



## RESILIENCE: Reflections on a Global Pandemic from the Eyes of An Occupational Therapist

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**re-sil-i-ence:** n. the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands. A number of factors contribute to how well people adapt to adversities, predominant among them (a) the ways in which individuals view and engage with the world, (b) the availability and quality of social resources, and (c) specific coping strategies.

For those working in the healthcare realm, the definition should include: **Finding opportunity for growth within the challenges experienced while in the middle of COVID pandemic and its lasting scars.**

For many in the skilled nursing community resilience should not be simply bouncing back but using our experiences to increase our knowledge and skill set to bounce forward.

*“It’s not the strongest of the species that survive nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.”*

– Charles Darwin

**The following content** is an excerpt through the eyes from a boots-on-the-ground devoted occupational therapist that worked and continues to work with the residents in skilled nursing. Her experiences truly personifies the term resilience.

### The Other Side of COVID — ISOLATION

The buzz of chatter and laughter was always present in the hallways of our long-term care facility. Then in March of 2020 in the blink of an eye everything changed. We closed the doors to visitors, loved ones, communal activities, and to the therapy clinic. Yellow gowns, blue masks, plastic face shields, and uncertainty was in the air replacing those familiar sights and sounds.

With these immediate changes brought on by the pandemic, I have been challenged as a therapist to meet my patients where they are: often alone, scared, and confused by the new ways we have to interact with them. They suddenly found themselves alone in a room with four walls, unsure if they would ever see their family again and afraid of dying alone. With this new reality I still needed to provide them the confidence to move forward and break through their limitations.

I continued my position as an occupational therapist in a LTC setting during COVID because the residents have become family, and family sticks together, through thick and thin. Hard restrictions occurred over night and the isolation was suffocating. The residents, already limited in many aspects of their independence, now had to

curtail, or eliminate visits from their children, friends, church community, and even their pets. The effects were and remain monumental.

As a therapist, I did not have to dig deep to realize how quickly this isolation was painful and hurting them. One resident in my care found out his best friend died, and then just a mere two weeks later, he too passed. With no communal activities available to residents, days were exceptionally long. These are people with windowsills full of bingo prizes, who now choose not to get out of bed as their days appear to lack purpose. With the therapy clinic closed and our equipment on carts we can bring therapy to them. The task for me then becomes awareness of my conversation with them. How much do I share about my night prior? I have the luxury of visiting who I want and shopping where I please, with no restrictions. At the end of the day, I still have my community and a level of normalcy.

**Realizing how much this population was lacking in human connection and purpose was a catalyst to become more creative working with limited supplies and space.**

Our therapy team identified the safest way to use outdoor space and indoor social distancing to continue with therapy. Therapy provided residents with reassuring human touch, time outside of their room, and confidence to know we will get through this together!

As a therapist during this time, I have cared for many who have lost their battle with COVID and/or isolation, and more still who are suffering the loss of normalcy and quality of life. If you are reading this and have influence over the regulations coming from the government level, I urge you to consider the consequences of keeping this population safe. Is the isolation too much? Where is the line of mental and physical health? This population is at the mercy of regulations and policies, that although aim to protect, put limitations on their quality of life.

We have overcome the worst of the initial onset of this vicious virus and realize the importance of movement, touch, family, and connection. I continue to serve this community of residents today because these people deserve the tender loving care provided through therapy, no matter the restrictions in place. Mask and testing remain the new norm, and hallways are still quiet but with therapy focused on meeting the patient where they are, there is a glimmer of hope.

By: *Jessica Schmitt MS, OTR/L, ECDCS*

#### ABOUT PREFERRED THERAPY SOLUTIONS

Preferred Therapy Solutions is a full-service rehabilitation management organization dedicated to providing state-of-the-art clinical, management, billing, and information technology solutions to the post-acute and long-term care industry. Preferred Therapy Solutions is able to assist in developing a strategic road map designed to increase SNFs market share by identifying potential referral targets and providing useful information on competitor’s performance. Preferred Therapy Solutions abilities significantly enhance the quality, productivity, scope, and efficiency of any facility’s rehabilitation department while maintaining a focus on achieving high levels of patient satisfaction and providing excellent customer service.

Jessica’s article is the beacon of light that as a company providing therapy in post- acute and outpatient settings during the evolution of COVID, it falls to us, Preferred Therapy Solutions to keep our therapists engaged so our residents and customers receive the best care and demonstrate the best outcomes. With that responsibility, we must adapt and learn from these experiences: demonstrate our resilience, as Jessica discusses, despite adversity.

Some themes we acknowledge and adapted to from the COVID experience include:

- *The initial chaos due to the unknown, about the virus, the way it spread and how to manage it without an adequate supply of PPE.*
- ✓ **PTS Solution:** Learn as much about COVID as possible and educate our teams, residents, customers, and community both about the virus, but also about the vaccine.
- *The initial blurring of the therapist’s functions due to staffing challenges and restrictions.*
- ✓ **PTS Solution:** Offer support to the nursing team for the essential daily care of the residents while incorporating very functionally based skilled treatments.
- *A forced emergence of technology both to assist the residents to communicate with their families but also to provide necessary therapy in the context of COVID*
- ✓ **PTS Solution:** Embrace technology for all that it offers to keep our resident’s goals on track; using telehealth and virtual visits to ensure therapy continued despite illness and restrictions.
- *Resilient people are more committed to their organization, have a better work-life balance and often embrace change as a chance to grow and learn.*
- ✓ **PTS** is committed to embracing all that our teams, residents, and customers have encountered, learn from their experiences, and adjust where we need to.

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