

## Post-Exertional Malaise: What Is It and How Do I Manage It?

### What Is Post-Exertional Malaise?

Post-exertional malaise (PEM) is when a person feels much worse after doing things that use even small amounts of energy. This can happen after physical activity, thinking hard, or feeling strong emotions. Someone with PEM may have new or worse symptoms after exercising, studying for a test, or having an argument. These symptoms feel like a physical or mental shutdown from being very tired or having to use your brain to do everyday things. PEM symptoms usually begin about 24 hours after activity or start a few hours or days later. It is different than just feeling tired or sore after doing something hard. PEM is an important symptom to look out for when studying Long COVID.

### How to Handle PEM

**Find out what makes you feel worse.** Some things that make you feel worse can be stopped or avoided, but not all of them. Writing down what you do and how those things make you feel each day can help. Here are some things that might make PEM happen:

- Moving your body or staying still: running, walking, taking a bath, brushing your hair or teeth, or standing or sitting upright
- Thinking a lot: talking to people, going to school or work, writing emails
- Things you see, hear, or feel: bright or flashing lights, sudden noises, or noises that repeat
- Feelings: hard times that cause you to be upset or scared, talking with friends and family
- Things around you: changes in weather, air that's not clean, or things you might be allergic to

**Think of energy like a battery.** Some people find it helpful to think of energy like a rechargeable battery. It is important to keep the battery charged by using small amounts of energy and stopping before your battery runs out. Resting in between activities recharges the battery.

**Find your starting energy level.** To find this, start by cutting your activities in half. Your starting energy level can change over time and may get better or worse. If you are doing too much activity, you may get more tired over time. But if you are able to stop what you are doing before getting tired, you might be able to do more later.

**Think about the activities you did and shorten those that made you not feel good.** If something made you feel worse before, think about:

- How long you did the activity
- How hard the activity was
- What exactly you had to do

This way if you have to do this again, you can maybe do it for less time or have someone help if it was too hard.

**Give yourself extra time to do things, rest, and feel better.** There is no way to fix PEM completely, but doing things when you feel okay and resting when you're tired may be able to stop your symptoms from getting worse by doing only what you can every day. Plan for extra rest and listen to your body when it says to stop. You can even try something called "radical rest."

Radical rest is when you avoid doing anything *before* a planned activity. If you have an activity coming up, plan to have extra time to rest *after* the activity. This will help if the activity made PEM symptoms worse. Some things you can do to make yourself feel better are activities that don't need a lot of energy, like reading or drawing. Make sure that you eat and drink plenty of water too.

**Break up big projects into smaller parts and focus on what's most important.**

- When a project is split into smaller parts, it allows time to rest in between parts and come back to work on it when you're feeling better. For example, instead of having yourself clean a whole room at once, clean 1 part at a time.
- Choose activities that really matter to you. If something is important, see if someone else can help you do it. Or, see if you can change the day something has to be done to plan more time for rest and recovery.
- Avoid doing things you don't have to do. One thing that is **not** recommended is graded exercise therapy. This is when a doctor asks you to increase your activity over time. While it helps with some conditions like concussions, research shows it doesn't work for PEM and can make things worse.