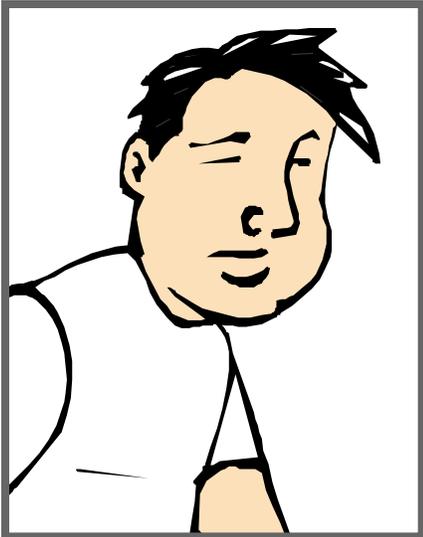




## Fatigue and the transit driver

by Pat Weaver



*Avoiding fatigue is far more preferable than looking for strategies to deal with it once it occurs.*

**I**t is one of the most unnerving experiences that can happen when driving a transit bus: You got up early this morning to take three passengers to doctor's appointments at the medical center 75 miles away. The sun is coming up over the horizon and is getting in your eyes. It's a little warm in the bus, and the passengers aren't talking much, mostly dozing as they bounce along in their seats.

You've been on the road about 30 minutes. The highway is long, smooth and monotonous. You didn't get a lot of sleep last night. You worked late and when you got home you just couldn't fall asleep until about 2:30 in the morning. The

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**F**atigue behind the wheel is a very real danger, even if you've never experienced it firsthand. Here are some tips for staying awake while you're driving:

- An obvious cause of fatigue is lack of sleep. If you haven't received seven or eight hours of sleep the night before, you're courting fatigue. Get enough rest. Driving is hard work, and you need to be fresh and alert to perform your job safely. If you know you're too tired to drive, treat it just as if you were sick; you are not fit for duty in this condition.
- Avoid being scheduled for early morning shifts just after driving a late evening or night shift. If you are transporting passengers across state lines or live in a state that regulates hours of service for intrastate transportation, you may have hours of service restrictions. Be sure that, at a minimum, you comply with these requirements. Kansas does not have hours of service limitations for intrastate public transportation, so your minimum standard will be set by your agency policy.
- When driving into the early morning sun, be sure to wear a good pair of sunglasses to protect your eyes and avoid the need to squint or close your eyes to avoid discomfort.
- Adjust your vehicle's environment so that it helps keep you awake and alert. Keep the temperature cool with air conditioning in the summer and frugal amounts of heat in the winter.
- Do not use cruise control; keep your body involved with the driving.
- Watch your posture. Drive with your head up and your shoulders back. Tuck your buttocks against the seat back. Legs should not be fully extended, but flexed at about a 45 degree angle.
- Take frequent breaks. Stop periodically in a safe place (gas station, convenience store or rest stop, for example) to allow yourself and passengers a chance to get out and stretch. Exercise fights fatigue. Stop long enough to make sure you're not too drowsy to continue. If drowsiness occurs on an in-town route, ask your supervisor for a 15 minute break between passengers to allow you to refresh yourself. If that's not enough then you may need to consider asking to be relieved for the day. It may be an inconvenient request, but avoiding inconvenience is no justification for risking an accident because of fatigue.

Safe driving demands your full attention. If you feel your eyelids getting heavy, your next actions may not simply determine whether you'll stay awake—they might determine whether you and your passengers stay alive.

## Driver fatigue,

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radio isn't holding your attention, and neither is the driving. You stare straight at the miles of road ahead. You start to feel your shoulders sag, and your eyes slowly... start... to... close.

You hear a shout. Abruptly, you open your eyes, jerk up in your seat. You've started to drift out of your lane and a little off the road, enough that a passenger noticed and yelled out in time. You steer your vehicle back into the lane, take a few deep breaths, and realize, fearfully, what just happened. You were asleep, and a tragedy was narrowly averted.

Fatigue on the road can be a killer. It happens frequently on long drives or when other conditions (like inadequate rest the night before) are present. Some of the warning signs were probably there: back tension, burning eyes, shallow breathing, inattentiveness, and any kind of erratic driving, such as drifting, abnormal speed, tailgating, or failure to obey traffic signs.

Thirty-seven percent of drivers have nodded off for at least a moment or fallen asleep while driving at least once in their driving career. Eight percent have done so in the past six months. While there are no good statistics on the number of transit drivers who have dozed off while driving, the potential is always there if you don't take adequate precautions.

The consequences for a drowsy transit driver are tremendous. Falling asleep with passengers on the vehicle could lead to injury or death of you as the driver, one or more passen-

gers, or others in your path. It might lead to substantial property loss for your agency. And finally, just one report of your nodding off at the wheel, even if no accident occurs, could mean the loss of your job.

One cause of fatigue is alcohol consumption. Alcohol is a depressant, and a driver doesn't have to be drunk to fall asleep at the wheel.



## If you go to bed late and wake up early to an alarm clock, you are probably building a sleep debt.

Even one drink can be enough to induce fatigue. Another cause can be prescription or over-the-counter medications. Just because the medications are legal doesn't mean that taking them is safe to do so when driving a vehicle.

Another culprit is the nature of modern highway driving. Most vehicle interiors have a comfortable driver's seat in a reasonably temperature-regulated environment. Many vehicles have "cruise control." Most major roads have been engineered to eliminate sharp curves, hills and bumps. Ironically, these designs for

comfort contribute to falling asleep at the wheel. And, if your passengers are sleeping during an early morning or late night trip, there won't even be talking to help keep you alert.

Dull landscapes, the droning of tires and engines, and the repetitive patterns of oncoming headlights, trees, poles and highway center lines can lead to a dangerous, trance-like

state known as "highway hypnosis," which deadens drivers' senses and slows their reaction time.

What can you do? First, take a few moments to complete the driver fatigue quiz on the next page. Next, read the tips on page 5 for staying awake while you are on the road. Driver fatigue is a serious issue, and deserves your serious attention.

Source: Adapted with permission from the National Safety Council, *Driver Fatigue Fact Sheet*, April 13, 2004, <http://www.nsc.org>. ▲

## Ready for coordination?, continued from page 1

munity, consider using *A Framework for Action*, a self-assessment tool for communities created by a panel of experts from around the country that convened in August 2003.

This publication is a tool communities can use to identify areas of success and highlight the actions still needed to improve the coordination of human service transportation.

To download the complete

*Framework for Action* and facilitator's guide, visit the Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility (CCAM) Web site at <http://www.fta.dot.gov/CCAM/www/index.html>.

If you don't have access to the Internet, you can order a hard copy of the self-assessment tool from the Kansas RTAP. See the order form on page 15. ▲