleep will start to play havoc with cognitive function if left unchecked. Anything less than six hours sleep a night will have the same effect as alcohol has on a driver: slower reaction times, poor judgment, less accuracy. "The golden rule is to keep your sleep bank balance topped up."

More time to play
Lisa Winsor doesn't mind working through the night because it gives her time off between 10am and 4pm. "I prefer it actually," she says. "I'm not sure how things will go if I become romantically involved. I won't be able to go out at night." She decided to stick with her American employers because the pay was better than the equivalent job in New Zealand, she enjoyed the role, and she wants to have a job to go back to if she returns to the US. Winsor acknowledges she has an easier time than colleagues who have children at home or a spouse to coordinate with. "In meetings we'll have cats walking across keyboards, you'll have little kids suddenly appear in the background and throw their arms around daddy's neck, a baby screaming in the background and someone suddenly goes on mute." Alex Bartle says with shift and night work there is always a compromise. "Let's face it, no shift work is good for us. In the end it is a lifestyle decision."

Bartle was a GP for 30 years before becoming interested in sleep 20 years ago. For the past 12 years he's made it his specialty and now runs 10 Sleep Well clinics throughout the country. For Kiwis who need to sleep during the day and work at night, he recommends darkening rooms an hour before bedtime so the body can produce the sleep-regulation hormone melatonin. Once it's time to get to work, he recommends turning on as much intense, white light as possible to suppress melatonin and shift the circadian cycle.

Bartle says napping can be a useful top-up, particularly if a sleep-deprived person is going to do something that might put themselves or others at risk, like driving a car to collect children from school. He recommends either short naps – 30 minutes or less – or a 90-minute sleep cycle. Napping is something software developer Hamish Wright has become adept at since returning with his wife and two young sons from London in September last year while continuing to work for his UK company.

Wright left New Zealand on his OE in 2007, and for the past 10 years has worked for marketing company MVF Global. When Covid-19 confined him to his home office, Wright and his wife Julie Taylor-Wright, then an essential worker at Charing Cross Hospital, managed to juggle things between them. They shared care of their sons Ben, 6, and Leo, 3, and they used a local child minder to fill in the gaps.

But when schools closed down for the foreseeable future, which added home schooling and additional child-minder expense into the mix, the family's plans to one day return to New Zealand were brought forward. MVF Global was receptive to Wright working from New Zealand as long as he joined morning meetings UK time and got the work done. "The family arrived back just in time for Wright's sister's wedding and moved into his parents' home until they could buy a house."

Now Wright works a split shift, scheduling meetings to overlap with UK time by starting work at 9pm or 10pm and finishing at midnight. He'll be up again in the morning to get the boys off to school, then have a nap before doing more work during the day. After Ben and Leo are in bed, Wright naps again before logging on to his computer later in the night.

That means he links with Australian Stock Exchange hours, starting work at midday and working until 6pm or 7pm to edit and load the videos. Those hours mean he can also do a London interview at 7am UK time, using his Tower Bridge backdrop. "That's the beauty of the digital world."

5 sleep tips for nocturnal NZ workers

- 1 Be disciplined about getting enough sleep. Between seven and nine hours every 24 hours is ideal.
- 2 Keep meal times linked to normal daytime hours as much as possible, no matter what shift you're working. Don't be tempted to have breakfast at 2am if that's when you start work.
- 3 Start darkening the room an hour before bedtime; turn off computers and phones, get rid of noise and use black-out curtains.
- 4 Avoid the temptation of socialising when you should be sleeping. Keep your sleep 'bank balance' topped up.
- 5 Taking brief naps (less than 30 minutes) or a 90-minute sleep will help but 'rest' does not replace sleep.

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The time travellers

Covid-19 refugees who returned to New Zealand are working through the night for overseas employers. But what's the cost of a job that crosses timezones, asks **Jane Phare**

Aucklander Lisa Winsor goes to bed at 4.30pm these days, an hour earlier than normal thanks to the end of daylight saving this month. Her afternoon bedtime is a routine she's kept up since returning to New Zealand from the United States late last year, spending two weeks at an MIQ hotel and emerging with relief into a life free from physical distancing, closed restaurants and constant mask-wearing.

American-born Winsor spent 25 years in New Zealand before moving back to the US four years ago while her son and daughter attended university there. She settled just outside Philadelphia, eventually joining the pharmaceutical division of a large engineering consulting firm. But by March last year her office was closed and group get-togethers were banned. She rarely saw her children due to Covid-19 restrictions and because they were living in different states.



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Sleep therapist Fiona Johnston

Winsor's alarm goes off in her Auckland home at 12.15am, giving her time to wake up, pull on a T-shirt and open her laptop for a 12.30am start. Her "day" is full of Zoom-style meetings and admin work, and she's usually finished by 10am New Zealand time. So far Winsor, in her 50s, has coped well with her odd working hours. She's

photographed plenty of stunning sunrises through her bedroom/office window – but very few sunsets. There have been a few hiccups, like the day she drank a couple of cups of coffee in the afternoon then lay awake, wired, all night before getting up to start work again. Her work schedule leaves plenty of time for walks on the beach and catching up with friends in the afternoon, but dinner out is a rarity. If she goes out, Winsor will pay for it the next day and has been known to have 11-hour catch-up sleeps on her days off, Sunday and Monday. No one knows how many Kiwis have moved back home at least temporarily while still working for overseas employers, juggling their schedules to fit in with far-away timezones. As they do, they face a common problem: sleep – or the lack of it. Sleep experts warn that anyone working through the night needs to be disciplined about getting enough sleep – at least six hours but preferably between seven and nine. The risk, they say, is that people working unsociable hours will burn the candle at both ends, wanting to carry on with a normal life at times when they should be sleeping. Sleep therapist Fiona Johnston, of



Andrew Scott can look as though he's anywhere in the world. Photo / Jason Oxenham

Shiftwork Services, says in today's 24/7 society, tampering with the human body clock to suit work commitments is part of normal life but not getting enough sleep can have both short- and long-term effects. "Your body clock is hard-wired to be awake during the day and asleep at night. So as soon as you fiddle with that you are going to run into problems." Sleep deprivation can cause depression, anxiety, poor concentration, memory difficulties, mood swings, irritability and loss of sense of humour. Longer term, that lack of sleep can lead to diabetes, hypertension, heart problems, poor immune response, a short-

ened life expectancy and is linked to some types of cancer. Regardless of the shifts they work, and the needs of overseas employers, humans remain diurnal – active during the day – and not nocturnal. That's partly because they socialise and do other activities on their days off, pulling them back into diurnal patterns. Johnston recommends working as few night shifts in a row as possible but acknowledges that will be difficult for Kiwis still working in different timezones for offshore companies. Sleep expert Dr Alex Bartle says the long-term effects on the human body are "huge". Younger people tend to cope better with shift or night work than people over the age of 45, he says. Short-term, younger people will get away with sleep deprivation. "They shift the circadian phase much more easily when they are younger. They'll get very tired but it won't have any major impact on them." The problem with shortened hours of sleep is that workers won't be getting enough deep, non-REM (rapid eye movement) sleep which produces a growth hormone that boosts anti-cancer cells and immunity factors. And nor will they be getting enough of the lighter REM sleep phase that is connected with cognitive function. Emma Jobe, 27, has been juggling night work with her London office since returning to New Zealand just before Christmas last year, but doesn't think she could cope with it long-term. She originally planned to spend just the summer here after coming home



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for her parents' 60th birthdays late last year. But with Covid-19 making life bleak in London, she decided to stay on, gave up her flat and had her belongings shipped home. Her employer, media and entertainment group NBCUniversal, agreed that she could work remotely from New Zealand. That meant starting at 4am to link with her London office between 3pm and 6pm UK time, and continuing to work until late morning. Although she was grateful to be able keep her UK job while living in New Zealand, Jobe began to feel "foggy" and not as alert as usual. She was constantly tempted to socialise in the evenings and stay up too late. "I had the bad habit of going out to have dinner with friends and letting the time get away on me," she says. "It definitely was taking a bit of a toll. I noticed my short-term memory was going. I was constantly feeling a bit fuzzy and forgetting things people had told me." Now, with the Covid-19 outlook improving in the UK and a room in her old flat becoming available, Jobe has decided to return to London. For the final two weeks in New Zealand, her boss agreed that she could change her hours to a split shift, working from 8pm until midnight, then waking in the