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The Role of Occupational Therapy in Long Covid Rehabilitation

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Introduction

The integration of OT into primary care is an emerging practice area with positive implications, especially for chronic conditions like long COVID and Myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS). These conditions are often misunderstood by healthcare providers and the community, with complex symptoms that require specialized care. This project focused on creating resources and educational materials for patients and rehabilitation professionals to better manage these complex conditions. It additionally emphasizes advocacy for people with “invisible disabilities”, to spread awareness and improve accessibility to care.

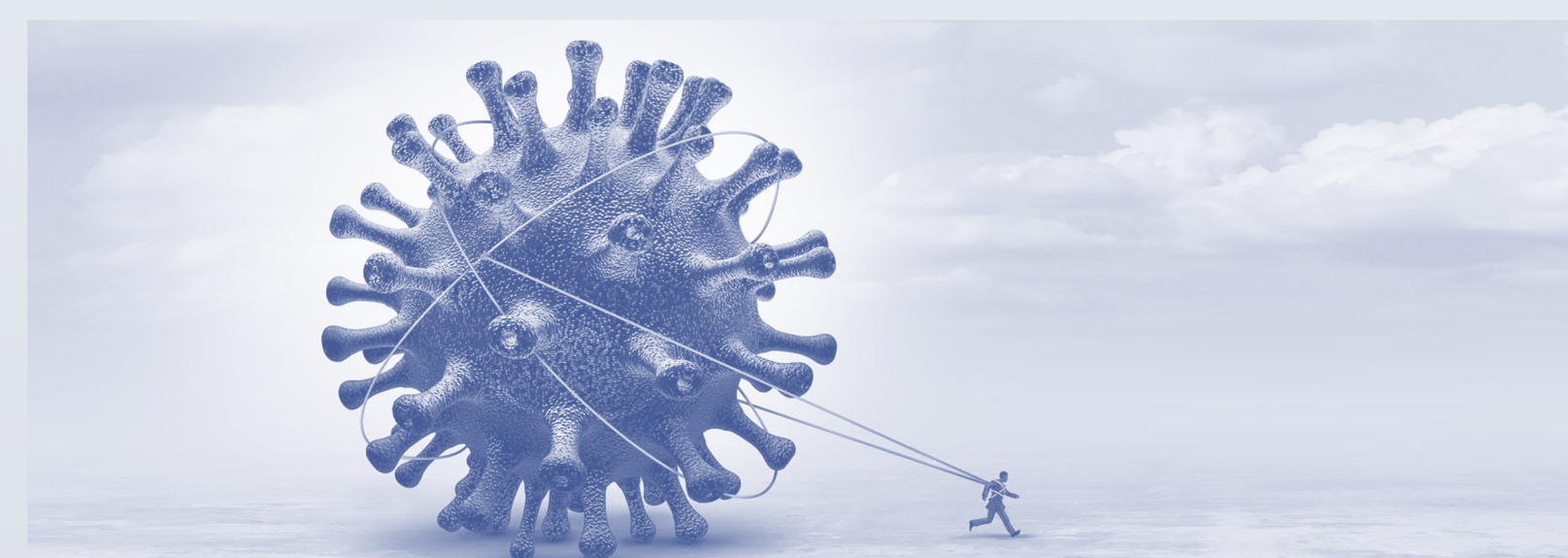


Figure 1. Photo. Long Covid Hero. (n.d.) [Photograph]. <https://www.physiciansqualitycare.com/covid-19/long-covid.php>

Capstone Site Description

Physicians Quality Care is a primary and urgent care facility that serves individuals of all ages and a wide variety of conditions. It also houses a newly established Long COVID clinic, primarily focusing on individuals with diagnoses of Long COVID, ME/CFS, and/or POTS. Dr. Hoppers, the clinic’s owner, leads all Long COVID research and is dedicated to addressing the complex needs of these patients through comprehensive multidisciplinary care and innovative research initiatives.

Summary of Needs Assessment

- Long COVID patients face challenges due to the invisibility of their symptoms, such as post-exertional malaise (PEM).
- OT interventions must recognize and accommodate these subtle, often delayed symptoms to prevent exacerbation--PEM can significantly worsen symptoms after physical or mental exertion.
- Traditional graded exercise therapy is often ineffective or harmful for these patients, and OTs should adopt flexible, individualized approaches focusing on pacing and energy conservation.
- OTs must understand PEM and pacing strategies to educate and assist patients in managing their energy levels effectively.
- OT clinicians’ skills in health promotion, activity analysis, energy conservation, and functional cognition are crucial in a multidisciplinary treatment approach.
- Environmental accommodations, mental health support, and self-care protocols are essential for managing chronic conditions.
- This project emphasizes the need for OT advocacy and education to inform communities, employers, and rehabilitation professionals about chronic fatigue conditions.
- Educating OTs on long COVID and chronic conditions through multimedia approaches can enhance rehabilitation efforts and improve patient well-being.

Literature Review Summary

OTs in Primary Care: Occupational therapists (OTs) bring expertise in human development, health promotion, activity analysis, behavior modification, and adaptive equipment to primary care, enhancing services and reducing healthcare fragmentation.

Managing Long COVID and ME/CFS: These conditions, often invisible, present prolonged symptoms like fatigue, cognitive impairments, and mental health issues, impacting daily functioning and occupational performance.

Energy Management Education: Crucial for teaching strategies to manage and conserve energy, significantly improving occupational performance, self-efficacy, and quality of life.

Multidisciplinary Collaboration: Effective treatment involves a team of healthcare professionals, including OTs, to provide comprehensive, multidisciplinary care and support for long COVID-19 and ME/CFS patients.

Pacing Protocols: Important for managing fatigue and post-exertional malaise, with interventions considering physical, cognitive, orthostatic, sensory, and emotional domains.

Education and Advocacy: OTs play a key role in educating other healthcare practitioners and advocating for appropriate accommodations and support for patients with long COVID-19 and ME/CFS.

From a 2019 survey from Forward ME, a coalition of ME organizations in the US and UK

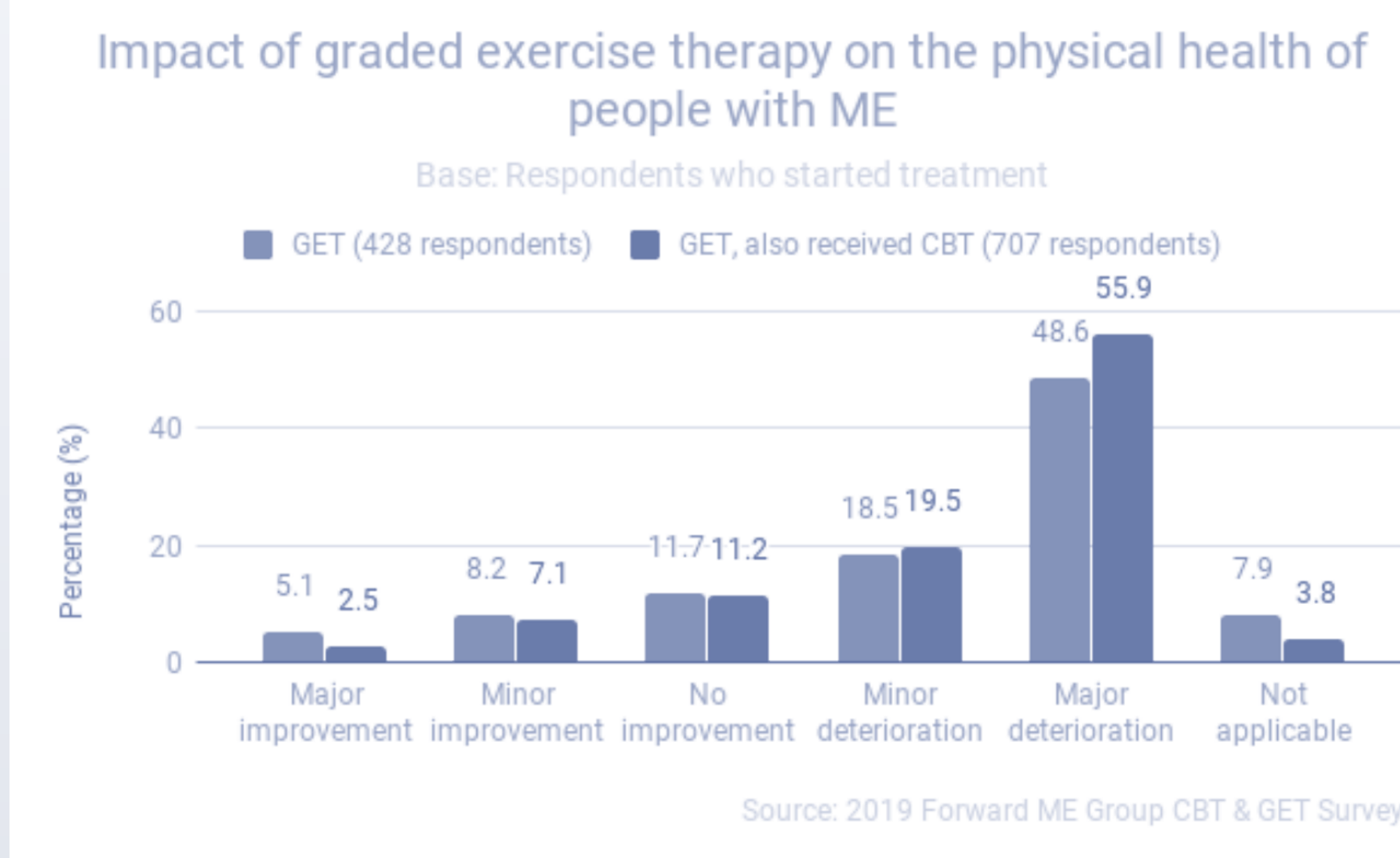


Figure 2. Graphic. Graded Exercise Therapy and Physical Health. (n.d.) [Graph]. <https://www.meaction.net/2019/04/03/get-and-cbt-are-not-safe-for-me-summary-of-survey-results/>

Recharging a battery can be a helpful pacing analogy to use when providing education.



Figure 3. Graphic. Recharging battery. (n.d.) [Photograph]. <https://batemanhornecenter.org/>

Capstone Project Description & Outcomes

- Educating occupational therapists (OTs) about pacing and the importance of screening clients for PEM was a crucial aspect of my capstone project through providing education to both patients and providers while advocating for the invisible disabilities population, including those with long COVID and ME/CFS
- Fatigue in this instance is not due to deconditioning but is a core symptom of the illness and is debilitating and not alleviated by rest
- This leads to misunderstandings and often inappropriate treatment recommendations.

Clinical Screening Decision Tree for ME/CFS and LC

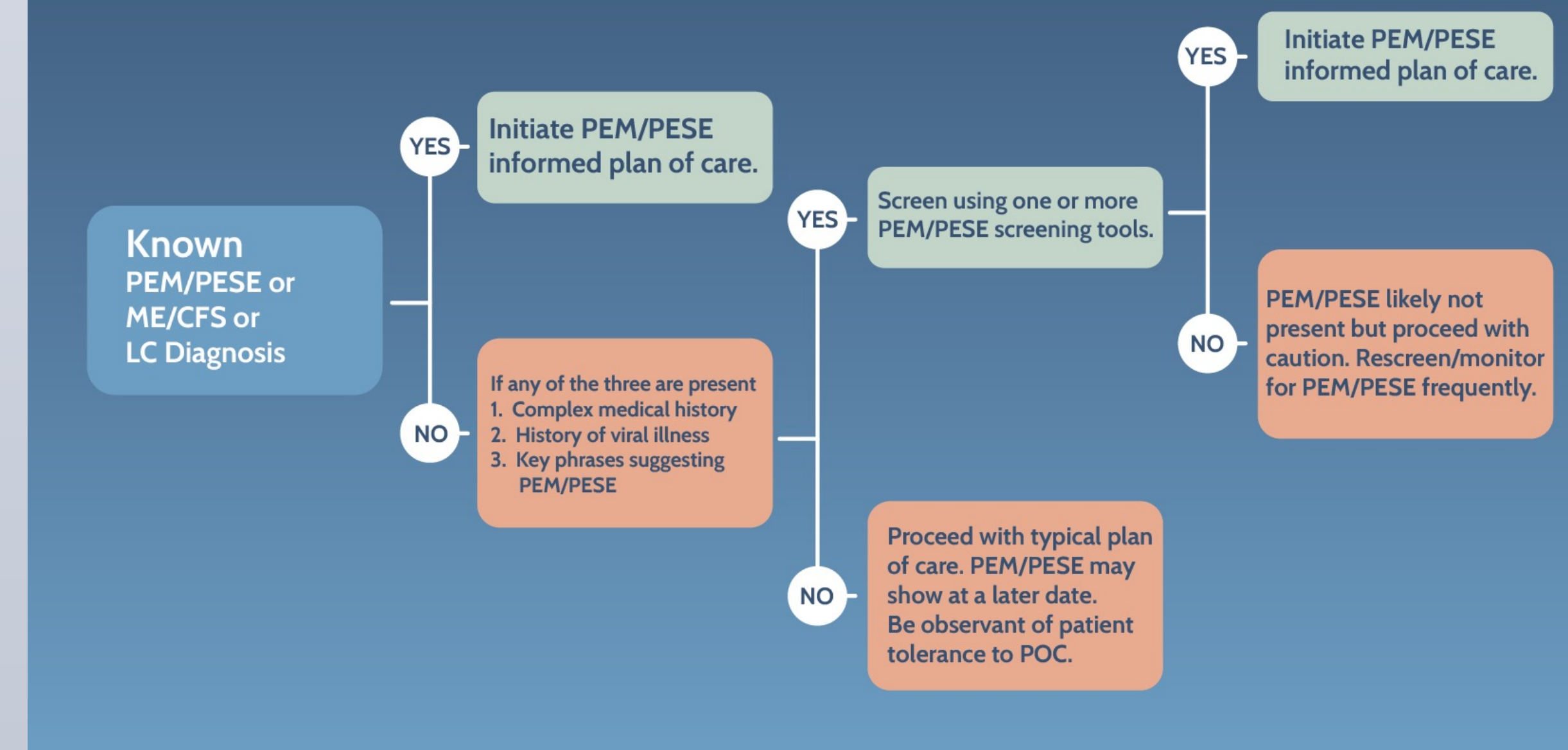


Figure 4. Clinical Screening Decision Tree. (n.d.) [Photograph]. https://batemanhornecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Screening-for-PEM-PESE-05_2023.pdf

- Traditional graded exercise therapy relies on gradually increasing physical activity to improve fitness and reduce fatigue. However, for those with Long COVID and ME/CFS, this approach can exacerbate symptoms and cause significant harm. Overexertion can trigger post-exertional malaise (PEM), where even minor activities result in a severe and prolonged worsening of symptoms.
- Pacing, which involves carefully managing activity levels to avoid PEM, is crucial. It requires understanding one’s energy limits and balancing activity with rest. By educating OTs about pacing, my project aims to ensure patients receive care tailored to their unique needs, promoting better symptom management and improving quality of life. This education helps prevent potential harm from potentially harmful exercise regimens and supports a client centered approach to rehabilitation. Additionally, advocating for the invisible disabilities population helps raise awareness and foster a more inclusive healthcare environment.

Capstone Goals Achieved

- Identified the occupational needs of the chronic condition population.
- Developed an occupation-based intervention plan for chronic disease management for patients of the clinic.
- Created an outline of where OT services could exist in the primary care clinic as part of the interprofessional team.
- Provided patient/community education on techniques for chronic disease management, prepared educational materials for employers/organizations/community outlining implications of “invisible disabilities” such as Long COVID-19 and proposed accommodations.
- Created resources for chronic disease management from an OT lens

Implications for OT Practice

- Long Covid is not going away, and it affects all areas of occupation.
- Continuing to educate other practitioners, patients, and their families is essential.
- Ongoing advocacy for this population helps patients receive needed services and promotes client well-being

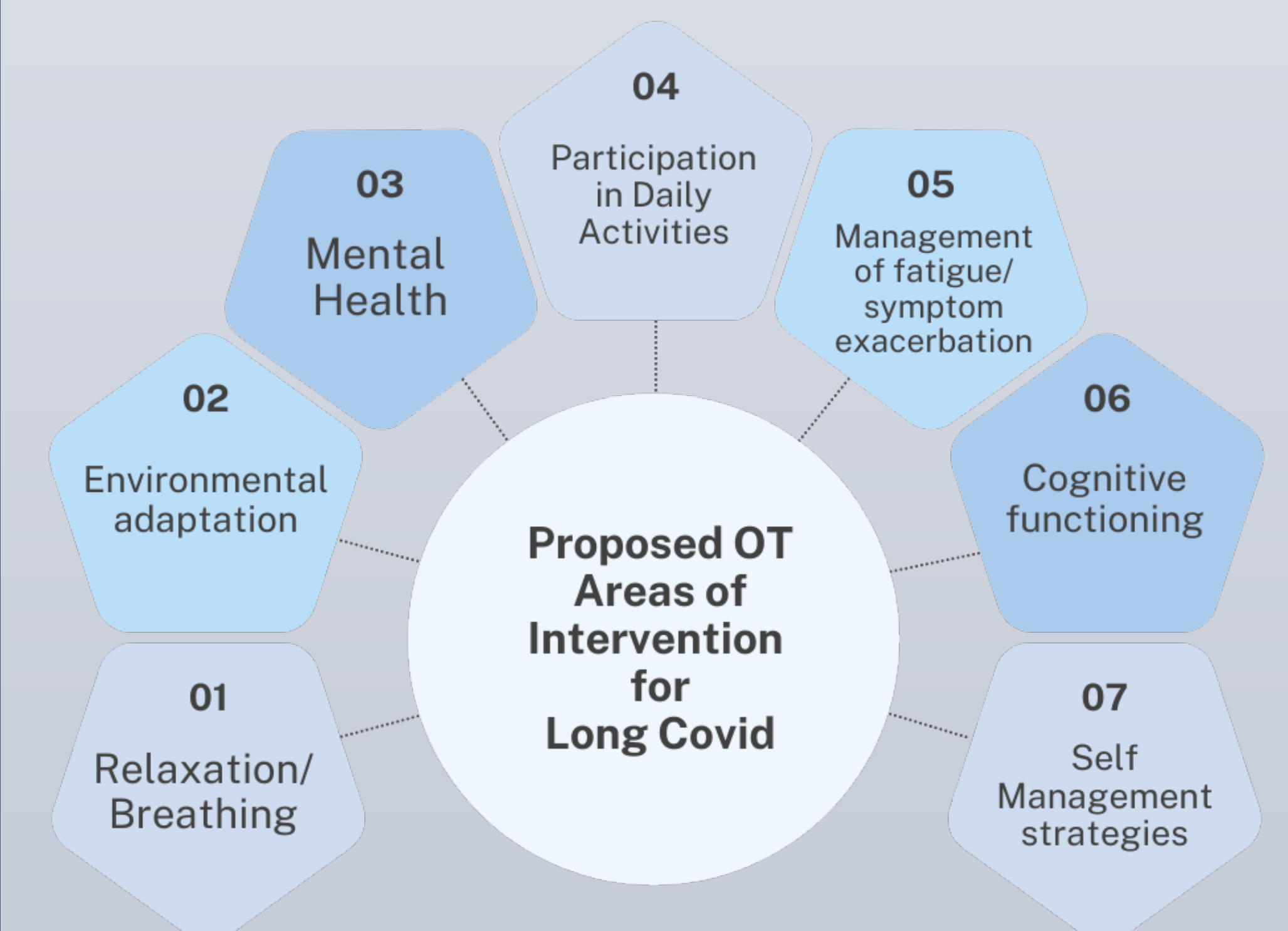


Figure 5. Graphic. Proposed OT Areas of Intervention for Long Covid.

REFERENCES & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

References Available Upon Request

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