

Post-Exertional Malaise in Post COVID-19 Recovery and Finding your “Energy Envelope”

Post-COVID-19

Interdisciplinary Clinical Care Network
Recovery | Care | Research | Education

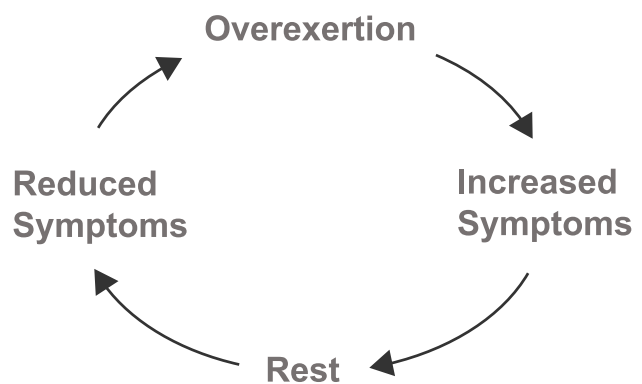
► Some people who are recovering from COVID-19 have times where they feel exhausted, have difficulty thinking, and other symptoms after a minimal amount of activity – this is known as post-exertional malaise (PEM). These symptoms are similar to those reported with myalgic encephalomyelitis or chronic fatigue syndrome. The symptoms can occur 24-72 hours after activity and perhaps last for days or weeks and are often referred to as “crashes”.



Some people with PEM experience a cycle of “push and crash”. They find themselves caught in a frustrating loop, swinging between over-activity and forced rest. When their symptoms are mild, they push to get as much done as they can. This overexertion triggers an increase in symptoms, which in turn leads to forced rest or a crash.

Push and crash leads to feeling like things are not controllable. It can be very discouraging.

To avoid the cycle of “push and crash”, you can use pacing strategies. Pacing means that you spread out your activities into smaller chunks with rest periods in between so you do not overdo activity and worsen your symptoms. This idea of staying within your limits and avoiding crashes, is what we call staying in your “Energy Envelope”.



Staying within your Energy Envelope offers the possibility of a more stable and predictable life. You can live your life according to a plan, rather than always reacting to your symptoms. This gives you a sense of managing your illness, rather than it controlling you.

Benefits

- Less intense symptoms
- More stable and predictable life
- Sense of control
- Less time needed to rest
- More time being able to do what you like
- Increasing your energy envelope or how much you are able to do



1. Finding Your Energy Envelope

Keep a record for 1-2 weeks of what activities (physical, mental and social) you do and how they make you feel. This can help you find out how much you can do before you reach your limit and worsen your symptoms. The amount you can do without your symptoms worsening is your Energy Envelope.

2. Adapting to Your Envelope

Make a list of all the tasks you do from morning to night. Divide them into essential (must do) and what is not essential (nice to do or others can do for you). For essential tasks, apply the “4Ps” – plan, pace, prioritize and position. For non-essential tasks, apply to “3Ds” – delete, delegate, and defer. See PHSA’s video on fatigue in COVID-19 for more information on the “4Ps” and “3Ds” – www.youtube.com/watch?v=12azPbZoOZs.



The idea is to narrow down which type of activity, how many activities, and how you do the activity each day so you can live within your Energy Envelope and keep your symptoms stable.

3. Expanding your Envelope

Once you can keep your symptoms stable you may be able to increase your Energy Envelope to include more activities without your symptoms getting worse. Aim for at least 2 weeks of stable symptoms before you consider increasing your activity. Increase in small amounts and slowly over time. Be ready for set backs or rebounds of your symptoms. If this happens, back off again, until your symptoms are stable again.



Where to go for more information

PHSA Post Exertional Malaise video:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBAAEhc3cNI

PHSA Fatigue and Pacing video:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=12azPbZoOZs

PHSA Introduction to Living in Your Energy Envelope Tool:

www.phsa.ca/health-info-site/Documents/post_covid-19-Intro_to_the_Living_in_your_Energy_Envelope_Tool.pdf

PHSA Living in Your Energy Envelope Tool:

www.phsa.ca/health-info-site/Documents/post_covid-19-Living_in_your_Energy_Envelope_Tool.pdf



Remember that practicing diligent pacing strategies and staying within your energy envelope is an effective way of managing post-exertional malaise.

For more information on how to support your understanding and management of symptoms as you recover from COVID-19, please visit www.phsa.ca/health-info/post-covid-19-care-recovery

