

Managing Post COVID-19 Condition Therapeutic Education Program



**Brain Fog:
Getting Through the Haze**

Plan for session:

- Review approach to managing cognitive and communication difficulties
- 4Ps for cognitive activities
- What is rest?
- Cognitive strategies for attention, memory, executive function
- Group Problem-Solving

Review of Brain Fog

- “Brain fog” is a way of describing some of the cognitive and communication challenges people experience with Long COVID and other related conditions.
- Like other symptoms, brain fog seems to be much worse with fatigue and can be one of the symptoms of PEM/PESE.
- Stabilizing your condition can improve your capacity to participate in activities that are important to you
- There are no “exercises” for brain fog. The approach is energy conservation and compensatory strategies.
- Reducing your mental load by externalizing everything you can leaves more energy for the things you need to do.
- Try not to focus on errors: increased stress and anxiety takes up mental energy and can lead to more errors.

4P's of Energy Conservation

Plan Time of day/week, where, how, rests, etc.

Pace Taking breaks within and between cognitive tasks

Prioritize How important is this for me to do?

Position Is the environment supportive of what you want to do?

Prioritization:

- Rocks
- Pebbles
- Sand
- Water



<http://consultforexcellence.com/2017/05/02/big-rocks-day/>

Prioritization: Eisenhower Matrix

	Immediate/ Deadline	Not Immediate/ No deadline
Important	Large Rocks	Pebbles
Not as Important	Sand	Water

Prioritization: Eisenhower Matrix

	Immediate/ Deadline	Not Immediate/ No deadline
Important	<u>Large Rocks</u> Emergencies, specialist appointment, interview, crucial home repair, insurance forms, picking up medications	<u>Pebbles</u> Grocery shopping, maintaining relationships, self-care
Not as Important	<u>Sand</u> Returning library books, shopping for a gift, helping a friend with a task	<u>Water</u> Playing games, certain chores, scrolling on social media

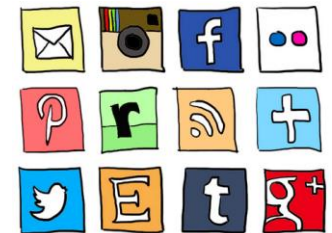
Why Pace Cognitive Activities?



- Your brain is 2% of body weight but uses up to 20% of body's energy
- Even simple cognitive tasks cost energy
- Cognitive activities can trigger Post-Exertional Malaise/Symptom Exacerbation
- **Avoid the roller-coaster:** stabilize your symptoms, reduce flare-ups
- Allow you to participate in important activities within your limits

What is Cognitive Exertion?

- Phone calls
- Filling out forms
- Writing emails
- Social media
- Watching TV
- Reading a book
- Conversation
- Signing up for kids' programs
- Social events
- Meal planning
- Decision-making



Plan to Pace:

Regardless of the activity, stop for rests while you still feel ok rather than waiting until you *have* to.

- Plan - how long, when to take a break/rest
- Break up cognitive tasks and activities into smaller parts
- Rest between and during tasks
- Set a timer
- Break schedule is a guide: you can stop sooner than planned (but don't work for longer)
- Adapt frequency, duration, time of day, intensity of effort required
- Try to find “savings” even in routine activities (i.e. checklists, meal plans, pill box)

*Resist taking advantage of good days

*It may take some time to notice a change in how you feel

What is rest?

Should be restorative

Not time to fit in another task/activity (even something enjoyable)

Activate the parasympathetic nervous system (rest/digest):

- Diaphragmatic breathing
- Meditation/Prayer
- Cuddle a pet/person
- Nature - indoor/outdoor - plants, birdsong
- Positive visualization
- Gratitude
- Mindfulness





Reviewing Cognitive Strategies

Brain Fog - May 2023

Attention Strategies - Levels of Attention

Sustained attention Keeping your attention on something over a period of time

- Reading or conversation or adding up numbers in a quiet setting
- **This is the level where we function the best!**

Selective attention Focusing on one thing while ignoring something else

- Having a conversation while the TV is on
- Reading in a noisy café
- Writing an email with a headache

Alternating attention Shifting attention from one thing to another and back

- Helping with homework while you're cooking
- Responding to a text while reading

Divided attention Paying attention to two tasks at once

- Taking notes in a meeting
- Driving & talking

Reduce the Attention Load

How do you make the task or activity more like “sustained attention”?

- Eliminate distractions (internal, external)
- Break the task into steps and do one at a time
- One communication mode at a time
- Block off time for complex tasks
- Leave markers and stop notes if you're interrupted

Memory Strategies - Prospective Memory

- Memory is not the same as intelligence
- Prospective memory - remembering things in the future
- Outsource and externalize your memory:
 - Is this something I need to know or can I be reminded?
 - Appointment times, grocery list, alert for garbage day
- Assume you will forget - do something to prevent the error
- It's a lot of work to memorize - Put it on paper, check for it later
- Brains like to be reminded - set yourself up for success

Prospective Memory Strategies



- Calendars
- Alerts/reminders
- Put an object where it needs to be used
- Link new habits to old habits/routine
- Send yourself an email
- Sticky notes
- Tell someone to remind you
- Put something in your way to remind you
- STOP note
- Pill boxes



Memory Strategies - Learning

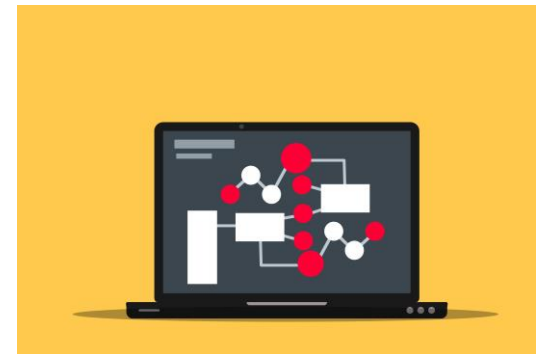
Only when you need to know something or commit to memory:

- Repetition
- Reminiscence
- Acronyms
- Processing in various ways - read/write/listen
- Spaced retrieval & self-testing
- Reorganize information
- Comparison
- Summary
- Teaching to someone else



Executive Function Strategies

- If a task is overwhelming or fatiguing, use an external strategy to reduce the memory and attention load
- Lay out the steps & break up the task before you start
- Put it on paper / make it visual
- Use a systematic way to work through a task -
 - Checklist
 - Decision tree
 - Process flow chart
 - Build routines



Summary: Strategies for Brain Fog

- There's no “exercise” for brain fog
- Manage and protect your energy (4Ps)
- Use compensatory strategies when possible
- Externalize it - Get it out of your head