

# Sleep problems, stress and worry during the pandemic

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Some people's lives got a lot busier with the onset of the pandemic. Researchers at NTNU have investigated how the COVID-19 pandemic affected different aspects of their lives, including the sleep of workers in essential occupations. The initial results are clear.

"Employees in essential occupations struggled with sleep more often

compared to the population before the pandemic," says Torhild Anita Sørengaard, a Ph.D. candidate and senior lecturer at NTNU's Department of Psychology.

These findings are in line with studies from other countries, which have shown that sleep problems have been widespread during the pandemic.

## **Studied essential occupations**

Sørengaard and Professor Ingvild Saksvik-Lehouillier have led the research project at NTNU. They studied the relationships between sleep, workload and coping ability of employees in essential occupations, such as [health care](#), social services, the municipalities and schools. The study followed these employees from the spring of 2020 to the present.

Stress at work and [health concerns](#) are associated with symptoms of insomnia for workers in essential occupations. This finding was not surprising as stress and anxiety can adversely affect sleep, leading to problems falling asleep and waking up during the night.

"Stress and worry are risk factors for [sleep disorders](#) in general, not only during a pandemic, but the extent of the stress and worries may be greater now due to the challenging situation that so many have been in for a long time," says Sørengaard.

## **Worries about health consequences**

Increased work pressure, stress and burnout were not the only causes of sleep issues.

"Worrying about the [health](#) consequences of the pandemic can also contribute to sleep problems," says Sørengaard. "It's an extra burden to

be afraid that you or those around you, like family and colleagues, might get sick as a result of the pandemic. Eventually, these worries can lead to sleep problems."

They also found that symptoms of burnout, such as fatigue and negative emotions associated with work, can contribute to poorer sleep. Overall, the results show that both burnout and insomnia need to be prevented early.

"Acting early and implementing measures that promote health and well-being can have a preventive effect on future illness and [sick leave](#) among these employees," Sørengaard says.

## **Stress worse than demands**

Researchers also found another link between working life and sleep. Stress at work contributes more to employees' sleep problems than the actual job demands do. From previous research we also know that prolonged stress is one of the major [risk factors](#) for burnout.

All of this should encourage action for workplaces and organizations that are particularly vulnerable in demanding situations, where the work pressure can quickly intensify.

Sørengaard believes these organizations should facilitate various measures that can help reduce stress and make it easier to deal with the increased work pressure.

She points out that we need to remember that employees respond differently in the face of demands. Some people master an increased workload and time pressure well on their own, while others need more support. In other words, it is important to strengthen the resources in the workplace and facilitate individual solutions.

"Listening to employees' specific needs and challenges becomes crucial when we design measures for these situations," says Sørengaard.

Previous research has shown that social support and understanding from colleagues and managers is one of the most important resources in the workplace. Ensuring adequate rest and relaxation away from work is important too.

## **Goes both ways**

Sleep is important for handling challenges effectively, so the connection goes both ways.

Stress and worries can contribute to poorer sleep, and poor sleep can exacerbate [stress](#) and worries. Sleep is important for health, well-being, safety and performance, and insufficient sleep can make it more difficult to cope with a challenging workday.

"It's important to recognize that several occupational groups are experiencing high workloads, and that taking care of employees is necessary both for their own health and the socially important tasks they perform," says Sørengaard.

This recommendation should not only apply during the [pandemic](#). The results are also useful in other contexts where the work pressure becomes intense.

The initial results of the study have been published in two articles in the journal *Sleep Medicine*.

**More information:** Torhild Anita Sørengaard et al, Associations between burnout symptoms and sleep among workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Sleep Medicine* (2022). [DOI](#):

[10.1016/j.sleep.2022.01.022](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sleep.2022.01.022)

Torhild Anita Sørengaard et al, Insomnia among employees in occupations with critical societal functions during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Sleep Medicine* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.sleep.2021.02.025](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sleep.2021.02.025)

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